

IN SEARCH OF A BETTER RELIGION

By Peter M. Scott

My observations of the human condition during a lifetime of already considerable length have led me to conclude that mankind's most pressing need, at the present time, is for a religion which takes fuller account of the skills and knowledge we have acquired since the existing religions came into being. It seems reasonable to assume that these religions supplanted earlier ones by offering their devotees systems of belief which seemed, at the time, to make better sense of the world around them, and to be of more use in coping with the realities of their existence in it. There is no reason, then, why they themselves should not be superseded by a religion which is more soundly based on the greater understanding we have acquired of both our environment and ourselves during the intervening millennia.

The two most prominent world religions, Christianity and Islam, differ from one another in important ways, but both derive to some extent from an earlier religion, Judaism, and hold certain fundamental beliefs in common. The first of these is that the entire universe and everything in it was created and is governed by a single supernatural Being, God, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and invisibly present everywhere, but sufficiently well disposed towards the human race on this small planet of ours to provide us with rules of conduct and pass judgement on the extent to which these rules have been observed in individual cases. Since, however, this God is incorporeal (although usually endowed, by historical convention, with the masculine gender) these guidelines have hitherto been issued through the mouths of selected human beings, usually called prophets, but the final verdict on each person's performance in this life is passed by God Himself, after death, during an Afterlife, in the existence of which, both religions also believe.

There are differences between them as to how the Afterlife is lived, and where it is lived, but there is general agreement that some essential essence of each individual, the soul, is immortal, and is transported, after the death of the earthly body, to some otherworldly place where it is judged by God on the evidence of the life led here on earth. And, on the basis of this judgement, against which there is no appeal, various

rewards and punishments are meted out to be enjoyed or endured by their recipients until the end of time.

Down through the centuries, every possible effort has been made to uncover material evidence that these supernatural entities actually exist in the forms attributed to them, but none has ever been found. Instead, both religions have based their beliefs on writings in books which are said to have been divinely inspired, although in significantly different ways. The Christian Bible was assembled some considerable time after the death of Jesus Christ, the Founder of the religion, and is in two parts. The Old Testament is pre-Christian and consists of certain sacred writings of Judaism, which describe, among other things, God's creation of the world and everything in it, the subsequent history of the Jews (who believed themselves to be God's chosen people), the laws God gave them, the pronouncements made by their prophets, and even their folk songs and legends - an ancient record of an even older oral tradition.

The New Testament contains four separate accounts of the birth, life and death of Jesus, all written some time after the events they describe, together with a number of other early Christian writings, mainly letters from an itinerant Jewish preacher called Paul (himself a convert to the religion after the death of Jesus) to congregations of proselytes in various cities of the Roman Empire which was then at the height of its power. These letters deal with matters of Christian belief, some of which needed clarifying, and were the first attempts to define the doctrines of the religion. Obviously, then, the Christian Bible was assembled in a rather pragmatic fashion over an extended period of time. The Old Testament was included because the first followers of Jesus were Jews who believed that His coming and His ministry had been foretold in several prophecies recorded in it. They saw His life and works as carrying Judaism forward and upward into a new, more exalted phase, and this belief became part of the Christian message, when, having been rejected by the Jews, it was carried forth to the rest of the world.

The early Christians accepted the content of the Old and New Testaments as both divinely inspired and historically true, but, having been recorded by many different human hands, not exempt from interpretive analysis, extrapolation, and even amplification, as the need arose, particularly with regard to matters of doctrine. When Christianity became the established

religion of the Roman Empire, however, it developed an organization reflecting that of the State, with a managerial hierarchy who devoted much of their early energies to the elaboration of the biblical record into a comprehensive framework of beliefs, observances, and rituals within which Christians could prepare their immortal souls, during life on earth, to qualify for the eternal bliss awaiting them in the Afterlife. When completed, this elaborate, but elegant system was administered by a professional priesthood speaking Latin and operating out of buildings which had been constructed for the purpose and consecrated to God.

During this process, the Roman Empire divided itself into two parts, centred on Rome and Constantinople, and the Western Church produced its own official version of the Bible, translated into Latin from the original Hebrew and Greek, which became, after the eventual collapse of the Western Roman Empire into barbarism, the almost exclusive preserve of an educated priesthood, enabling them to exercise total control over what the Christian laity were allowed to know about the writings on which their religion was based. Several centuries were to elapse before the Bible was rescued from this fate and translated into the vernaculars of the many different Christian nations. Meanwhile, the Eastern Roman Empire continued to thrive and prosper, sponsoring its own, more liberal brand of Christianity, more loosely organized than the monolithic Western Church, based on the original texts, and conducting its services in Greek.

In contrast, the Holy Book of Islam, the Koran, was authored, in its entirety, by the Founder of the religion, the Prophet Muhammad, in the 7th Century AD. In it are recorded, in Arabic, the messages he received directly from God (Allah) which form the basis of the religion, and are believed by Muslims to be the very words of Allah, the All powerful, Creator of all things, and absolutely true for all time. The word Islam means submission, and the central requirement of the religion is for Muslims to submit unquestioningly to the will of Allah as revealed in the Koran, and follow the example of Muhammad, His Prophet, the last and greatest of a line of prophets (which included Moses and Abraham from the Jewish Old Testament, and even Jesus Christ from the Christian New Testament), through whom Allah has sent messages to mankind. Studying the Koran is, therefore, the central activity of the religion, and learning how to do so, an essential part of Muslim education, often to the exclusion of all else.

Although the Koran was quite specific about the will of Allah on many important matters, it did not offer, even when taken together with the teachings of Muhammad, a complete system of doctrine, and it was left to Islam's religious scholars to work out a detailed framework of law and dogma by studying these two sources in the centuries following the Prophet's death. The resulting official version of the religion rested on three fundamental pillars - (i) the Koran, (ii) the Sunna (the example of the Prophet), and (iii) the Ijma' (the consensus within the community). The last of these has been defined as the agreed opinions of the Islamic scholars of any one generation about matters arising which are not specifically dealt with in the Koran and the Sunna, and it has laid the foundations for a number of Islamic institutions, the single most important of which is the Shariah, a body of law embracing the total Muslim way of life.

The Shariah differs from Christian legal systems in regulating both secular and religious behaviour, and in codifying the rites and rituals of Islam. Its most profound distinction, however, arises from the Islamic belief that the Shariah, given its origins, is an expression of the will of Allah as revealed in the Koran and through the life of Muhammad, *after whose death no further revelations are possible*. This means that, once the process of interpretation and deduction from these sources had been finalized and agreed, the Shariah was fixed and immutable for ever. Secular legal systems, having been created by society, can be developed and modified by society as circumstances change, but *Shariah law, having been imposed from above to mould society, cannot itself be moulded by it*.

As a consequence, there is little separation of religious and secular authority under Islamic law, and, since the essential religious beliefs, duties and rituals decreed by Allah are there for all to read, the systematization of the religion did not lead to the formation of a universal organization with its own managerial hierarchy to propagate and administer it. The communal activities prescribed in the Koran may take place in any building set aside for the purpose, a mosque, or place of worship, and any Muslim may lead prayers, but it has become customary for each mosque to have an elected prayer-leader called an imam, who is allowed to deliver a short sermon after the compulsory communal ritual prayers at midday on Fridays. But nothing stands between a Muslim and his God.

Any questions of a religious nature which arise from new developments in society are settled by agreement between a number of Islamic scholars, who, because of their exemplary way of life and great learning, enjoy considerable respect in the community, and each of whose opinion carries weight according to his standing among his colleagues. If these wise and holy men cannot agree among themselves, there is no higher authority to appeal to, and the point at issue can be resolved, if at all, only with the passage of time. This looseness in its organization, although counterbalanced in practice by the total submission to the will of Allah demanded by the Koran, has prevented Islam from becoming a proselytizing religion, in the usual sense, but a doctrinal requirement to assert its superiority over all other religions and its reinforcement of religious by secular authority gave it a marked appetite for political conquest during its formative years. Muhammad himself became involved in wars against the pagan tribes around him and was responsible for conquering Mecca before he died. The concept of the jihad, or holy war, is deeply embedded in Islam, and the five essential religious duties commanded by Allah include paying alms-tax, a regular form of charity which includes contributions to an ongoing 'holy war' to affirm the superiority of Islam over all other religions.

Despite their inability to validate the two main premises on which their doctrines are based, Christianity and Islam, in their two different ways, have succeeded in imposing their authority on countless millions of adherents down through the centuries. Initially, their confident assertions of the ultimate power of Good over Evil (in the face of much evidence to the contrary), and even their assumption of a divine right to determine what is Good and what Evil, were of benefit to the societies in which they flourished by imposing systems of law and order on them which were, for the most part, more equitable and humane than those previously in place. As no social development is possible without law and order, any law and order is better than no law and order at all, and the beliefs to which the worshipers of both religions subscribed encouraged them to accept their lot in this life, however uncomfortable, on the assumption that, since it had been ordained by God, they would be rewarded for so doing in the Afterlife. Their obedience to God's laws also rendered them more amenable to the government of such rulers as He had seen fit to appoint over them.

But the degree of unquestioning obedience extracted by the two

religions from their respective communities began to vary with the passage of time, and, while the grip of Islam on the everyday lives of its adherents tended, with the formulation of the Shariah, to tighten, that of the Christian Church gradually relaxed. There were a number of reasons for this, the main one being the marked difference in the extent to which their doctrines permitted legislative innovation, and the flexibility with which they were able to confront changes in the social environment, such as the acquisition of new skills and knowledge by members of their congregations. And although the Christian Church was the more hierarchical and authoritarian of the two, the tenets of the religion it had synthesized from the wealth of raw material in the Bible were significantly more humanistic, and pluralistic than those of Islam.

There is nothing in the Koran to compare with the many colourful human beings who populate the pages of the Bible, or with the moving accounts of the birth, life and death of Jesus, nothing in Islam to match the veneration accorded by the Christian Church to the mortal Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Joseph, His earthly father, or to the Apostles and the many saints of both sexes. And, although both societies were patriarchal in structure, Christian church worship became much more of a family affair than its Islamic counterpart, and Christian women, unlike Muslim women, were allowed to take an active part in communal work and leisure activities outside the home. Also, the separation of powers between Church and State, with the latter, when duly legitimized by the former, wielding supreme authority over its subjects' bodies, with full responsibility for maintaining law and order, and the former retaining charge of their souls (and those of the rulers, of course), meant that civil law, although based on the same apparently God-given principles, developed separately from, and took precedence over, canon law, differentiating clearly between crime and sin.

Two other cultural developments of significance for the future were permitted by the Christian Church. The first was the foundation, beginning in the 12th Century AD, of university colleges as centres of learning, separately endowed from the Church's seminaries, to meet the demand for a more secular collegiate education for the offspring of the ruling classes, plus any gifted commoners (and clerics) who aspired to be their doctors, lawyers and secretaries, but also, more importantly, to encourage the pursuit of scholarship for its own sake. Although operating within the broad confines of Christian

doctrines and observances, these establishments were sufficiently independent to foster the spirit of inquiry into any matter, and allow debate on any subject, which did not lead to heresy or atheism.

The second development, in the Arts, was almost entirely due to the active patronage of the Church. Muslims, while excelling in architecture and craftsmanship, were expressly forbidden to represent humans or animals in their art, and music had no part to play in the austere recital of the prayers prescribed in the Koran, but there was nothing to prevent Christians from glorifying their God by, not only building Him bigger and better churches, but also covering their interiors with colourful representations of any of the many personages and events, human and divine, described in the Bible. And the inherited Jewish tradition of praising the Lord in song gave rise, by degrees, to the vocal and instrumental decoration of every aspect of a Christian worship which had itself been elaborated into a variety of attractive liturgies, in addition to the increasingly theatrical ritual of the Mass. Consequently, while Islamic mosques, however splendid their exteriors, remained forever bleakly lavatorial inside, with rows of Muslim menfolk reciting the same prayers and performing the same ritual calisthenics at the same times on the same days, Christian Churches became places of communal entertainment, veritable palaces of variety, where princes of both church and state would eventually vie with one another in commissioning painters, sculptors and composers to produce ever more ravishing manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

As a consequence, the Christian Church in Europe emerged from the Dark Ages following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, during which the Church had kept some vestiges of civilization alive, in better shape than Islam to cope with the re-awakened spirit of mercantile adventure, intellectual inquiry, artistic experiment. and technological innovation which would eventually manifest itself in Europe. This was contrary to all appearances at the time, however, because, while the Christian West had been struggling to survive on the fruits of feudal subsistence farming, Islam had been everywhere in the ascendant. After the death of Muhammad, his victorious Muslim Arabs had wielded the sword of the Prophet to such powerful effect that they had carved out an empire embracing Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Armenia, Egypt, North Africa, Sicily and half of Spain, carrying with them not only their religion but a cultural legacy from Greece and Persia which

enabled them to create a civilization excelling, initially, in science, literature and craftsmanship, and lasting for several centuries, until a second wave of Islamic expansion occurred under the Turks.

Even more warlike than the Arabs, who they quickly overran, the Turks carried the banners of Islam deeper into Christendom. They subjugated what was left of the Roman Empire in the East, ending a thousand years of civilization and intermittent prosperity under its Christian Emperors, and were not stopped until they reached the very gates of Vienna. At its height, in the 16th Century, their Ottoman Empire embraced Anatolia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Greece, in addition to the original Arab lands, and it lasted until the 20th Century. But, ironically, as it reached the peak of its power, it was already a spent force culturally - repressive, regressive, and locked into the systemic resistance to change which, thanks to the Shariah, had become the legacy of a victorious Islam. Also, while the Muslims were advancing in the East, the Christians were driving them out of Spain in the West, and a number of flourishing Italian city states were rediscovering the rich cultural legacy of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, much of it carried back to them westward by scholarly refugees from the fall of Constantinople to the Turks.

The subsequent spectacular germination on Italian soil of the seeds of a European civilization which would eventually grow to dominate the modern world was called the Renaissance, meaning 'rebirth', but it was not only the scientific and artistic achievements of the ancient world that were being discovered during this heady time - there were new scientific laws, new kinds of art, even new worlds, and, more importantly, a new confidence in the possibilities for mankind itself, freed from the shackles of traditional beliefs inherited from the Dark Ages. Reading the Gospels for the first time in the original Greek, Western scholars discovered just how far the dogmas of the Christian Church had departed from the teachings of the Founder of the religion. The resulting dissatisfaction with the design of the current ecclesiastical model, and the manner in which it was being administered from Rome by a self-perpetuating clerical oligarchy, led to demands for the reformation of the Church which proved so unacceptable to Rome that several of its provinces broke away to form independent "Protestant" Churches along national lines, free to worship and preach on the basis of Bibles written in the local vernacular,

and produced in quantity by the newly invented printing presses.

Strangely, the ultimate beneficiaries of the Renaissance and the Reformation were not the Italians who had set the ball rolling, but the northern countries of Europe - England, Holland, Germany. and Scandinavia - where the freedom of the individual to commune directly with his God without the intervention of a qualified representative of the Church of Rome, fostered a spirit of independence, adventure, inquiry and invention, leading eventually to the series of revolutions - political, scientific, commercial, and industrial - which determined the shape of the modern world, but not until the Roman Catholic Church had mounted an all-out effort to re-assert its authority over its lost territories. The result was a Europe racked by religious wars for nearly two centuries, the main point at issue being, who ruled who, and on what authority, since, in the eyes of the Vatican, the legitimacy of the rulers of the newly emergent Protestant nation states was open to challenge by any Roman Catholic Pretender who could muster the necessary men and materials to do so.

When the sectarian strife in Europe finally gave way to territorial conflicts of a more conventional kind, the Christian religion had fragmented into the three distinct and independent parts which can still be seen today. In the West, there was the substantial remains of the Roman Catholic Church facing a number of independent Protestant Churches, and, in the East, the remnants of the Orthodox Church, originally a number of self-governing churches loosely centred on Constantinople, but now reduced, with the exception of the thriving Russian Orthodox Church, to minority communities in the Muslim countries of the Ottoman Empire.

Paradoxically, while the religious wars were raging in Europe, the combatants had been spreading Christianity across the globe in the wake of exploration and exploitation, the Spanish and Portuguese promoting Roman Catholicism, the British and Dutch, Protestantism. At the same time, Islam had been carried to South East Asia and North East Africa, not, strange to relate, by the recommended Islamic method of jihad, nor by the Christian method of missionary activity, but by the simple example of generations of Muslim traders which had somehow served to promote the attractions of Islam without resorting to either. But, although all these religious communities based their different practices on a common belief in the existence

of a single all-powerful Deity and an Afterlife of the soul, and although religion continued to function as the lifeblood of their respective societies, a widening difference developed between the Protestant Christian countries and the rest in the pace of their economic development.

It is in the nature of established religions to be conservative. Having laid claim to the exclusive ownership of absolute truths about the nature of God and His relationship with the human race they are bound to resist or discourage any new development which cannot be accommodated within this dogmatic framework, or, worse, brings the integrity of the whole edifice into question. This is particularly the case with Islam whose adherents are sworn to accept the pronouncements made by Allah, speaking directly, in Arabic, to the Prophet Muhammad, as eternally true. It has also been true, if only to a lesser extent, of the Roman Catholic Church which, after the Reformation, found itself increasingly obliged to resist any innovation that threatened to undermine its claim to have the exclusive right to interpret the will of God and administer those sacraments which alone made it possible for the shriven sinner to enter into Heaven - particularly since this claim was based on foundations of its own manufacture.

Even the Eastern Orthodox Church, while not aspiring to the hegemonic status claimed for itself by the Church of Rome, adopted a similar set of transcendental values, preaching the acceptance of whatever circumstances God and His anointed ones had ordained for its flock on the understanding that the rewards for doing so would be forthcoming in the Afterlife. The Reformed Churches, on the other hand, having founded their very existence on the right to interpret the Holy Scriptures for themselves, electing their own ministers to guide them, but listening, in the end, to the dictates of the individual conscience, were much less resistant to change. Some of them even espoused the idea that money made by honest endeavour was more worthy in the sight of God than inherited wealth, and that their chances of salvation in the Afterlife could be improved by directing whatever God-given talents they possessed toward making this world a better, and more equitable place to inhabit during this life.

Ultimately, radical religion led to radical politics, and both tended to encourage the kind of thinking that gave rise to the innovations in science and technology that would eventually undermine the very foundations of their beliefs. The same

spirit of inquiry that led some to research the laws of nature, led others to question the claims made by the religious regarding the validity of the ancient writings on which their dogmas were based. But, in making their criticisms, the agnostics laboured under the grave disadvantage of being unable to produce an alternative model for the creation of the wonderful world they saw around them, and the almost infinite variety of creatures inhabiting it. And many of the scientists regarded the laws of physical nature they were uncovering as evidence of the existence of a supremely intelligent Creator, although others found it difficult to reconcile the frequent occurrence of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, droughts and plagues, which regularly killed thousands of men, women, and children indiscriminately, with such a Being's purportedly boundless love of mankind.

A great deal of this uncertainty was resolved in the year 1859 when Charles Darwin published his epoch-making book, "On the Origin of Species" putting forward what is still known as the Theory of Evolution in spite of the accumulating evidence in support of it. Darwin's revelation of the biological mechanisms which has caused our species to evolve, step by insubstantial step, over millions of years from possibly a single protoplasmic speck of life, can lay claim to being the most important event in our recent history. It has obliged us to change our ways of looking at ourselves so profoundly that, more than a century later, a majority of the human race has yet to come to terms with this, although hardly a day seems to pass without some further evidence emerging of the insignificance of our place in the infinite complexity of the Universe, and the unimaginable length of time which has elapsed since that first speck of life appeared on Earth. There can be no place in this apparently motiveless and self-perpetuating machinery for a divine Creator watching over His handiwork and passing judgement on the past performance of each individual human soul in some infinitely commodious Afterlife. Which is not to say, of course, that there is neither a God nor an Afterlife.

Not surprisingly, the publication of Darwin's work was followed by a period of intense debate throughout Christendom during which every effort was made by members of the various religious establishments to denigrate findings which, if accepted, might render them professionally redundant. Some members of the scientific community, too, were unconvinced by Darwin's reasoning, and sought to put forward alternative theories of a less mechanistic nature to account for the evolutionary

process. And who could blame them, when the only explanation that appeared to fit the facts seemed to be so highly improbable? There was, of course, little if any debate about Darwin's discoveries in the Islamic world where the matters referred to in "The Origin of Species" had been dealt with twelve centuries earlier by Allah when dictating the Koran to Muhammad, in Arabic, and could, therefore, not be questioned. Stranger to relate, however, is that, by the end of the century, even the Christian churches appeared to have ridden out the storm, and were carrying on their business as usual.

There were two possible explanations for this. The first, that, in the Protestant countries, the secularization of society had proceeded to such an extent that purely religious beliefs and observances had become matters of individual choice to be practiced largely in private, quarantined, as it were, from developments in the rest of the community, while in the Roman Catholic countries the Church's hold on the hearts and minds of its flock was so secure that the questions raised by Darwin's revelations could safely be ignored. In both cases, the consolations to be derived from the day-to-day practice of the religion appeared to outweigh any intellectual discomfort caused by accepting the Book of Genesis as true. Reinforcing this attitude was the second possibility: that a belief in the existence of a Divine Creator, and even of an Afterlife, had been nurtured in the human psyche by Darwinian natural selection itself, making it genuinely difficult for us to accept an explanation of our origins which placed mankind in a godless universe bereft of any higher purpose than the propagation of the species. Better a religion based on primitive superstition, perhaps, than no religion at all?

The difficulty with this option is that it licenses the largely self-perpetuating oligarchies of such religions to rely on the same Holy Writ that legitimizes their Divine Creator to pontificate about matters which more intimately affect the lives of their fellow creatures than whether or not some supernatural Being made the entire Universe and everything in it in less than a week at some time in the not too distant past. Inevitably, as time goes by, the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in the real world will bring the priestly view of what is true and untrue, permitted or not permitted, into increasing conflict with cultural initiatives based on a more objective assessment of the available evidence. Ultimately, the penalties incurred by insisting that the Holy Scriptures are absolutely true for all time will begin to

outweigh the benefits derived from the beliefs and practices extrapolated from them.

Our knowledge of the past teaches us that, with the passage of time, changes occur in the natural world to which all living creatures must either adapt or perish, and also that, of the attributes which have contributed to the proliferation of the human race on this planet, an adaptability to extreme variations in environment has been not the least important. Such adaptability demands flexibility, ingenuity, and pragmatism in the face of adversity, rather than the rigidity, credulity, and dogmatism favoured by the more doctrinaire proponents of both Christianity and Islam, although it is worthy of passing note that regimes which have sought to eliminate all belief in the existence of God from within their domains have not only failed to do so, but have found their own adaptability to change impeded by the inflexibility of the ideologies they have sought to impose in its place. It would be unwise, however, to see the collapse of such regimes as a triumph of religion over atheism, rather than of flexibility, ingenuity and pragmatism over other manifestations of rigidity, credulity, and dogmatism.

This, then, is our dilemma. We find it hard to believe that we live in a godless universe with no room in it for any higher human purpose than the acquisition of the skills and knowledge needed to survive in order to gratify our senses and procreate, but even harder to believe in any of the more comforting alternative cosmogonies on offer. Hence, my conclusion that we need a new universal religion which makes better sense than the existing ones of the world we now inhabit. Surely, given its past achievements, it should not be beyond the capacity of the human brain to devise one.

In support of this latter view, let me reveal that, in my early years, having already come to the above conclusions, even I found it possible to cobble together a personal religion which accommodated, both a belief in the existence of a benign supernatural power in the universe and the present sum of our knowledge about ourselves and the world we live in. I feel confident that I have not been alone in following such a course, but this homemade creed of mine has stood me in such unassailably good stead for the last sixty years that I make no apology for giving an account of it here, in the hope that others may find it as useful as I have, even to the point of seeing in it a modest contribution to the foundation of the

better world religion we so badly need.

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Whenever asked, as a serious question, about the nature of my religious beliefs, I have felt obliged to reply (rather unhelpfully, in most cases, I'm afraid) that I am a Bergsonian. This is because I was "converted" to my religion (in the sense that all the pieces of it finally fell into place) after reading a book entitled "Creative Evolution" (1907) by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941). Having been brought up as a Christian, I had enjoyed a thoroughly chapel-going Methodist childhood before being received, as an accident of wartime, into the Church of England at the age of fourteen, shortly after which I was given the invaluable opportunity of exploring the elaborate confectionery of Roman Catholicism under the expert guidance of an older friend, himself a convert, who later became a priest. Needless to say, I was strongly attracted by the elegant coherence of the structure which Rome had erected over the centuries, but, as will be evident from what has gone before, found myself unable, in the end, to reconcile the premises on which it was based with the knowledge I was acquiring from other sources.

But, appetite whetted and curiosity aroused, I continued to search for a more satisfactory alternative. Not, I should add, with any great sense of urgency, since the lack of personal religion was not preventing me from living a life, in my late teens, that was anything less than full. As a congenital autodidact, however, I still found time for some exploratory reading, and, starting with Plato, worked my way forward in time through as many of the great philosophers as I could understand, until I got to the early 20th Century. Much as I enjoyed exploring their ideas, however, I found none of them to be of any really practical value as other than intellectual sustenance, until I got to Bergson and read his "Creative Evolution". I realized at once that the quest I had been engaged in, without being fully aware of it, was over. Everything, rather to my own surprise, was suddenly clear, and the need for further enlightenment has not been experienced since.

Not much is heard of Bergson nowadays, Winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1927, even secondhand copies of his books are hard to find. Why is this? Perhaps because he didn't found a religion. Perhaps because his conclusions left

subsequent philosophers with so little of relevance to add, and existing religions looking so inadequate, that the world has found it more convenient to forget him.

Bergson trained as a scientist, a biologist, before becoming a philosopher, and he began his speculations by examining the human condition in the light of the evolutionary process described by Charles Darwin in 1859. He concluded that, as far back in time as human thought could reach, there must have been a minimum of two entities in existence - first, the inanimate physical universe, and, second, on this planet at least, some living organism, however small and primitive. How these two things came into being he could not imagine, but the only explanation he could think of for the process of evolution which, by imperceptibly small degrees, over billions of years, has produced our own species, was that some invisible force was at work, which, beginning with that single spark of life, had powered evolution forward, branching out in every possible direction whenever random mutation presented it with an opportunity to do so. He called it the Life Force, and pointed to the evidence for its existence in the world around us, where it is so much a part of our everyday experience that it has simply been taken for granted, as was the force of gravity until Isaac Newton came along.

Every living creature, it seems, has the capacity, not only to reproduce itself, but also to multiply, but, whence comes the energy that fuels this process? In our own case, each of us begins life as a single fertilized ovum the size of a pinhead, which, if protectively housed, proceeds of its own accord, to take in nourishment, multiply, and grow until it has developed into a fully formed and independent person capable of passing on the vital spark of life to another fertilized ovum before degenerating eventually into lifelessness. If we observed this process occurring in any other than a living entity, we would surely expect to find that it was being driven by some external power source. Knowing, as we do, that the countless species of insects, fish, reptiles, birds, and mammals, not to mention the plants and trees, which populate the earth today, must have evolved over aeons of time from a single unicellular source, is it not easier to believe that this effect has been caused by some invisible, but potent, propulsive force, rather than by nothing at all?

Having postulated its existence, however, Bergson had to concede that, on the evidence available, the Life Force did not

appear to be pursuing any preconceived plan, but was proceeding, rather, by a process of trial and error, infusing its vital energy indiscriminately into each and every form of life produced by the interaction between the Darwinian machinery of random mutation and the exigencies of the physical environment, ruthlessly discarding any casualties of this process on the way - a sort of Unintelligent Design! But, step by infinitesimal step, this apparently anarchic and dispassionate prodigality populated Planet Earth with one species after another until, finally, our own species emerged, unremarkable in appearance, but, in one particular respect, superior to all other creatures hitherto produced.

Compared with those of many of its evolutionary forbears, the physical attributes of the human mammal were pretty unimpressive as regards strength, agility and armament, but they comprised a wide enough range of capabilities to ensure the survival of the species - if only, at first, as scavengers - and included a degree of manual dexterity which would eventually make possible the fashioning of specialized tools for use in reshaping the environment, once these items had been invented by the remarkable organ that has been the supreme achievement of th Life Force to date. Almost miraculously, with one bold evolutionary step, the human brain had acquired a capacity for abstract reasoning which is, as far as we know, unique in the universe. Bergson saw this faculty, the intellect, as being superimposed on our inherited mammalian brain - an already highly evolved apparatus for receiving, processing, and responding to sensory information - more like a new piece of equipment than an extension of its existing powers of perception and motivation. He described it, memorably, as "a tool for cutting round some aspect of total reality in order to do something about it".

This remarkable instrument has empowered us, step by step, from the puniest of beginnings, not only to dominate all the other species on the planet, but to exercise an ever-increasing control over our own environment, even to explore the past and predict the future. Bergson, however, while fully appreciative of the virtues of the intellect, was more interested in defining the extent of its limitations. He pointed out that, although the intellect has enabled us to extract information from the world around us and develop spoken and written languages of great precision with which to communicate this information to each other and bequeath it to future generations, it is of less use in dealing with the internal

workings of our own bodies and the vital emotional relationships we sustain, throughout our entire conscious life, with one another, and with the seamless totality of the real world around us. For that we must rely on whatever faculties reside in the primitive mammalian brain beneath the cerebral cortex, and in the even more primitive reptilian brain under that.

These abilities are not inconsiderable. They have enabled lower orders in the evolutionary tree to survive, reproduce, and multiply quite efficiently for countless generations, not only by managing their essential bodily functions with a minimum of conscious effort, but also by enabling them to perform, spontaneously, tasks which appear, to human eyes, to require a high degree of acquired technical skill. Bergson quotes a number of these, the most obvious being the spider's web and the bee's honeycomb, but he was particularly taken with the ability of a species of wasp to totally paralyze its chosen prey by injecting a toxin into the exact nerve ganglion to achieve this effect "with the precision of a trained surgeon", and he attributes all such skills to an inherited instinctual apparatus, operating entirely intuitively. Bergson's point is that the intellect can be imagined as having been somehow extruded, by the evolutionary process, from the underlying body of instinct like a single prehensile tentacle, capable of the abstract thought which has enabled us to master our environment, but it is the underlying body of instinct on which we rely for our largely intuitive relationships with each other and the reality around us.

Bergson was not, of course, the first philosopher to recognize the limitations of the intellect. The ancient Greeks had experienced difficulty in getting to grips with "becoming" as they called it, having found that their mathematics could engage with the flight of an arrow, for example, only by reducing it to a series of still points - closer and closer together, but never actually joining up. And Zeno's famous paradox was a classic exposition of the problem. But Bergson was the first to draw attention to the indiscriminate workings of the evolutionary process which had produced this phenomenon, and to the continuing importance, for our personal well-being, of the inherited intuitive capacities underpinning it. Since these faculties, of their very nature, resist both definition and manipulation by the mental tool which has been increasing its contribution to our material well-being, exponentially since our species first evolved, there is a danger that they

might be undervalued or even ignored, and, consequently, underutilized.

Bergson goes on to use this model of the human psyche to explore some of the more problematic aspects of the human condition. Since language, for example, is a product of the intellect, the limitations of the intellect are reflected in the inability of language, alone and unaided, to transmit anything other than abstractions between one human being and another. In order to communicate with each other at a personal level we are obliged to use other means. We can touch each other in different ways, we can exchange glances, we can load our spoken words with a sufficient variety of vocal tone and emphasis to give them emotional colour and weight, we can even sing to each other, and music, even without words, is a language which speaks "to the heart", conveying messages that cannot be put into words. The same can be said of the pictures we make for each other. In fact, the whole of what we call Art can be seen as a means of communicating personal insights into the reality around us which are not susceptible of purely intellectual definition.

Those of the arts using language as a medium strive to arouse emotional responses by deploying words in musico-rhythmical patterns, using analogies, metaphors, and similes, or by telling stories which arrange characters and events in affecting ways, but also, more interestingly to Bergson, by employing symbols - words describing entities and events which, for historical or cultural reasons, carry a greater emotional charge than their apparent face value. But, for a symbol to "strike a chord" the artist and his audience must have past experiences in common, or share a knowledge of the past acquired through education, using the term in its broadest possible sense. The richer the culture, the higher the art, of course, but, underlying all human cultures, no matter how civilized or primitive, is a common humanity giving rise to certain basic shared experiences, such as childbirth, motherhood, fatherhood, childhood, eating, drinking, love, hate, and death, which can transcend all cultural barriers and point the way to what must be the simplest, and possibly the most affecting of all art forms - the symbolic act.

Looked at in this light, even the religions of the world, insofar as they seek to elucidate the workings of the mysterious universe we inhabit and the purpose of our existence in it, by drawing on anecdotal evidence alone, can be seen as

art forms, using symbols to convey insights too profound to be put into mere words, and designing rituals aimed at making personal contact with whichever manifestation of the Life Force they have chosen to worship. Obviously, mankind's subjugation of a once hostile environment, and our discovery of the true origins of our species, have rendered many of the tenets, and much of the organizational framework of these archaic religions obsolete, but this is not to deny the value of certain forms of communal activity in putting its participants in touch with each other intuitively - and with, perhaps, the Life Force. One need only substitute the term "Holy Spirit" for "Life Force" to appreciate the truth of this.

Bergson's achievement was to demonstrate that an apparently mindless evolutionary process taking place in a blankly indifferent universe is, in effect, animated by an incognizable force of which mankind has always been intuitively aware, but has had difficulty in coming to terms with intellectually. By so doing, he makes it possible for each of us to appreciate the extent to which that moving spirit manifests itself in our own lives, and derive "spiritual" refreshment from gathering with our fellows in churches, theatres, concert halls, art galleries and even sports grounds, to bask in its life-enhancing radiance, without necessarily subscribing to the redundant dogmas of an out-dated religion.

So, there you have it! A credible, coherent framework for a personal religion in the post-Darwinian era. I myself came away from Bergson's great work to find that I had become some kind of religious oxymoron - a monotheistic pantheist who believes that the One Holy Spirit is the Primary Source of all Being, and is also resident, to some extent, in all living things. In practical terms, however, I found little difficulty in reconciling my new beliefs with even the version of Christianity I was currently practicing - was it not the very first of the Church of England's Thirty Nine Articles of Belief that God has neither body, parts nor passions? - and, stripped of the priestly accretions of centuries, the original four Gospels could quite easily be read as supporting the view that God the Father and God the Son can both be subsumed under God the Holy Spirit, in that, if Jesus saw himself as the Son of God, it was because he saw us all as the Children of God, or, in Bergsonian terms, the offspring of the Life Force. His main message was that that we should simply love God, and love our neighbours as ourselves. Nothing incompatible with worship of the Life Force there!

But, what of the Afterlife? Of Heaven and Hell, and all stations in between? It seems likely that a belief in an afterlife, where it is not simply wishful thinking on the part of those who find this life hard to bear, is the product of a human consciousness which finds such difficulty in envisaging its own non-existence, that it develops a conviction that some unique personal essence of itself is immortal, a conviction which has a tendency, perhaps, to inflate with the social status, in this life, of the individual concerned. But, apart from the "technical" unfeasibility of the kind of afterlife aspired to by the wishful thinkers, theologians who have applied their minds seriously to the question of how any souls fortunate enough to be admitted into Heaven might spend eternity there, have concluded that their sole occupation would be the selfless adoration of God, for ever and ever. In other words, to enter into Heaven would be to shed the burden of the very selfhood which, in this life, had aspired to its own indestructibility.

Paradoxically, since matter can neither be created nor destroyed, we know that everything about us is immortal, except that vital spark of life which is the self, and even that, if it were in some way measurable, would, according to the laws of physics [all natural processes are irreversible and involve an increase in entropy], dissipate, on leaving the body, at a rate equal to the square of the distance traversed, but, no matter how widely dispersed, would never quite cease to exist. Whoever we are, then, and whatever our station in this life, death will re-invest our corporeal remains in Mother Earth, and our spiritual remains, if any, in the infinite space around it, without differentiating between us in any way. To that extent, we are all equally immortal, with nothing to lose but our individuality as we become at one again with each other in the great Whole. Let us, then, leave the Afterlife to look after itself, and direct our energies towards making the life we have here on earth as long and rewarding as possible for as many of us as possible.

Our new world religion could help us to do this by encouraging us to commune, individually, with the Life Force, or Holy Spirit and, more importantly, by putting each of us in touch with Its divine presence in all of us. Why more importantly? Because religion, stripped of its sectarian and doctrinal trappings, can play a vital role in promoting social intercourse of a less materialistic, competitive, and

acquisitive nature than that generated by the secular organizations we have created in order to exercise that control over our environment which the machinations of our intellect have made possible.

The ability to combine into groups capable of achieving goals beyond the reach of the individual is not unique to our species, but, thanks to our intellectual prowess, we alone have the ingenuity to conceive of changes we would like to make in the world around us, and then proceed to assemble groups of individuals who, acting together, can bring those changes about. The development of our civilizations has depended upon our ability to organize ourselves into societies of ever-increasing size and complexity, deploying growing numbers of specialist skills, but this has been made possible only by the imposition on us, with or without our consent, of managerial hierarchies of one kind or another. In other words, we cannot have organization without having organizers who possess the authority (and the ability) to tell numbers of us what to do, and when, where, and how to do it, in order to achieve objectives of benefit to all which would be unachievable by those same individuals acting alone.

And we can hardly expect these organizers to be content with rewards for their efforts which are no greater than the ones enjoyed by those they have organized. Inevitably, therefore, managerial hierarchies bring with them graduated inequalities of wealth and status in the community, and human history records the many and various attempts we have made to create organizations which maximize effectiveness in achieving objectives of benefit to the entire organization, while minimizing, in the interests of internal stability and cohesion, the inequalities within. Philosophers and poets have dreamed of societies in which there are no inequalities of rank, wealth, or status, but those dreams have been made possible only by the prosperity generated by organizations governed by hierarchies. Our religions, on the other hand, have a long history of supporting the established social order (among their own adherents), while sometimes deploring its grosser inequalities, and even preaching, in the case of both Christianity and Islam, that we are all equal in the sight of God - unless, that is, according to the latter, we happen to be female.

Their attachment to this doctrine has not prevented either of these organizations from creating their own hierarchies of

professional managers, ranking upwards in order of authority and reward, although Islam deems them to be holy scholars with ascending degrees of expertise in the interpretation of the Koran and its derivatives, in which, however, no distinctions are drawn between the laws of church and state. It seems that organizations, even religious ones, cannot dispense with hierarchies, and that hierarchies cannot but foster inequalities. Fortunately, however, in order to commune with the Holy Spirit of the Life Force, either individually or collectively, no religious organization should be necessary, certainly not of a professional nature. Obviously, for communal worship to take place, premises would have to be available on which numbers of Believers could congregate at some previously appointed time, but these matters could easily be dealt with by volunteers possessing the appropriate expertise, while allowing all inequalities of rank, wealth and status to be left outside the door.

Such arrangements, though unusual for a religion, would not be uncommon in the world today. There are secular institutions in existence which boast worldwide networks of local groups who's members meet regularly, sometimes for lunch, to enjoy each other's company and pursue matters of common interest, often of a charitable nature, without the assistance of paid officials. It should not be difficult for local chapters of the new religion, funded by voluntary contribution, to operate along similar lines, and communicate with each other in comparable ways, drawing only on the skills and knowledge available among the members. This is simple, routine stuff.

More ingenuity would be called for in compiling any "Articles of Association" required under local statutes, and devising an "Order of Service" which would meet the needs of Believers of all ages, coming from many different walks of life. Given the non-prescriptive and voluntary nature of the activities, these tasks would have to be undertaken by the individual groups at local level, but there is no reason why the details of arrangements found particularly useful by one group should not be made available to others for their consideration. This, too, is common practice among voluntary bodies. And it seems more than likely that, in the absence of agendas imposed from above, the simple attractions of the religion's objectives, and the strength of the congregation's desire to achieve them, would ensure the development of an adequate range of procedures for doing so - after, perhaps, a period of not unpleasurable experimentation.

It would be presumptuous of me to anticipate what form these might take, but I would be surprised (and disappointed) if a certain amount of singing and dancing did not find a place among them. Certainly, if the participants are to commune with the Holy Spirit in each other at an intuitive level, it is difficult to see how some kind of physical contact could be avoided, if only at the level of the ritual performed in certain countries on New Year's Eve when singing "Auld Lang Syne". On the other hand, after several millennia of worshiping deities created in our own image (but credited with supernatural powers), it may not prove easy for some to approach One possessing none of the features from which it might be possible to create even a mental image, and from whom the only favour a worshiper can ask is to become the vessel of an inscrutable and unpredictable creative force.

The enormous success enjoyed by religious organizations such as the Christian Church and Islam in persuading their followers to accept doctrines which run counter to the evidence of their senses, and even their own best interests, is but one example of the sad fact that many of us would rather be told what to believe, and even how to behave, than decide these things for ourselves. And there will undoubtedly be some who continue to prefer the certainties of a judgmental Creator promising a better life hereafter, however fictitious, to the uncertainties of a Giver of Life offering only spiritual refreshment, creative inspiration, and the pleasures of sharing these intangibles with fellow devotees over the course of a single lifetime. I feel confident, however, that there will be others who, although they live in the real world, eschewing the comforts of primitive superstitions, sense the presence, in and around them, of a Power which, once welcomed in, is capable of nourishing their individuality and enriching their relationships with their fellow creatures, and that their numbers will be sufficient to make a sort of Fellowship of the Holy Spirit possible.

In addition to its greater compatibility with the present body of human knowledge, the new religion would have a number of other advantages over its medieval counterparts. It would, for example, place no obligations whatsoever on its adherents, nor would it impose any constraints on their everyday behaviour, since it would have no existence outside their meetings, other than in their hearts and minds as they lived their daily lives under the the laws and customs of the society to which they

belonged. It would lay no claim to be in any way superior to any other religion and raise no barrier to the participation of its devotees in the rites and rituals of any other organization - religious, political, commercial or even military - relying entirely on the Holy Spirit of the Life Force to pursue its own ends (whatever they may be) through their thoughts and actions at all times, depending on the extent of their receptivity to it. Any changes in personal behaviour suggested to them by this experience would be entirely for the individuals concerned to make.

Obviously, the new religion would be more likely to flourish under regimes which allowed their subjects to associate freely in private in order to pursue matters of common interest posing no threat to public order. And in countries, also, where a sufficient level of secular education has been achieved to encourage an intelligent scepticism in the face of unfounded claims to be in possession of supernatural powers, even though there are countries meeting both these criteria where at least half the population still prefer the account of the origins of our species given by the anonymous author of the Book of Genesis to that offered by Charles Darwin. But that same freedom, under the law, to believe in the impossible should ensure that no obstacles are placed in the path of the spread of a Fellowship of the Holy Spirit throughout the whole of what used to be called Christendom, nor should it meet with any significant resistance in communities where religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Shinto, are widely practiced.

Difficulties will almost certainly be encountered, however, wherever Islam predominates, particularly when it is the official religion of the state, and the rigidities of Islamic law prevail over all other concepts of human rights. It is unlikely, for example, that the free association of strangers of both sexes in private would be permitted, no matter how innocent their intentions, and the new religion could make little headway without it being open to all who are so inclined, regardless of age, sex, rank or wealth, voluntarily to meet and celebrate their common humanity by affirming their belief in a Holy Spirit dwelling in each one of us. There would be nothing to prevent it from being practiced by individuals in private, of course, or even, perhaps, over the Internet, but, for present purposes, communities which have locked themselves into Islam's medieval prison can only be left to the Life Force to rescue in the course of the infinite

amount of time at its disposal.

The knowledge that my own time is much less than infinite, however, inclines me to conclude this essay by expressing the hope that it will convince some who read it that the world would be a better place if our old and obsolescent religions were replaced by something more in keeping with the realities of life in the 21st Century - something less dogmatic, divisive, and judgmental - and bring about the formation of at least one cell of a new religion, along the lines suggested above, within what little may be left of my lifetime.

Ballina, New South Wales, October 2007