

As these new ways of looking at the cosmos became more successful and became the basis for enormous strides in scientific and technological progress, so the traditional religious viewpoint became discredited at the intellectual level and religion began to be discounted at the social level. It ceased to be relevant to society. This situation gradually spread, especially during this century, from the West to other parts of the world. While religion continues at the personal level to be a source for individual inspiration for many, it has gradually ceased to be of importance as a source from which a society can create social policy and build its social vision. Politicians and social administrators no longer think in terms of religious principles when they are formulating policy or trying to create answers to the social problems with which they are faced.

Human society, however, needs something at its centre to act as a focal point and source of social vision. There needs to be some vision upon which all the citizens of that society are agreed and which thus forms the basis for social cohesion. We can call this central focus of a society its ideology. Previously religion was the ideology of each society. During the course of the twentieth century, religion has gradually been pushed aside from this central role, as we have described above. This has led to a vacuum at heart of society which a number of man-made ideologies have attempted to fill. Most notably, these ideologies have included nationalism, racism and communism. Each of these has held itself up to be a suitable replacement for religion at the heart of society, creating a vision around which the people can unite and a basis for political and social policy. Because of the way in which these ideologies have replaced religion at the heart of society, some have called them pseudo-religions. In many countries where these ideologies have been rigorously applied, they have indeed tried to take the place of religion even to the point of trying to make the arts and literature subservient to the ideology.

From the West, these ideologies spread to other parts of the world during the twentieth century and many have been attracted to them. In country after country as the people have moved from being a traditional society towards entering the modern world, the same process has occurred. Religion has been displaced at the heart of society and one or other of these ideologies has been adopted. Thus for example, many countries naturally adopted a nationalistic ideology after they won their independence from colonial rule. In many, after decades of nationalism produced no improvement in the situation of the ordinary people of the country, they have also tried socialism or communism for a time.

During the twentieth century, as well as the rise of these ideologies, however, we have also witnessed their fall. During this century, these ideologies have been seen to have become the source of great human misery. In the West, for example, nationalism was the source of the first World War that laid waste the continent of Europe and caused the Western European powers to fall from their pre-eminent place among the nations of the world. The second World War was caused by the racist ideology of Nazi Germany and caused an even more wide-spread destruction in Europe, Asia and the Pacific. And, more recently, in

the last decade, we have witnessed the fall of communism, leaving behind a devastated landscape of ruined economies and polluted environments in Europe and Asia. In many other parts of the world, also, people are wondering when these ideologies are going to produce the improvements in the social condition of ordinary people that they promised. Thus, these man-made ideologies that looked so promising and held such sway earlier in the century have become discredited.

And so at the end of the twentieth century, as we approach the Millennium, we are in a very interesting situation where we have a vacuum at the heart of many societies. Religion has been discarded decades ago and the ideologies that took its place have become discredited. But without an ideology to act as a centre and a cohesive force, society is in danger of falling apart. And so people are desperately looking about for something to fill this vacuum and act as the source of unity.

As we face the new Millennium, there appear to be three candidates that present themselves as alternative ways forward from the present situation: religious fundamentalism, free-market capitalism, and the adoption of a new ideology.

Some have advocated that, with the failure of the modern man-made ideologies, the answer is to return to the past situation in which traditional religion was the central ideology of society. Most of the failings of modern society (corruption, lack of sexual morality, crime, drugs, etc.) would, they assert, be solved if religious standards are more rigorously applied. This call for a return to religious fundamentals is very appealing to many, particularly in those societies which had religion as their social core until recently and so many of the older members of the population can still look back with nostalgia at the certainties and securities of traditional society. Unfortunately for those who advocate this route, there are a number of problems with this pathway. First, it is not possible to turn the clock back and re-create the situation of two hundred years ago when religion was not only the ideology of a society but no other ideology was even conceivable. Then, the religious construction of reality was reality for all of the people. Once people have seen that there are alternative realities and when they are using those alternative realities for the technological improvements that they rely on for their daily life, it is impossible to re-create the situation where there are no alternative realities. Second, this programme fails to address the reason that religion was rejected in the first place: the fact that it was no longer seen to be relevant to the problems of the time nor in keeping with the world-view presented by the modern world. Third, those societies that have tried a return to a fundamentalist religious agenda, in Iran for example, have not witnessed any great improvement either in the economic fortunes of the ordinary people or even in the level of corruption in society.

The economic theory which now predominates since the fall of communism is free-market capitalism. Many countries have adopted it for their economic basis. As a theory, however, it is not really capable of forming an alternate social ideology since its is based on an individualistic philosophy that is the

very antithesis of all concepts of society. The individualism that underlies free-market capitalism dictates that social restrictions should be removed in order to allow the free operation of market forces. This philosophy relies on the greed and ambition of the individual as its motivating power. Some of its most ardent advocates have even asserted that there is no such thing as society and there are only individuals in competition with each other. Naturally it is impossible to build any form of social cohesion on the basis of such a philosophy. Indeed in those societies in which this type of philosophy has been most actively applied have witnessed a loss of social cohesion and a resultant rise in social disaffection and alienation as witnessed by increasing vandalism, drug addiction, and gang warfare. Human beings are social animals and need a sense of belonging to a social group. If their society adopts an ideology that is destructive of this sense of social cohesion, then those who are at the fringes of the society demonstrate their disaffection by vandalism and crime and create their own social groupings such as gangs.

The third of the three options open to people is to adopt a new way of thinking that can provide an ideology for modern society. The requirements for such an ideology would include: a need to think in global terms, a need to transcend the differences in culture, nationality, religion and social class that presently act as a divisive force in the world, and the ability to give people a vision of a future direction that is both cohesive and progressive. To fulfill such requirements, some people have advocated a renewal or reform of the traditional religion of their culture. They have proposed a re-interpretation of their religion in ways that are relevant to the modern world. They focus for example on the role of religion in ameliorating the condition of the poor and on open-mindedness and tolerance towards other religions. Unfortunately many of these reformers disagree with each other on the exact path that they should take in this process of reform. For the present writer, the requirements for an ideology for the modern world are fulfilled in the Bahá'í Faith. First, it is a religion and so it is capable of inspiring the individual and providing the individual with the spiritual fulfillment that religion has always provided. Second, it has, as its central social principle the need for the peoples of the world to come together, to put aside their differences and to unite in order to overcome the problems that the world faces. Writing over one hundred years ago, Bahá'u'lláh the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, foresaw that the problems that humanity faced could only be tackled at a global level. And so he called upon the governments of the world to come together to agree to maintain the peace of the world and to co-operate over the solution to the problems that humanity faces. Since the time of Bahá'u'lláh, problems such as wars, social conflicts, world poverty, and environmental pollution have multiplied and become more intractable. It is difficult to see how the problems that face the world today can be solved except along the lines that Bahá'u'lláh has advocated. Thus the Bahá'í Faith presents itself as a religion and an ideology that can both act as a religion for the individual and a progressive ideology for society. By acting as an ideology for society, it provides a focal point of unity and social

cohesion. Beyond this, it addresses the problems that the world as a whole faces and proposes solutions to these problems at the global level.

As we approach the Millennium, our thoughts are naturally turned towards the future and we contemplate in what direction we would like to see humanity going. Bahá'ís advocate that this direction should be that of increasing unity, peace, and the spiritualisation of our society and our world. Towards this goal, the Bahá'í teachings contain a practical programme which millions of Bahá'ís around the world are pursuing at the present time. It is the hope of the present writer that others will join the Bahá'ís in the pursuit of these goals.

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