

"Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by rulers as useful."-Seneca

In the course of January alone, this year we had two reports of bizarre religious behavior. They come from the Middle East, although the Arab World is not alone in examples of this sort. In one, a mother involved in a fracas with her child over the latter not saying her prayers killed the child while bashing her. In the other, an Egyptian court handed down a 15 year imprisonment to a woman, Nadia, who had reconverted to Christianity after her Islamic husband had died.

Individual cases like this have been occurring with regular frequency in the past. We had the story from Cheshire, England, where the 17-year-old schoolgirl Shafiea Ahmed was brutally killed by her parents for being 'Westernized,' meaning diverting away from the Islamic way of life. The parents Iftikar Ahmad and Farzana were found guilty.

More than any other factor religion has divided humanity and created rancor and acrimony among people. Thousands were burnt and tortured in India at partition when Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in 1947. It had been so repulsive that Pandit Jawaharlar Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, said, "the spectacle of what we call religion...., in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror and I have frequently... wished to make a clean sweep of it." Nehru added, "almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition, exploitation and the preservation of vested interests." The conflict in Palestine which appears irremediable is rooted in a religious struggle between Muslims and Jews. Sudan had to bifurcate due to murderous clashes between



bate and so are Buddhist monks and the Hindu Brahmacharis. The awful social result of this unnatural ban is the practice of sexual abuse by the clergy

They are told that some Bhikkus could travel by 'Iddi Balaya or through the air sans aero planes or helicopters. Not a single of these claims to miracles form the human experi-

walk away from that victim? Richard Dawkins has pointed out how humans have inherited empathy as a survival tool kit coming down in the long process of evolution through natural

ARE RELIGIONS DOING US ANY GOOD?

Muslims and Christians.

Examples abound from past history of mass tragedy due to religion. The Thirty Years War and the Crusades are just two major episodes.

The bigotry in religion was epitomized during what is called the Dark Ages of Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire in AD476. For nearly four centuries the Christian church managed to stifle all intellectual freedom, innovation and creativity. When Copernicus made the discovery that the Earth is not the center of the universe as taught in the Christian bible but that it was subordinate to the solar galaxy, the great scientist was summoned and asked to recant. He reluctantly did so in public hearing but was privately heard to mutter on return: "Nevertheless, the Earth is not the center of the universe!" Charles Darwin, sent in the ship Beagles to discover in nature evidence of God's creation returned with the astounding discovery that the bible's theory of creation has no basis in fact. Darwin was scared to make the announcement until very late.

The problem is that all religions are based on faith and thus any rational criticism is looked upon in an unfriendly way. Salman Rushdie has a 'fatwa' imposed on him for his book "Satanic Verses." This means that if he is spotted somewhere in the wrong country he will be beheaded. The curious thing is that all such acts are done in the name of the "Compassionate God." Sunnis kill Shias in the name of the same God they worship.

Once you place such a value on faith you can fly anywhere in your imagination and create a world that is disconnected to the real world that we touch, feel and see. One's virtue depends on how stubbornly one resists objective facts that are verifiable by evidence out there in the real world.

Religions have always stood against proven facts and thereby caused untold and incalculable damage to humanity. Thousands of Afrikaners have died and do die of AIDS because the Catholic Church has decreed against the use of condoms in sex.

The other day, I saw an SBS presentation by Richard Dawkins that graphically illustrates the blindness that faith produces. Annually 40,000 dead bodies are brought and dumped into the Ganges River to float in the 'holy waters.' A beautiful river is polluted with the stink. Holy men walk around the precincts seeking blessings.

Ignorant attitudes toward sex held by most religions have caused severe stress, trauma and disease. The association of celibacy with holiness is a byproduct of this attitude. Catholic priests are required to be cel-

that is now getting wide media publicity. In Australia there is strong controversy about Catholic priests engaging in sexual abuse of kids in their charge. The accusations are so rife that the hierarchy seeks to cover up complaints. Priest and monks and Brahmacharis are basically human beings with an animality embedded in them. When denied of respectable outlets for the release of their natural energy these dignitaries go for the kids in their charge. There have been many reported cases of Buddhist monks also charged with sexual offences. The fellow in London is jailed. In the Asian societies where these monks live many crimes of child abuse are hidden away from reaching official level.

Brutal laws in the Arab world impose unrealistically harsh punishments on simple wrongdoing. A woman caught in an adulterous act is stoned to death. The husband, however, goes scot free after philandering and screwing unlimited times.

We give our kids a religious education sending them to Sunday Schools etc. but what are these innocents taught there? They are taught to suspend reason and believe in the crap of outmoded religious books. That everything in the universe is driven by natural cause and effect is not told to them because they are required to believe in heavenly mysteries- in angels, and Gods and in other forms of divinity and spirits said to inhabit our world. If belief in mysteries like this are fostered how could kids grow up and develop as intelligent men and women with their critical faculties awakened? They are told that the Holy Book is something sent down by a divinely courier to a mortal soul. They are told that a woman can give birth to a baby without sexual intercourse and with virginity intact. They are told that the Virgin Mary did not die physically but simply shot into heaven.

Even Buddhist Sunday schools are guilty of imparting myths to innocent kids. They are told that the Buddha as a newborn baby walked a few steps before announcing that he is supreme.

ence since modernity.

These and numerous other crap are inculcated into the minds of innocent children at Sunday Schools. I once went to a Sri Lankan Buddhist Sunday school and discovered to my astonishment that children were given a dose of racism there. There is a slippery link between religion and racism. I thought to myself.

This incident brings to mind an important consideration, namely that religion is often consolidated in the minds of people as a kind of tribal label. The importance is the identity badge it confers on the follower. This is the source of all religious evil in the world. That one should actually follow the healthy precepts of religious founders is not perceived as the important issue. What is relevant is whether one is prepared to be a foot soldier and die for that particular label. The 'honor killings' referred to earlier is rooted in label protection. The label Christians, label Islamists, and label Buddhists are the articulate ones that give a bad smell to the doctrines of religious founders. This labeling factor provides potency for the use of religion by politicians. An alleged 'patriotism' is linked to religion. Such patriotism explained the Hindu riots referred to above.

One also hears of attacks on mosques and churches taking place in Sri Lanka by foot soldiers known as 'Bodu Bala Sena.' This and similar organizations look away when the country's leaders and rulers nakedly behave in violations of Buddhist values.

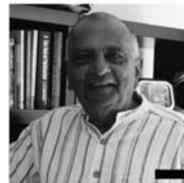
It is stated that without religion there can be no morality. The basis of morality was enunciated by Confucius in the sixth century BC. "Do not do unto others what you do not want done to you." Now, this is pretty common-sense that can be demonstrated as something reasonable to anyone regardless of their religiosity. The psychological factor of empathy is already within you and me regardless of our religiosity. Don't you feel like picking up a man who lays hit on the road and struggling for life? Are you going to

selection.

Hence there is a lot of naturally in-built morality within us that has to be developed and



Shyamon Jayasinghe



nurtured through socialization. What religion does is to scare us to our bone that if we do bad we will invoke God's wrath and land in hell. Avoiding evil through fear is not morality.

The report about religion is not all negative. Many religious persons like Mother Teresa, Sisters working in hospitals etc have done enormous good, and other religious charities have indeed done significant good. But the balance sheet is negative. While religions produce hypocrites they also produce really good men and women. Religion has also produced great works of artistic and architectural beauty that is the common inheritance of the human race.

Above all, religion gives many persons a meaning in their lives. They believe they are creatures of God and what happens to them constitutes God's plan for them. Buddhists and Hindus would say that one's predicament is caused by karmic forces. The latter statement is absolutely right if the karmic process is confined to this known life. However, when that process is said to extend to 'other existences' after birth, as is commonly believed, we have the same question mark that is raised with regard to theistic religions.

Religion becomes a solace to multitudes because of the Divine plan but then there is no demonstrable evidence that such a divinity or a divine plan exists. Since we are discovering that there is a natural reason for everything that occurs to us, the 'meaning of life' furnished by religion is fast becoming disposable.