

## **IS RELIGION DEAD?**

Polls over the past few decades have certified the decrease of the numbers of people who belong to a formal religion or, at least practice that religion by regular participation. There is at least one generation of young adults who have had no religious training due to parental indifference. A generation younger than the latter, however, are now showing evidence of seeking some ways of finding the support of a community and a fellowship of believers. But whether they are attracted by an institutional church is not certain at all.

People in the West, especially Americans, have been saturated with many forms of technology and constant consumerism to urge them to acquire goods to give them meaning. There has been no place for any transcendent being nor the need to develop one's own interior life. Meanwhile older people lament that their children and grandchildren have forsaken the basis of their own sources of comfort and identity.

False spiritual leaders promote religion for the sake of political gain. They want to be seen as adherents of religion. But politics and patriotism often are made to be substitutes for a real spiritual life as is evident in movements such as "Christian Nationalism". They are deluded in believing the USA was once a Christian nation but has now lost faith. Generations in the past usually followed the religion of their families, their neighborhoods, their country. I am born. I am told I am an American and Catholic. It went with the territory. This is what we were given by our European ancestors. After the Protestant Reformation shattered the dominance of Catholicism, peace came about through the adoption of the religion of the local ruler. The principle was "Cujus regio, ejus religio". That means the religion of the King, or ruler, became the religion of the land. Mediterranean countries were Catholic. Northern European countries were Lutheran. England, of course, chose to go its own way. None of this seems to work anymore. Young people want to make their own choice according to their own likes.

The Industrial Revolution and emergence of science eventually led us to a culture that doesn't need God at all. Secularism became the religion of many people. The present state of fear, confusion uncertainty, as well as the predominance of the loss of common values, such as truth and the common good, have shaken many people, especially in the USA and west. Christianity lost its family based traditions and values, unlike the Jews and Muslims who celebrate many of their feast days

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with great elation. I regret that we Christians don't have that home based faith religion.

So where are we now? People drift away from the churches but many are seeking more, looking for a community, a way of life that gives them some foundation. The individualism and materialism of western culture fail to inspire and guide them. It is a dangerous time when young people can easily succumb to the charismatic leaders who have their own way of seeking the meaning of life. The shallow depth of understanding their own faith tradition has not given most seekers a way to rediscover the wealth of their own religion.

I believe the times call on us faith-filled people, and Christians in particular, to really live what we profess. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived in a demanding time not unlike our own and died by the Nazis, was saddened by what he called "cheap grace" with which he believed most followers of Christ seemed to be satisfied. He prayed that we all learn to find a truly interior life, a life where we are transformed and go beyond our ego-centered selves to our "true self" where the Holy Spirit abides.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan whose teachings I recommend to any person seeking God and significant meaning, wrote of his experience of spending time in India giving retreats, learning the ways of the people. On his return to the USA, he began to understand that Christianity is not meant to be a "salvation scheme" (a way to get to heaven), "creating spiritual country clubs for the elite", but much more a vocation to live what Jesus taught, to share the life of God for the life of the world. We need, he says, to stop talking about Jesus and be Jesus.

To be Jesus is the meaning of our baptism. We are called not just to pray to Jesus, to adore Jesus as God, but to follow the Christ, to be Christ in our world. That is a big order, a real responsibility. That is what Jesus taught us. We are not just to say prayers and attend worship but to really pray which means having a relationship, learning what he taught, to study the Bible and, e.g. know what the Sermon on the Mount, as well as the Last Judgement (Matt. 5-8, 28) teaches about what being a human being made in God's image is really about. It is a way of life, a way to understand ourselves and our world, not just to believe some truths and keep some rules. Doctrines and rules follow from a relationship with God, and do not substitute for it.

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Morality and ethics follow from this relationship. We are here on earth to do good to others to see the face of the Christ in every person we meet and give them the respect due to all human beings. It means being concerned about the common good and not just my own needs. Life is not just about me; I am about life.

What does Religion mean to you? What does Faith mean to you? Do you see the need for growth in a deeper interior life? How is your prayer life? Do you ever read Christian books or periodicals? I, for one, know I am still growing, learning. The older I get the less I seem to know about many things, including God and life. But it is a great adventure to keep learning. You can contact me at [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto:joycet@glastonburyabbey.org).

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.