

Is Religious Belief Really a Personal Matter?

World View - Religion - Ideology - Politics

- About the Connection between Reason, Emotion and Religious Beliefs -

by Wolfgang Fischer

Some Preliminary Thoughts Concerning the Suffering which Humans Inflict upon Each Other

Suffering is not easily abolished. For as long as suffering is being inflicted, those who are trying to change this, will in turn bring suffering upon the original perpetrators. To begin with, we can therefore but try to reduce the amount of suffering and guilt that is 'produced'. However, to reduce the production of suffering in society presupposes the placing of human thinking and acting into a more creative context and heading towards a more profound perception of justice.

It requires the cooperation of all social forces within a new kind of political culture - a culture that is open and prepared to face new things. With this aim in mind I am presenting the following ideas.

Freedom of Thought: Both Curse and Blessing

History shows that the basic freedom of humans produces some contradictory effects - namely, creativity on the one hand and destructive tendencies on the other.

But if from this we will draw the conclusion that humans are, as it were, destined by some 'higher power' to be split into 'good' and 'evil' and must therefore 'naturally' remain so, then we can terminate the debate straight away. Any further thought about this would be futile since, no matter what, everything would continue unchangeably as it has gone up to date.

However, starting from the premise that humans are as they are because certain cultural conditions have caused them to appear so, will open up a possible way out of the dilemma.

Evolution of Freedom of the Spirit

From a purely biological viewpoint humans appear to be animals. They are subject to the laws of nature like any other creature. Life, procreation and death are unavoidable. A factor, however, which distinguishes the human species from animals is its brain, together with the vast potential of new experience which it engenders.

We can observe the development in this direction by comparing the potential of unicellular life forms with that of more highly developed animal species up to the primates. The range of facility for acting and reacting increasingly exhibits a certain independence of the genetically preordained patterns. Parallel to the genetic determinants the directing and reacting functions are increasingly determined by contents of consciousness (the mind).

Humans have the capacity to act with foresight, with the evolutionary developmental steps being partially retained.

We know the motives of human behaviour to be very deep-seated in our mind, down to the still unconscious regions. We know furthermore that the causes of reflexes as well as more complex reactive patterns are to be found in individual experience - that they become neurologically structured, repeatable and conditionable and - along paths not yet explored by science - even gain access to the genetic information.

And indeed: where else could innate reflexes originate? How could there be any evolutionary development unless individual experience or advantage - in the sense of genes being provided with increased opportunities - could structure itself genetically in such a way as to become hereditary? Why should the genes cause bodies

to come into existence unless they could count on benefiting qualitatively as well as being passed on through procreation?

To my mind (in contradiction of Crick's thesis according to which any acquired attributes of organisms cannot be transferred to the genes), Evolution might not just have its cause in an "accidental" genetic mutation or copying mistakes on the molecular level but quite possibly, via individual life experience, directly influences our genetic structure.

Genetics these days tends to be dominated by analysis and manipulation, even though we have not the slightest idea about the possible effects of arbitrary manipulations upon ourselves or future generations. Even the metabolism of the DNA remains obscure, i.e. we do not know anything about the behaviour of the genetic code within the organism after having been incorporated as food.

Nor was this of great concern until recently, since the code of the DNA structured by Evolution, from the unicellular organism to the vegetable and up to beef, was found to be compatible if not identical with the human cellular information. Whether this still is the case nowadays, in the face of increasing manipulation of genetic information and the insertion of artificial genes into the food chain, is so far anyone's guess: we have all been degraded to the status of guinea-pigs! The scandal of the mad cow disease merely indicates the helplessness with which science is subject to mercantile interests, as well as the scandalous manner in which it treats the ordinary people. (With these remarks I do mean not to oppose genetic engineering as such but certainly the laissez faire attitude in which it is handled!)

Yet to get back to the subject of human motivation. It is common knowledge that we are not merely motivated by rational thought but equally by emotional impulses, and that both regions are closely interconnected. The emotions are in part biological heritage, they tend to interfere in our lives in the manner of reflexes; and it is part of the human maturing process, both individually and collectively, to become aware of this connection so as to be able to handle one's emotions creatively.

Although this area, too, has not yet been researched exhaustively, we do know that emotions, too, may be subject to a continuous phylogenic development, and that, via the cerebrum with its potential of thought and knowledge, we are able to influence our emotional behaviour. Here again the spheres of thinking and emotion are closely interconnected.

Purely rational knowledge or thoughts not held to be true tend to have little influence upon our actions. Conversely, thought content or knowledge which affects us emotionally and is deemed to be in accordance with the truth will exert a strong influence upon our actions as well as on further thinking.

Because of its basic influence to nearly every decision to make it is precisely this 'emotional resonance' which, though often forgotten, renders any debate about our view of humanity, about religions and ideologies, so supremely important. For such debate can draw attention to the extent to which certain beliefs are apt to affect everyday life through their massive influence upon our thoughts and actions.

For us humans, language - i.e. the spoken or written WORD - as a suggestive impulse affecting the life of the individual, represents a stimulus of huge intensity. Information, whether oral, visual or material, has a decisive influence upon our very being. It is therefore imperative to question whatever we believe. And religious in-

formation should certainly be no exception, and should not be allowed to be left untouched as something of merely personal significance.

Freedom of the Spirit and Growing Awareness of the Human Social Dimension

Although religion has never been a purely personal matter, its political background has so far remained hidden. Few people have been interested in an open discussion concerning the possibilities of manipulation. And as long as religion and politics share an interest in domination, the declaring of religion to be a 'personal matter' always helps to stabilise the status quo of currently 'acceptable' thinking. Whenever "religious thinking" threatens to undermine certain political interests, these will not hesitate to resort to extreme measures of silencing it, ranging up to murder.

In commercial advertising (see also: Jean Kilbourne's new book "Deadly Persuasion", [first chapter here]) this connection has long been perceived and is being widely used to manipulate individual intentions. It seems significant that certain technical manipulations in this field - e.g. in television, flashes of extremely short duration designed to spirit information past our consciousness into the brain - are prohibited only where it is possible to control them. Apart from that, practically anything is permitted. The election campaign of Bush against Gore for example featured an advertising film of the Republicans in which after insertion of the political opponent's name, "Democrats", just the last four letters: "-RATS" were faded in briefly a number of times in such a way as to be barely visible directly but able to be perceived subconsciously (see "Süddeutsche Zeitung" of 13th. Sept. 2000). The Democrats of course lodged a protest; the effect however was already firmly imprinted in the minds of all those who had seen the spot.

In the sphere of the military, too, research into these findings is being conducted, along with their practical application with the aim of unnoticeably manipulating public opinion. Examples of how efficiently this is functioning are the techniques of media coverage of contemporary wars. Noam Chomsky is one of a mere handful of scientists who have tirelessly been pointing out this state of affairs for decades and who meticulously proof this kind of manipulation.

Spoken or written word possesses the property of suggestion and for humans constitutes a conditioned stimulus just like all other conditioned stimuli. What is more: its effect is particularly diverse. In terms of quality as well as quantity the potential of language to influence people far exceeds that of any other conditioned stimulus. This is because words are connected with any and all stimuli (both inner and outer) which have ever been able to enter the various stations of the cerebral cortex in the course of a life-time. Words are able to signalise and represent any other active stimulus without exception; and from this it follows that words can evoke any reactions of the organism which any other stimulus could ever produce. There is not a single bodily function, nor any ever so much hidden reaction of our organism - and be it a hormonal or psycho-energetic process - which could escape the influence of verbal information.

The Duty to be Creative in Accordance with Living Conditions as Precondition for Achieving Freedom

This raises the general question about the compatibility of information as such with the actual genetic state and natural conditions affecting an organism. The extent to which mental information is compatible with the creative potential of nature will determine its physiological effect on the basis of education and cultural conditioning; if it is incompatible, the effect will be pathological, (i.e. will cause sickness).

Therefore, anybody with a genuine interest in political change will first of all need to ask the question: What kind of picture of humanity, what conception of human existence and what kind of

view of the purpose of living is apt to generate in humans a psychological atmosphere of trust, of inner security, of self-determination, of openness, courage and love? For such an atmosphere would be the precondition for us ever being able to overcome all the destructive consequences of mistrust, of alienation and lack of self-confidence, of untruthfulness, fear and hate.

It seems futile to wait for people collectively to learn from the consequences of their way of living. History has shown how arduous and long-drawn-out a process this is, and also how prone to manipulation as to the result of such learning.

It may indeed be a helpful starting point if we utilized our human mind in such a way that we learned through mental understanding before being forced to do so by the consequences of our own actions.

Yet this would demand a preparedness to let the human spirit emerge from the corner of the private sphere into the open field of political and scientific debate. Here we will be able to examine and question the nature of information in open discussion.

At this point we might investigate our religions, ideologies, world views and other social theories concerning their creative potential in relation to the living system Earth (GAIA). We might learn to quit contraproductive and destructive habits. We might learn to understand ourselves as a world wide family, as a human community, whose members support welfare of all and out of mere self-interest learn to protect our habitat Nature from further damage.

Jointly we will be able to decide which direction our future path is to take. Are we going to perpetuate the outworn treadmill of illusory freedom, or will we take up the challenge of transforming the laissez-faire culture of competitiveness into a culture of cooperation?

To my mind, the goal of reducing suffering and want on our planet would certainly justify a political approach. As a first step comprehension of religion could be as follows:

Religion is seen as an expression of the attempt to understand life from its origins. It is the attempt of humanity to perceive life in a meaningful context which at the same time offers a perspective for the future.

This definition indicates that, contrary to common belief, religion has more to do with gained experience and scientific knowledge rather than having to be defined by some prescribed belief in metaphysical unreality. Belief is always connected with the uncertainty of not knowing and for this reason alone a most unreliable basis for thought and action.

When understood comprehensively in a sense offering some orientation, religion will, via knowledge and the continued application of such knowledge, engender a kind of critical awareness as a much-needed basis for human responsibility. Only when this understanding of religion has generally been accepted and is being applied will there be a basis on which science and personal experience can work together, acting responsibly for the benefit of the community. A political system which defines itself in this kind of spirit will surely set itself goals that serve the benefit of all, thereby maintaining a sound foundation for building on in the future.

see also: The Machine, Mass Media Hypnosis, by Eduardo Galeano (4. 2002) [<http://emanzipationhumanum.de/downloads/galeano01.pdf>]

recommended reading:

The Pleasure Areas, Herbert James Campbell
Deadly Persuasions, Jean Kilbourne

Emanzipation Humanum, version 3.2000, translation from German to English by Rainer Taëni. Criticism, suggestions as to form and content, dialogue, translation into other languages are all desired