

Religion in the Modern World

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Abstract

This paper examines some aspects of the Western secular rebellion against theocracy that has occurred over the last 500 years. Amongst other things, it traces the rise of free enquiry and freedom of conscience, and describes how they challenge religion in the modern world. It argues that the roots of secularism are in fact religious and are not opposed to the fundamental truths of religion. It brings out these points by considering several historical events that were important to the development of modern secularism, such as the European Reformation and Galileo's conflict with the Papacy. The paper discusses the implications of the modern Western secular challenge to traditional religious cultures around the world in general, and to the Bahá'í community in particular. It concludes that alongside the need for religions to incorporate secular values, there is also a need for religions to return to their traditional role of strengthening family unity and building up united communities that serve mankind.

1. Introduction

Religion in the Western world has been on the retreat for many centuries now. Sacred values, in the name of science, freedom and democracy, have progressively diminished their influence. Religious freedom today means that no spiritual leader or institution can pressure us into accepting anything any longer. All of us have the duty to think for ourselves and arrive at our own opinions. Religious beliefs can no longer be simply determined by cultural identity, by tradition or ancestral heritage. Religious beliefs are our own personal responsibility and no one has the right of interference. Religious freedom also means that morality and

ethics is largely a matter of personal choice, and not something that can be imposed upon us by religious authorities.

Free enquiry demands that religious beliefs be in accord with science. There is nothing so sacrosanct that it cannot be investigated. In matters of truth, nothing can be accepted simply on the weight of authority. If religious beliefs are to be credible, they must first pass the test of scientific scrutiny. In matters of truth, it is no longer possible to hide behind the cover of infallible authority.

Modern democracy demands that religion be more open about its beliefs. Everyone has the right to be heard. Everyone's opinion from the outset has equal weight. Community affairs can no longer be run by edicts issued by a single individual spiritual leader or an elect council. Community affairs should be grounded in consultation and mutual respect, where each individual is free to express his or her opinions.

It is misleading to think of science, freedom and democracy as secular alternatives to religion in Western culture. "Secular" does not necessarily entail disbelief in God, or the giving up of many fundamental Christian values. In opinion polls taken in the USA, Germany, and the UK in the latter half of the 20th century, the majority of people interviewed believed in God and still identified themselves as basically Christian¹. It is more accurate to think of secularisation as a process leading to the privatisation of religious faith and the decline of institutional religion. In the modern Western world, very few people still attend Church regularly, or respect the authority of its clergy.

Just how the modern Western secular outlook is affecting traditional religion around the world is complicated. Consider immigrants living in the West who come from traditionally strong religious communities, like Eastern European Jews and Pakistani Muslims living in Britain. On the one hand, the process of secularisation has been so profound that it has created a generation of immigrants who suffer from cultural alienation.²

¹ quoted by H. Kung in *Does God Exist?* pp. 576-7.

² Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi Elect of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, describes these immigrants as being in "that psychologically devastating no man's land between an excluded past and an excluding present," J. Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, p. 62.

Although these immigrants are more intellectually and morally independent than their fellow immigrants, their “education” seems to have come at the price of them having to step outside their own respective religious communities. On the other hand, in recent decades, a new generation of immigrants has been involved with a revival of traditional community identity, paralleled by a rise in religious fundamentalism.³ Many of today’s religious fundamentalist groups pitch their beliefs directly against modern Western secularism. Groups, for instance, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, while attempting to create an Islamic theocratic state, also provided a home to anti-Western militant groups. Each culture must, of course, find its own balance. This paper will attempt to outline in broad terms how a balance between traditional religion and modern secularism may be found.

It is also pertinent to ask how the Bahá’í Faith faces the challenges of modern Western secularism. Although the Bahá’í Faith is a relatively young world religion, having its roots in the modern era, it is also committed to the building of religious institutions. How the Bahá’í Faith aims to build up religious institutions in a world in which there is widespread opposition to organised religion will also be discussed in this paper.

It should be noted from the outset that the opinions expressed in this paper do not represent authoritative Bahá’í belief, but are my own personal reflections. They are not only based upon my reading of Western history and the Bahá’í writings, but come from my experience as a second generation Pakistani immigrant growing up in Britain who embraced the Bahá’í Faith at the age of 20.

2. The Freedom of Conscience Challenge

Today the word “secular” is synonymous with religious scepticism. Secular humanists for instance, consider the rejection of religious truths to be one of their founding principles⁴ and at the same time, they see

³ Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, pp. 71-83.

⁴ In “A Secular Humanist Declaration” published in 1980, religious scepticism appears as one of ten principles. Part of the text reads, “Secular humanists may be agnostics, atheists, rationalists, or skeptics, but they find insufficient evidence for the claim that some divine

themselves as guardians of "reason, democracy and freedom."⁵ Historically, the situation was quite different. Secularism, as it emerged out of medieval Christendom, was concerned with affirming religious truths, not rejecting them. It was aimed at purging religion from man-made dogmas, and it appealed to scripture for its inspiration. With the mass dissemination of the Bible in the latter half of the 15th century—the first book to be printed in the Western world, followed by the printing of many ancient classical books—the scene was set for revolt. Some decades later, early in the 16th century, two movements that challenged the foundations of medieval Christendom were born: the European Reformation and the European Renaissance. Both movements were inseparable from the impact of Islam on medieval Europe.⁶ Both movements aimed at by-passing medieval clerical authority, and looked to ancient texts for their inspiration: the Bible in the case of the Reformation, and the classical works of Greece and Rome in the case of the Renaissance.

The 16th century Christian Reformation, initiated by the German theologian Martin Luther, was an important historical landmark for religious freedom and was inseparable from challenging the moral authority of the Pope. At a conference in 1537 AD, a group of Lutheran leaders met to formulate their doctrine. There, a statement entitled, "Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope," which directly challenged Papal authority, was made. This statement was later incorporated into the Lutheran Confession of Faith, the *Book of Concord*. The statement starts out by listing three areas on which it challenges the Pope: his spiritual leadership, his dealings with "secular dominions", and his authority in matters of personal salvation

"The Roman Pontiff claims for himself [in the first place] that by divine right he is [supreme] above all bishops and

purpose exists for the universe. They reject that God has intervened miraculously in history or revealed himself to a chosen few, or that he can save or redeem sinners... We reject the divinity of Jesus, the divine mission of Moses, Mohammed, and other latter-day prophets and saints of the various sects and denominations," Paul Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism*, pp. 18-19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁶ see A. Khursheed, "Medieval Islam: The influence of Islam on Judaism and Christianity," *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, Vol. 2, pp 175-229.

pastors [in all Christendom].

Secondly, he adds also that by divine right he has both swords, i.e., the authority also of bestowing kingdoms [enthroning and deposing kings, regulating secular dominions etc.].

And thirdly, he says that to believe this is necessary for salvation. And for these reasons the Roman bishop calls himself [and boasts that he is] the vicar of Christ on earth. These three articles we hold to be false, godless, tyrannical, and [quite] pernicious to the Church.

Now, in order that our proof [reason and opinion] may be [better] understood, we shall first define what they call being above all [what it means that he boasts of being supreme] by divine right. For they mean that he is universal [that the Pope is the general bishop over the entire Christian Church], or, as they say, ecumenical bishop, i.e., from whom all bishops and pastors throughout the entire world ought to seek ordination and [confirmation, who [alone] is to have the right of electing, ordaining, confirming, deposing all bishops [and pastors]. Besides this, he arrogates to himself the authority to make [all kinds of] laws concerning acts of worship, concerning changing the Sacraments [and] concerning doctrine, and wishes his articles, his decrees, his laws [his statutes and ordinances] to be considered equal to the divine laws [to other articles of the Christian Creed and the Holy Scriptures], i.e., he holds that by the papal laws the consciences of men are so bound that those who neglect them, even without public offense, sin mortally [that they cannot be omitted without sin. For he wishes to found this power upon divine right and the Holy Scriptures; yea, he wishes to have it preferred to the Holy Scriptures and God's commands]. And what he adds is still more horrible, namely, that it is necessary to believe all these things in order to be saved [all these

things shall and must be believed at the peril of forfeiting salvation]."⁷

The statement goes on to reject the attitude of allowing for superiority amongst Bishops, and cites Biblical text to suggest that a more Christian approach is one of humble service:

"In the first place, therefore, let us show from the [holy] Gospel that the Roman bishop is not by divine right above [cannot arrogate to himself any supremacy whatever over] other bishops and pastors.

Luke 22: 25. Christ expressly prohibits lordship among the apostles [that no apostle should have any supremacy over the rest]. For this was the very question, namely, that when Christ spake of His passion, they were disputing who should be at the head, and as it were the vicar of the absent Christ. There Christ reproves this error of the apostles and teaches that there shall not be lordship or superiority among them, but that the apostles should be sent forth as equals to the common ministry of the Gospel. Accordingly, He says: The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors, but ye shall not be so; but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. The antithesis here shows [By holding these matters against one another one sees] that lordship [among the apostles] is disapproved.

II. Matt. 18: 2. The same is taught by the parable when Christ in the same dispute concerning the kingdom places a little child in the midst, signifying that among ministers there is not to be sovereignty, just as a child neither takes nor seeks sovereignty for himself.

III. John 20: 21. Christ sends forth His disciples on an equality, without any distinction [so that no one of them was to have more or less power than any other], when He

⁷ "Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope," *The Book of Concord*.

says: As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. [These words are clear and plain:] He says that He sends them individually in the same manner as He Himself was sent; hence He grants to no one a prerogative or lordship above the rest."⁸

These passages make it clear that authoritarian institutions cannot claim to be truly Christian. The Christian spirit does not reside in leadership, but lies in humble service and fellowship. Lutherans in the 16th century judged Papal attempts at regulating matters such as Bishop ordination and acts of worship to be intrusions into the politics of leadership, rather than something concerned with serving the spiritual mission of Christ. The Lutheran movement was not sceptical about religion, but it was secular in the sense that it opposed the political ambitions of religious authorities. This is even more clearly evident in its opposition to the Papacy laying claim to the rule of various Kingdoms. The Lutheran movement believed in a strict separation between the spiritual mission of the Church and the political affairs of the State. Again, they cited biblical passages to support their view:

"The second article is still clearer, that Christ gave to the apostles only spiritual power, i.e., the command to teach the Gospel, to announce the forgiveness of sins, to administer the Sacraments, to excommunicate the godless without bodily force [by the Word], and that He did not give the power of the sword, or the right to establish, occupy or confer kingdoms of the world [to set up or depose kings]. For Christ says, Matt. 28, 19. 20: Go ye, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; also John 20, 21: As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.

Now, it is manifest that Christ was not sent to bear the sword or possess a worldly kingdom [rule in a worldly fashion], as He Himself says, John 18, 36: My kingdom is not of this world. And Paul says, 2 Cor. 1, 24: Not for that we have dominion over your faith; and 2 Cor. 10, 4:

⁸ *Ibid*

The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, etc."⁹

The Lutheran statement goes on to describe some of the undesirable historical consequences of the Papacy laying claim to the rule of "worldly Kingdoms":

"Accordingly, that Christ in His passion is crowned with thorns and led forth to be derided in royal purple, this signified that in the future, after His spiritual kingdom was despised, i.e., the Gospel was suppressed, another kingdom of a worldly kind would be set up [in its place] with the pretext of ecclesiastical power. Therefore the Constitution of Boniface VIII and the chapter Omnes, Dist. 22 and similar opinions which contend that the Pope is by divine right the ruler of the kingdoms of the world, are [utterly] false and godless. From this persuasion horrible darkness has been brought into the Church, and after that also great commotions have arisen in Europe. For the ministry of the Gospel was neglected, the knowledge of faith and the spiritual kingdom became extinct, Christian righteousness was supposed to be that external government which the Pope had established.

Next, the Popes began to seize upon kingdoms for themselves; they transferred kingdoms, they vexed with unjust excommunications and wars the kings of almost all nations in Europe, but especially the German emperors, sometimes for the purpose of occupying cities of Italy, at other times for the purpose of reducing to subjection the bishops of Germany, and wresting from the emperors the conferring of episcopates. Yea, in the Clementines it is even written: When the empire is vacant, the Pope is the legitimate successor.

Thus the Pope has not only usurped dominion, contrary to Christ's command, but has also tyrannically exalted himself above all kings. And in this matter the deed itself is not to be reprehended as much as it is to be detested,

⁹ *Ibid.*

that he assigns as a pretext the authority of Christ; that he transfers the keys to a worldly government; that he binds salvation to these godless and execrable opinions, when he says it is necessary to salvation for men to believe that this dominion belongs to him by divine right.

Since these great errors obscure [the doctrine of] faith and [of] the kingdom of Christ they are in no way to be concealed. For the result shows that they have been great pests to the Church."¹⁰

The separation of Church and State is now of course, a fundamental ethic of the modern Western world. It is one of the defining features of secularism. But to insist that there be such a separation does not mean one is being sceptical about religion. In fact, being secular in this sense is arguably being more true to the spiritual mission of Christianity. Building a theocracy ruled by religious leaders is not the founding aim of Christianity. Christians are called upon to build a spiritual domain on earth, the "Kingdom of God."

Dissent against unjust and cruel institutions on the basis of freedom of conscience, another sacred value of the modern Western world, was also articulated in the Reformation. This was also invoked by the Lutherans on Biblical authority:

"In the third place, this must be added: Even though the bishop of Rome had the primacy and superiority by divine right nevertheless obedience would not be due those pontiffs who defend godless services, idolatry, and doctrine conflicting with the Gospel. Nay; such pontiffs and such a government ought to be held accursed, as Paul clearly teaches, Gal. 1, 8: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. And in Acts 5, 29: We ought to obey God rather than men. Likewise the canons also clearly teach that a heretical Pope is not to be obeyed....

....To dissent from the agreement of so many nations and to be called schismatics is a grave matter. But divine

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

authority commands all not to be allies and defenders of impiety and unjust cruelty.

On this account our consciences are sufficiently excused; for the errors of the kingdom of the Pope are manifest. And Scripture with its entire voice exclaims that these errors are a teaching of demons and of Antichrist. The idolatry in the profanation of the masses is manifest, which, besides other faults [besides being altogether useless] are shamelessly applied to most shameful gain [and trafficking]. The doctrine of repentance has been utterly corrupted by the Pope and his adherents. For they teach that sins are remitted because of the worth of our works. Then they bid us doubt whether the remission takes place. They nowhere teach that sins are remitted freely for Christ's sake, and that by this faith we obtain remission of sins.

Thus they obscure the glory of Christ, and deprive consciences of firm consolation, and abolish true divine services, namely, the exercises of faith struggling with [unbelief and] despair [concerning the promise of the Gospel].

They have obscured the doctrine concerning sin, and have invented a tradition concerning the enumeration of offenses, producing many errors and despair. They have devised, in addition, satisfactions, whereby they have also obscured the benefit [and merit] of Christ. From these, indulgences have been born, which are pure lies, fabricated for the sake of gain. Then, how many abuses and what horrible idolatry the invocation of saints has produced! What shameful acts have arisen from the tradition concerning celibacy!"¹¹

Dissent based upon Freedom of Conscience is not a principle that necessarily undermines religious authority. It merely means that religious institutions, just like individuals, must be held responsible for their actions. Religious institutions cannot place themselves beyond justice.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

This is precisely what the Lutherans thought the Papacy was doing. The Papacy took on the role of administering justice and exempted itself from being subjected to any independent judicial inquiry. This also led to censure of public debate and discussion. The Lutherans called on Kings to curb "the license of the Popes":

"Then to these errors two great sins are added: The first, that he defends these errors by unjust cruelty and death-penalties. The second, that he wrests the decision from the Church, and does not permit ecclesiastical controversies [such matters of religion] to be judged according to the prescribed mode; yea he contends that he is above the Council, and can rescind the decrees of Councils, as the canons sometimes impudently speak. But that this was much more impudently done by the pontiffs, examples testify.

Quest. 9, canon 3, says: No one shall judge the first seat; for the judge is judged neither by the emperor, nor by all the clergy, nor by the kings, nor by the people.

The Pope exercises a twofold tyranny: he defends his errors by force and by murders, and forbids judicial examination. The latter does even more injury than any executions because, when the true judgment of the Church is removed, godless dogmas and godless services cannot be removed, and for many ages they destroy innumerable souls.

Therefore let the godly consider the great errors of the kingdom of the Pope and his tyranny, and let them ponder, first, that the errors must be rejected and the true doctrine embraced, for the glory of God and to the salvation of souls. Then let them ponder also how great a crime it is to aid unjust cruelty in killing saints, whose blood God will undoubtedly avenge....

....And even though the Pope should hold Synods [a Council], how can the Church be healed if the Pope suffers nothing to be decreed contrary to his will, if he allows no one to express his opinion except his adherents whom he has bound by dreadful oaths and curses to the

defense of his tyranny and wickedness without any exception concerning God's Word [not even the Word of God being excepted]....

...But since the decisions of Synods are the decisions of the Church, and not of the Popes, it is especially incumbent on kings to check the license of the Popes [not allow such wantonness], and to act so that the power of judging and decreeing from the Word of God is not wrested from the Church. And as the rest of the Christians must censure all other errors of the Pope, so they must also rebuke the Pope when he evades and impedes the true investigation and true decision of the Church."¹²

These themes—spiritual equality, the necessity of having an independent judiciary and the need to have open public debate and inquiry—are, of course, now commonplace in the modern Western world.¹³ At the time of the Reformation in Christian Europe, their public support often led to death. The basic premiss on which they are founded is that there is no institution, religious or otherwise, which can place itself above justice. This principle need not undermine the authority of the Church or any other religious institution, providing, that is, they act justly.

3. The Scientific Challenge

The second major secular blow to Papal authority came in the name of scientific free enquiry, around a century after the Reformation started.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ They appear for instance in the famous *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789, which is taken to be the charter for modern democracy: "1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good....10. No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law. 11. The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law." Gerald Murphy, *The Cleveland Free-Net*.

This secular scientific challenge has had many repercussions for religion in modern times. The dispute not only continued to undermine Papal authority, but also raised important questions concerning the relationship of scientific facts and theories to sacred religious text. It has contributed greatly to the widespread belief today that modern science is fundamentally opposed to religion, that religious scepticism is an inherent part of the modern scientific world view.

The infamous episode that most clearly brings out these issues is the conflict between the Italian physicist Galileo Galilei with the Papacy in the 17th century. Galileo, of course, needs no introduction. His scientific achievements include: discovering the properties of the pendulum; inventing the thermometer; formulating the laws that govern the motion of falling bodies; and using the telescope to make observations of the Moon, Sun, planets and stars.

It is particularly with respect to the way Galileo went about verifying scientific hypotheses that he is best remembered. He devised and carried out his own experiments, rather than relying on second-hand information through tradition. His experimental demonstrations, such as dropping metal objects from the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, or of rolling balls down an incline plane, are well-known even to many who have never studied science. For Galileo, free enquiry in the pursuit of truth was also an essential part of the scientific method:

“It appears to me that they who in proof of anything rely simply on the weight of authority, without adducing any argument in support of it, act very absurdly. I, on the contrary, wish to be allowed to raise questions freely and to answer without any adulation [of authorities] as becomes those who are truly in search of the truth.”¹⁴

It should be pointed out that although Galileo is frequently cited as being the first to use the modern experimental approach, he was in fact preceded by the English physician William Gilbert. Gilbert carried out original experiments in the field of electricity and magnetism. In 1600 AD, Gilbert published his book, *De Magnete*, which laid the foundations of modern

¹⁴ S. Drake, *Galileo*, p. 23.

electricity and magnetism. Galileo was a great admirer of Gilbert's work. Gilbert, like Galileo, found it necessary to emphasise the importance of carrying out one's own experiments in scientific investigation first hand, rather than relying on the words of traditional authorities:

"Many modern authors have written about amber and jet attracting chaff and other facts unknown to the generality: with the results of their labors booksellers' shops are crammed full. Our generation has produced many volumes about recondite, abstruse and occult causes and wonders, and in all of them amber and jet are represented as attracting chaff; but never a proof from experiment, never a demonstration do you find in them. The writers deal only in words that involve in thicker darkness subject-matter; they treat the subject esoterically, miracle-mongeringly, abstrusely, reconditely, mystically. Hence such philosophy bears no fruit; for it rests simply on a few Greek or unusual terms—just as our barbers toss off a few Latin words in the hearing of the ignorant rabble in token of their learning, and thus win reputation—bears no fruit, because few of the philosophers are themselves investigators, or have any first-hand acquaintance with things."¹⁵

At the time of Galileo, two traditional sources of authority were used to block or stifle scientific free enquiry: the Catholic Church, and the science of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotelian learning had been synthesised into Christian doctrine by many theologians and philosophers during the medieval period, and their tradition of scholasticism dominated university education. Galileo was brought into conflict with both these authorities with his support for the Copernican theory in astronomy. The medieval belief of the Sun and planets moving around a stationary Earth rested on the authority of ancient Greek texts from Aristotle and Ptolemy, and on the common interpretations of scripture. The relevant passages in the Bible that appear to describe a stationary Earth and moving Sun are as follows:

¹⁵ W. Gilbert, *De Magnete*, p. 77.

"The Lord reigneth, he is clothed with majesty; the Lord is clothed with strength, wherewith he hath girded himself: the world also is established, that it cannot be moved. Thy throne is established of old: thou art from everlasting" (Ps 93: 1-2).

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race. His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof" (Ps 19: 1-6).

Galileo was summoned to Rome in 1616 AD and was obliged by the Catholic Church to renounce his support for the Copernican system. However, in 1623 AD, Cardinal Barberini, a friend of Galileo's, became Pope Urban VIII. This gave Galileo a new sense of security and prompted him to write his *Dialogues on the Two Great Systems of the World*, published in 1632 AD. This work, although purporting to give a neutral comparison between the Copernican and Ptolemaic systems, in practice contained many strong arguments in favour of the former. Once again Galileo was summoned to Rome, this time in 1633 AD as an old man of sixty-nine. His one-time friend and now bitter enemy, Pope Urban VIII, allowed Galileo to be threatened with torture if he refused to recant. After recanting, he was condemned to prison, but this was changed to a mild form of house-arrest which lasted until the year of his death in 1642 AD.

Galileo was not a religious sceptic. He was a committed Catholic who accepted the truth of divine revelation and the spiritual authority of the Pope. This meant that Galileo accepted the truth of the Bible. How Galileo reconciled the apparent clash of the Copernican theory and the above passages from the Bible is insightful for the general relationship between science and religion.

Galileo's basic approach was to propose that the main purpose of religious scripture is to convey spiritual truths, and any reference to scientific knowledge is incidental. To this end, scripture uses simple symbolic language that everyone can understand. But because it deals with complex subjects, like the nature of God or human nature, it can be interpreted in many different ways, and for this reason, we must not be dogmatic or too literal in our interpretations of it. Religious language is like poetry, quite unlike the precise language of mathematics used to describe the laws of physics. Galileo said that in scripture, there is much more than "what its bare words signify." This means that where scientific knowledge conflicts with scripture, it forces us to reinterpret scripture. This, according to Galileo, is not a problem since scripture in any case is primarily about conveying spiritual truths and not scientific ones. Galileo thought the realms of science and religion were quite separate: religion deals with subjects such as the attributes of God and human salvation, while science deals with the physical universe. Galileo describes it as: "the intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven. not how heaven goes." Both Nature and scripture are revealed by God, but they deal with different realms of human experience. Galileo cites various respected Christian saints to demonstrate that his view is already well supported within the Christian tradition. These views are articulated in a letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany in 1615 AD. Part of the Galileo's letter reads:

"The reason produced for condemning the opinion that the earth moves and the sun stands still in many places in the Bible one may read that the sun moves and the earth stands still. Since the Bible cannot err; it follows as a necessary consequence that anyone takes a erroneous and heretical position who maintains that the sun is inherently motionless and the earth movable.

With regard to this argument, I think in the first place that it is very pious to say and prudent to affirm that the holy Bible can never speak untruth-whenver its true meaning is understood. But I believe nobody will deny that it is often very abstruse, and may say things which are quite different from what its bare words signify. Hence in expounding the Bible if one were always to confine oneself to the unadorned grammatical meaning, one

might fall into error. Not only contradictions and propositions far from true might thus be made to appear in the Bible, but even grave heresies and follies. Thus it would be necessary to assign to God feet, hands and eyes, as well as corporeal and human affections, such as anger, repentance, hatred, and sometimes even the forgetting of things past and ignorance of those to come. These propositions uttered by the Holy Ghost were set down in that manner by the sacred scribes in order to accommodate them to the capacities of the common people, who are rude and unlearned. For the sake of those who deserve to be separated from the herd, it is necessary that wise expositors should produce the true senses of such passages, together with the special reasons for which they were set down in these words. This doctrine is so widespread and so definite with all theologians that it would be superfluous to adduce evidence for it.

Hence I think that I may reasonably conclude that whenever the Bible has occasion to speak of any physical conclusion (especially those which are very abstruse and hard to understand), the rule has been observed of avoiding confusion in the minds of the common people which would render them contumacious toward the higher mysteries. Now the Bible, merely to condescend to popular capacity, has not hesitated to obscure some very important pronouncements, attributing to God himself some qualities extremely remote from (and even contrary to) His essence. Who, then, would positively declare that this principle has been set aside, and the Bible has confined itself rigorously to the bare and restricted sense of its words, when speaking but casually of the earth, of water, of the sun, or of any other created thing? Especially in view of the fact that these things in no way concern the primary purpose of the sacred writings, which is the service of God and the salvation of souls - matters infinitely beyond the comprehension of the common people.

This being granted, I think that in discussions of physical

problems we ought to begin not from the authority of scriptural passages but from sense and shy;experiences and necessary demonstrations; for the holy Bible and the phenomena of nature proceed alike from the divine Word the former as the dictate of the Holy Ghost and the latter as the observant executrix of God's commands. It is necessary for the Bible, in order to be accommodated to the understanding of every man, to speak many things which appear to differ from the absolute truth so far as the bare meaning of the words is concerned. But Nature, on the other hand, is inexorable and immutable; she never transgresses the laws imposed upon her, or cares a whit whether her abstruse reasons and methods of operation are understandable to men. For that reason it appears that nothing physical which sense­experience sets before our eyes, or which necessary demonstrations prove to us, ought to be called in question (much less condemned) upon the testimony of biblical passages which may have some different meaning beneath their words. For the Bible is not chained in every expression to conditions as strict as those which govern all physical effects; nor is God any less excellently revealed in Nature's actions than in the sacred statements of the Bible. Perhaps this is what Tertullian meant by these words: "We conclude that God is known first through Nature, and then again, more particularly, by doctrine, by Nature in His works, and by doctrine in His revealed word."

From this I do not mean to infer that we need not have an extraordinary esteem for the passages of holy Scripture. On the contrary, having arrived at any certainties in physics, we ought to utilize these as the most appropriate aids in the true exposition of the Bible and in the investigation of those meanings which are necessarily contained therein, for these must be concordant with demonstrated truths. I should judge that the authority of the Bible was designed to persuade men of those articles and propositions which, surpassing all human reasoning could not be made credible by science, or by any other means than through the very mouth of the Holy Spirit.

Yet even in those propositions which are not matters of faith, this authority ought to be preferred over that of all human writings which are supported only by bare assertions or probable arguments, and not set forth in a demonstrative way. This I hold to be necessary and proper to the same extent that divine wisdom surpasses all human judgment and conjecture.

But I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason and intellect has intended us to forego their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them. He would not require us to deny sense and reason in physical matters which are set before our eyes and minds by direct experience or necessary demonstrations. This must be especially true in those sciences of which but the faintest trace (and that consisting of conclusions) is to be found in the Bible. Of astronomy; for instance, so little is found that none of the planets except Venus are so much as mentioned, and this only once or twice under the name of "Lucifer." If the sacred scribes had had any intention of teaching people certain arrangements and motions of the heavenly bodies, or had they wished us to derive such knowledge from the Bible, then in my opinion they would not have spoken of these matters so sparingly in comparison with the infinite number of admirable conclusions which are demonstrated in that science. Far from pretending to teach us the constitution and motions of the heavens and other stars, with their shapes, magnitudes, and distances, the authors of the Bible intentionally forbore to speak of these things, though all were quite well known to them. Such is the opinion of the holiest and most learned Fathers, and in St. Augustine we find the following words : "It is likewise commonly asked what we may believe about the form and shape of the heavens according to the Scriptures, for many contend much about these matters. But with superior prudence our authors have forborne to speak of this, as in no way furthering the student with respect to a blessed life-and,

more important still, as taking up much of that time which should be spent in holy exercises. What is it to me whether heaven, like a sphere surrounds the earth on all sides as a mass balanced in the center of the universe, or whether like a dish it merely covers and overcasts the earth? Belief in Scripture is urged rather for the reason we have often mentioned; that is, in order that no one, through ignorance of divine passages, finding anything in our Bibles or hearing anything cited from them of such a nature as may seem to oppose manifest conclusions, should be induced to suspect their truth when they teach, relate, and deliver more profitable matters. Hence let it be said briefly, touching the form of heaven, that our authors knew the truth but the Holy Spirit did not desire that men should learn things that are useful to no one for salvation."

The same disregard of these sacred authors toward beliefs about the phenomena of the celestial bodies is repeated to us by St. Augustine in his next chapter. On the question whether we are to believe that the heaven moves or stands still, he writes thus: "Some of the brethren raise a question concerning the motion of heaven, whether it is fixed or moved. If it is moved, they say, how is it a firmament? If it stands still, how do these stars which are held fixed in it go round from east to west, the more northerly performing shorter circuits near the pole, so that the heaven (if there is another pole unknown to us) may seem to revolve upon some axis, or (if there is no other pole) may be thought to move as a discus? To these men I reply that it would require many subtle and profound reasonings to find out which of these things is actually so; but to undertake this and discuss it is consistent neither with my leisure nor with the duty of those whom I desire to instruct in essential matters more directly conducing to their salvation and to the benefit of the holy Church."

From these things it follows as a necessary consequence that, since the Holy Ghost did not intend to teach us whether heaven moves or stands still, whether its shape is

spherical or like a discus or extended in a plane, nor whether the earth is located at its center or off to one side, then so much the less was it intended to settle for us any other conclusion of the same kind. And the motion or rest of the earth and the sun is so closely linked with the things just named, that without a determination of the one, neither side can be taken in the other matters. Now if the Holy Spirit has purposely neglected to teach us propositions of this sort as irrelevant to the highest goal (that is, to our salvation), how can anyone affirm that it is obligatory to take sides on them, that one belief is required by faith, while the other side is erroneous? Can an opinion be heretical and yet have no concern with the salvation of souls? Can the Holy Ghost be asserted not to have intended teaching us something that does concern our salvation? I would say here something that was heard from an ecclesiastic of the most eminent degree: "That the intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven not how heaven goes."

But let us again consider the degree to which necessary demonstrations and sense experiences ought to be respected in physical conclusions, and the authority they have enjoyed at the hands of holy and learned theologians. From among a hundred attestations I have selected the following: "We must also take heed, in handling the doctrine of Moses that we altogether avoid saying positively and confidently anything which contradicts manifest experiences and the reasoning of philosophy or the other sciences. For since every truth is in agreement with all other truth, the truth of Holy Writ cannot be contrary to the solid reasons and experiences of human knowledge." And in St. Augustine we read: "If anyone shall set the authority of Holy Writ against clear and manifest reason, he who does this knows not what he has undertaken; for he opposes to the truth not the meaning of the Bible, which is beyond his comprehension, but rather his own interpretation, not what is in the Bible, but what he has found in himself and imagines to be there."

This granted, and it being true that two truths cannot contradict one another, it is the function of expositors to seek out the true senses of scriptural texts. These will unquestionably accord with the physical conclusions which manifest sense and necessary demonstrations have previously made certain to us."¹⁶

Ironically, Galileo's well-reasoned theology was quoted by the Pope in 1992 in his *Apology to Galileo*. Galileo's theology is the basis of the Catholic Church's present position. The Pope in 1992 stated:

"Thus the new science, with its methods and the freedom of research which they implied, obliged theologians to examine their own criteria of scriptural interpretation. Most of them did not know how to do so. Paradoxically, Galileo, a sincere believer, showed himself to be more perceptive in this regard than the theologians who opposed him. "If Scripture cannot err," he wrote to Benedetto Castelli, "certain of its interpreters and commentators can and do so in many ways." We also know of his letter to Christine de Lorraine (1615) which is like a short treatise on biblical hermeneutics."¹⁷

Galileo's conflict with the Pope is liable to give the impression that religion in the 17th century opposed science, but this would be untrue. There were other scientific pioneers of the 17th century who did not receive religious opposition for their support of the Copernican theory. Take for example German-born Johan Kepler (1571-1630 AD), a contemporary of Galileo. Kepler was the first professional astronomer to publicly support the Copernican theory of the universe, and his three planetary laws of motion laid the foundations of modern astronomy. Kepler's achievements in modern science rival Galileo's contributions to modern physics. Like Galileo, Kepler carried out his own scientific investigations first hand, and did not rely on tradition. But Germany was under the influence of the Protestant Reformation, which was rapidly

¹⁶ Galileo Galilei: "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany, 1615," *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*.

¹⁷ *L'Osservatore Romano* N. 44 (1264) - 4 November 1992.

spreading to other countries in Northern Europe. Although Protestant clerics spoke out against the Copernican theory on the basis of it contradicting scripture, religious interpretation for Protestants was a private matter, and Kepler did not receive any clerical opposition. The Protestant rebellion had been based precisely on the point of achieving greater freedom of thought, and in the 17th century, Catholic philosophers often fled to the more liberal Protestant countries of the North.

The Copernican System, far from undermining religious belief, did precisely the opposite for Kepler. He thought the Sun in the Copernican astronomical system took its rightful place at the centre of the universe, vindicating the power of God throughout the universe, driving the planets around it. In his mind, the Sun was not only a power of light and heat, but a source of Divine power reflecting God's dominion over the universe:

"The sun in the middle of the moving stars, himself at rest and yet the source of motion, carries the image of God the Father and Creator....He distributes his motive power through a medium which contains the moving bodies even as the Father creates through the Holy Ghost."¹⁸

Preceding both Galileo and Kepler, William Gilbert's *De Magnete*, published in London, not only stated its support for the Copernican theory, but also provided the same type of theological observations later made by Galileo: that scripture is primarily about human spiritual themes put in simple symbolic language, and therefore, it cannot conflict with scientific truth:

"Nor do those things which are adduced from the sacred scriptures seem to be specially adverse to the doctrine of the mobility of the Earth; nor does it seem to have been the intention of Moses or of the Prophets to promulgate any mathematical or physical niceties, but to adapt themselves to the understanding of the common people and their manner of speech, just as nurses are accustomed

¹⁸ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 264.

to adapt themselves to infants, and not to go into every unnecessary detail...."¹⁹

De Magnete was published in the same year (1600 AD) that the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for his heterodox beliefs that included an espousal of the Copernican theory, and the assertion that the stars were an infinity of suns like our own, each circled by worlds inhabited by intelligent beings like ourselves.

Even within Italy, the Catholic Church was not so blind to the "New Science" as often supposed. Jesuit astronomers such as Father Clavius confirmed Galileo's early telescope discoveries and even improved on them. Leading clerics in the Catholic Order had no qualms about the Copernican system being a "working hypothesis." In fact, Cardinal Bellarmine, advisor to the Holy Office, when asked to comment on Galileo's support of the new heliocentric theory, stated that to support the Copernican system made "excellent sense":

"For to say that the assumption that the Earth moves and the Sun stands still saves all the celestial appearances better than do eccentrics and epicycles is to speak with excellent sense and to run no risk whatever. Such a manner of speaking suffices for a mathematician...."²⁰

The Cardinal did however stress that to insist that the Copernican theory was more than a theoretical proposition and represented the true state of affairs was likely to "injure our holy faith by contradicting the Scriptures." He also stated in the same letter that:

"..if there were real proof that the Sun is in the centre of the universe....then we should have to proceed with great circumspection in explaining passages of Scripture which appear to teach the contrary, and we should rather have to say that we did not understand them than declare an opinion to be false which is proved to be true.."²¹

¹⁹ William Gilbert, *De Magnete*, foreword.

²⁰ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 454.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 454-5.

This latter point is a very important one, and highlights an aspect of the dispute which is not generally well known. Had Galileo presented convincing proof in favour of the Copernican theory, the Catholic Church was ready to revise its interpretations of the Biblical passages in question rather than declare an "opinion to be false which is proved to be true." Galileo had however, apart from the ascetic and mathematical simplicity of the Copernican system, only one piece of experimental data that was directly in its favour: namely his observations of the different phases on the planet Venus. To counter this, there were compelling scientific objections against the Copernican theory. One such objection was that if the Copernican theory were correct, the fixed stars ought to reveal an annual parallax caused by the Earth's motion. But no such apparent displacement in the position of these stars was observed at the time. In fact confirmation of this effect had to await the development of more accurate telescopes, and only came in 1838 AD. In addition to this, the version of the Copernican system popularised by Galileo offered no advantages of accuracy over the Ptolemaic theory and the former ancient theory had the advantage that it could be directly affirmed by looking up into the sky. In general, the choice between whether or not to accept the Copernican system in Galileo's day was not so clear cut as often imagined. The historian of science Professor E. A. Burt in his book, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, states that:

"..it is safe to say that even had there been no religious scruples whatever against the Copernican astronomy, sensible men all over Europe, especially the most empirically minded, would have pronounced it a wild appeal to accept the premature fruits of an uncontrolled imagination, in preference to the solid inductions, built up gradually through the ages, of men's confirmed sense experience. In the strong sense of empiricism, so characteristic of present-day philosophy, it is well to remind ourselves of this fact. Contemporary empiricists, had they lived in the sixteenth century, would have been first to scoff out of court the new philosophy of the universe."²²

²² E. A. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Science*, p. 38.

The Catholic Church did not dogmatically reject the Copernican theory. As shown in Cardinal Bellarmine's letter, which was a representative view taken by the Catholic Church as a whole, had Galileo been in the position of presenting stronger evidence to support the Copernican system, the church would have been prepared to revise its understanding of Scripture from a literal sense to a more symbolic one. When the decree banning Copernicus's *Book of the Revolutions* was finally issued in 1616 by the Catholic Order, the word heresy did not appear in it. The decree was issued "in order that this opinion may not insinuate itself any further to the prejudice of Catholic truth."²³ While individual accusations of heresy were certainly made by members of the Inquisition, they were not officially endorsed by the Papacy.

Towards the end of the 16th century, the Jesuit Order, the intellectual spearhead of the Catholic Church, began all over Europe to accept the Tycho Brahe astronomical model of the universe in favour of the Ptolemaic one. This scheme placed both the sun and earth at the centre of the universe, and thus can be thought of as a compromise between the Copernican and Ptolemaic system. Again, the Jesuits were prepared to treat the Copernican system as a "working hypothesis" in the first instance, until definitive proof was offered to the contrary: this was not an unreasonable position to take at the time. There were even some Jesuit priests who openly advocated the Copernican system not long after Galileo's conflict with the church had taken place. At the end of the 17th century, for example, Jesuit missionaries in China and Japan taught the heliocentric theory and made significant contributions in the spread of the new astronomy in the Far East.²⁴

Given all this support for the Copernican theory from within the European Christian community, it is clear that Galileo's conflict with the Church was not one based upon modern science opposing religion. It was, rather, modern science opposing the authority of religious leaders or institutions for the right of free enquiry. The Papacy had made excursions into domains that lay beyond its jurisdiction, and the conflict, in the long run, placed limits on the Papacy's claim to infallibility. It also helped define the kinds of truth conveyed in religious scripture. It forced Christians to accept what many of them already knew to be true: namely that the Bible

²³ A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 462.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

is a book primarily concerned with themes of spiritual progress and enlightenment, and not a book about scientific knowledge.

Galileo is remembered as a prophet of freedom in the cause of scientific free enquiry. Galileo's imprisonment is now widely used in the West to warn us of the dangers of following tradition and not thinking for oneself. It is taught to children at primary school level as a historical conflict between science and tradition. The secular challenge of free scientific enquiry has brought about a profound humbling experience for Christianity, and in that sense, it has helped religion. Modern scientific enquiry has liberated religion from blindly relying on authority or tradition.

Modern science has helped religion become less literal about its beliefs. The Copernican revolution forced Christians to realise that a geocentric view of the universe was not essential to a Christian world-view. Later, modern science helped them understand that the age of the Earth was not measured in thousands of years, but billions of years. Again, the lesson here was that Christians should not put their faith into literal interpretations of scripture, but seek to understand the underlying spiritual meanings behind it. In this way, modern science has greatly helped religion be less superstitious about its beliefs. Rather than working against religion, it has rendered religion a great service.

There is another sense in which modern science has purified Christian belief, and that is with respect to its age-old tendency to be anthropomorphic. Anthropomorphism is another kind of literalism. It comes from a loss of humility, in which Christians can forget the inherent mystery of God. This is most clearly apparent on the subject of divine intervention and miracles. In medieval times, divine intervention was invoked for all sorts of events that we now ascribe to natural causes, such as earthquakes, plagues etc. Scientific enquiry showed that events in Nature followed exact mathematical laws and principles. Physical events that were previously attributed to miraculous causes were in time given a scientific description based upon Natural Laws. Now, this did not mean science opposed religion. The 17th century pioneers of science described the "Book of Nature" in terms of God revealing his presence **through** Natural Laws, alongside the Book of Revelation. Kepler, for instance, thought human beings were empowered by God to decipher the divine

script in Nature, to uncover the eternal geometrical harmonies that existed before Creation: to share in timeless truths for which human beings were created, in God's likeness. These divine harmonies in Nature are much more powerful signs of God's likeness than anything which can be transmitted directly through the senses. In Kepler's words:

"Why waste words? Geometry existed before the Creation, is co-eternal with the mind of God...geometry provided God with a model for the Creation and was implanted into man, together with God's own likeness—and not merely conveyed to his mind through the eyes."²⁵

The 17th century Jewish philosopher Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza based much of his philosophy on purging Christian belief from its traditional anthropomorphism. He provided a description of God in terms of Natural Law rather than the miracle of divine intervention:

"From these conclusions – that nothing happens in nature which does not follow from its laws, that its laws extend to all things conceived by the divine intellect itself, and finally, that nature maintains a fixed and immutable order – it clearly follows that the term "miracle" cannot be understood except in relation to men's opinions, and means nothing but a work whose natural cause we cannot explain by the example of another customary thing, or at least which cannot be so explained by the one who writes or relates the miracle."²⁶

For Spinoza, the source of the problem lay in an overly literal theology, in which religious people interpreted everything in terms of their own capricious wishes:

"that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

²⁶ Benedict de Spinoza, *Spinoza Reader*, p. 36.

All this does not mean God cannot act through divine intervention, or that God does not answer people's prayers, or that there is not a divine purpose for human beings. But it should remind religious people who believe in God that God's ways are a great mystery, and anything human beings ascribe to God or God's purpose has no ultimate importance. Objective knowledge of God is by definition impossible. In the words of St Paul, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things we also speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Cor. 1:12-13).

4. Family Unity and Community Identity

There are important aspects of human experience that are missed by science, freedom and democracy, but which have traditionally been the province of religion. Amongst them is the creation of family unity and community identity. In most, if not all, the world's religions, marriage is a sacred bond, involving spiritual commitments and obligations: it is certainly not founded on individual rights and freedoms. Marriage is about much more than the development of the individual, whether it is in terms of thinking for oneself or standing up for one's beliefs. In the Abrahamic religions, the union of marriage in a religious context is intimately related to creating a family, one that will serve both society and God. Marriage is nourished by religion's intention to create love and unity.

Religion creates community identity. Religion provides a certain way of life. Sacred places, whether temples, mosques or synagogues, are places in which people gather together in worship, in fellowship, sharing a common vision. They are places where births are announced, marriage vows are made, and where the dead are honoured. Religion inspires compassion and charity for the poor and needy. Community bonds, like family ties, are based upon people having commitments and duties to one another. Social order is dependent on us having respect for a higher authority. The demands of community sometimes require self-sacrifice and obedience. The rights and freedoms of secularism, although very important on the individual level, cannot provide a sense of community.

another. Social order is dependent on us having respect for a higher authority. The demands of community sometimes require self-sacrifice and obedience. The rights and freedoms of secularism, although very important on the individual level, cannot provide a sense of community. Modern science encourages us to be more self-reliant, to think more for ourselves and to depend less on others. In short, while science, freedom and democracy strengthen the individual, it is religion that strengthens the family and the community.

If these observations are correct, the clash of secularism with religion in the modern world, or science with religion for that matter, is reflected in a conflict between the individual and the community. In the Western world, where secular values dominate, the sense of family unity and community identity has been greatly eroded, and it is individual ethics that take priority. The widespread breakdown of family unity is, for instance, reflected in the rapid increase of divorces and single parent families. On the level of community, there is a deep-rooted distrust of all forms of authority, not just religious ones. This has led to an increase in violence and social disorder. Take for instance, the anti-authoritarian attitudes that Western teenagers have at school towards their teachers, and the resulting problems of diminished school discipline. On the other hand, in countries where traditional religion is strong, the rights and freedoms of the individual are often subsumed by the dictates of family or community authority figures. Restrictions of personal freedoms and rights are usually justified by appealing to family and community stability.

Western democracy relies on its society having strong individual ethics, such as freedom of conscience and free enquiry. Democracy requires quite a high level of individual freedoms and rights before it can work. Each individual must be free to express his or her opinion, and that opinion must be taken seriously. Traditionally, most societies in the world have been run by individual leaders. This may explain why many non-Western countries struggle with having a democratic form of government. In addition, democracy does not address the issue of family unity and community identity. In a non-Western country where family unity and community identity is the primary concern, secular democracy seems individualistic and alien. It is wrong however, to think of the West as not having any religious identity. Most Western people still identify themselves to be Christian. But it is a privatised identity, one that only

comes to the surface occasionally, around Christmas time, or when it is under the threat of attack.²⁸ Jonathan Sacks makes the argument that Western secular societies are more religious than they suppose.²⁹

If there is to be a truly multi-cultural form of secularism, the modern West needs to address family and community concerns, which inevitably take it back to religion. But there is a problem in this regard, and that is: religions do not always bring people together. In fact, it is the sectarian violence of religion today that dominates its public image. Instead of bringing a greater sense of spiritual equality and unity, religious people are often exclusive, parochial and authoritarian. The unity of a religious group only seems to exist for those believers within it. Outside the identity of the group, amongst people of different religious groups, there is widespread mistrust, prejudice and even hatred.

Religious corruption has been the driving inspiration for the rise of secular humanism. In addition to the defiance of Papal power, there has been an increasing disenchantment with the numerous wars waged in the name of religion. Sectarian violence for instance between Catholics and Protestants has been continuing now for nearly 500 years. Moral repulsion at all kinds of injustices perpetrated in the name of religion has arguably been more decisive in driving people towards secularism than any theological

²⁸ On the day of the Sept. 11th Islamic militant attacks on America in the year 2001, the American President claimed that "Freedom had been attacked..." This was widely reported in the media. But in the subsequent days, people gathered in churches to remember their dead and try to come to terms with what had happened. In their hour of need, they came together as a community in churches. Their response to the crisis was rooted in the belief that Good shall triumph over Evil, a familiar Christian theme.

²⁹ In relation to marriage, he notes, "Overwhelmingly we do still marry, and hope that our marriages will last. In a recent survey almost nine out of ten of those interviewed said they valued faithfulness as the most important ingredient in marriage. We still believe in the family, without quite knowing why. The family is a religious institution that survives in a secular culture." J. Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, p. 57. On a more general theme, he writes, "If someone invented a religion detector and passed it over the surface of our culture, the needle would swing when he came to our still strong convictions that compassion and justice should be part of social order, that human life is sacred, that marriage and the nurture of children are not one lifestyle among many. When we lack power, we still feel responsible. When we see others suffering, we can still feel pain. These are traces that the Biblical tradition has left deep within our culture: signals of transcendence that can at times move us to otherwise unaccountable acts of conscience and courage." J. Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, pp. 92-3.

problems. This was evident even as far back as the 17th century. Take for instance the philosophy of Spinoza, which set out to reform many aspects of traditional Christian theology. Spinoza's criticisms of theology were first and foremost rooted in a moral protest: of all religions consisting of "external ceremonies"; of religious people falling far short of their great ideals; and how in a spirit of piety, they embrace superstitions which oppose science and reason.³⁰

As we move inexorably towards a multi-faith global village, traditional religious rivalries seem more and more parochial. Religious people, now more than ever, are challenged to come together in a spirit of fellowship rather than competition. The very credibility of religion in the modern world depends on it. One of the great successes of science lies in the universality of its practice. It is an activity that transcends cultural identity, customs and language. In comparison, religion in the modern world seems to be fundamentally divided. Religions disputing amongst themselves undermine their own respective truth claims. The more people of different faiths vie with one another, the less likely it is that their faith is based upon an infallible authority. As traditional religion in the modern

³⁰ "I have often wondered that men who boast of their allegiance to the Christian religion—that is, to love, gladness, peace, continence, and honesty toward all—would contend so unfairly against one another, and indulge daily in the bitterest hate toward one another, so that each man's faith is known more easily from the latter [i.e., his hate] than from the former [i.e., his love, etc.]. For long ago things reached the point where you can hardly know what anyone is, whether Christian, Turk, Jew, or Pagan, except by the external grooming and dress of his body, or because he frequents this or that place of worship, or because he is attached to this or that opinion, or because he is accustomed to swear by the words of some teacher. All lead the same kind of life." "What, then, is the cause of this evil? Doubtless that to ordinary people religion has consisted in regarding the ministry of a church as a position worthy of respect, its offices as sources of income, and its clergy as deserving the highest honor. For as soon as this abuse began in the church, the worst men acquired a great desire to administer the sacred offices; the love of propagating divine religion degenerated into sordid greed and ambition. . . . From this, of course, there had to come great quarrels, envy, and hate, whose violence no passage of time could lessen." "It is no wonder, then, that nothing has remained of the religion that used to be, beyond its external ceremony, by which the people seem more to flatter God than to worship him, no wonder that faith is nothing now but credulity and prejudices. And what prejudices! They turn men from rational beings into beasts, since they completely prevent everyone from using his free judgement and from distinguishing the true from the false, and seem deliberately designed to put out the light of the intellect entirely. Piety – good heavens! – and religion consist in absurd mysteries, and those who scorn reason completely, and reject the intellect as corrupt. . ." B. Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, pp. 8-9.

world comes to terms with secular challenges, it also needs a renewed commitment to fellowship, love, compassion and unity.

5. Challenges for the Bahá'í Community

What are the challenges of secularism for the Bahá'í Faith? On the one hand, the Bahá'í Faith gives strong support to all the major defining features of a secular outlook: free enquiry and freedom of conscience,³¹ the necessity of all religious truths being open to scientific investigation,³² a free exchange of diverse opinions,³³ and the free flow of information.

³¹ "this is a house of worship wherein conscientious opinion has free sway. Every religion and every religious aspiration may be freely voiced and expressed here. Just as in the world of politics there is need for free thought, likewise in the world of religion there should be the right of unrestricted individual belief. Consider what a vast difference exists between modern democracy and the old forms of despotism. Under an autocratic government the opinions of men are not free, and development is stifled, whereas in democracy, because thought and speech are not restricted, the greatest progress is witnessed. It is likewise true in the world of religion. When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail - that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs - development and growth are inevitable. Therefore, this is a blessed church because its pulpit is open to every religion, the ideals of which may be set forth with openness and freedom." 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 197.

³² "Consider what it is that singles man out from among created beings, and makes of him a creature apart. Is it not his reasoning power, his intelligence? Shall he not make use of these in his study of religion? I say unto you: weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance! Look around and see how the world of today is drowned in superstition and outward forms! It is impossible for religion to be contrary to science, even though some intellects are too weak or too immature to understand truth. God made religion and science to be the measure, as it were, of our understanding. Take heed that you neglect not such a wonderful power. Weigh all things in this balance. To him who has the power of comprehension religion is like an open book, but how can it be possible for a man devoid of reason and intellectuality to understand the Divine Realities of God? Put all your beliefs into harmony with science; there can be no opposition, for truth is one. When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles - and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 144-146.

³³ A clash of opinions during Bahá'í consultation is not only welcome, but it is a fundamental prerequisite for arriving at truth: "The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be

On the other hand, there are elements of traditional religious theocracy in the Bahá'í Faith. The individual Bahá'í has clear commitments and responsibilities to the family and the community. Children must be obedient to their parents, and all members of the Bahá'í community must be obedient to their elected assemblies. Although there is no clergy within the Bahá'í Faith, in every locality, members of the Bahá'í community democratically elect nine people who serve on a "Local Spiritual Assembly," an institution that looks after community affairs. Local communities elect the nine people who serve on a National Spiritual Assembly, while national communities elect the nine people who serve on the Universal House of Justice, the highest administrative body of the Bahá'í international community. Bahá'í assemblies are invested with a legislative as well as a moral authority. Bahá'í assemblies are not answerable to the community that elects them.³⁴ The goal of Bahá'í assemblies is that in time, they will become "Houses of Justice," which

attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 87.

³⁴ "The Administrative Order of the Faith of Baha'u'llah must in no wise be regarded as purely democratic in character inasmuch as the basic assumption which requires all democracies to depend fundamentally upon getting their mandate from the people is altogether lacking in this Dispensation. In the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith, in the enactment of the legislation necessary to supplement the laws of the Kitab-i-Aqdas, the members of the Universal House of Justice, it should be borne in mind, are not, as Baha'u'llah's utterances clearly imply, responsible to those whom they represent, nor are they allowed to be governed by the feelings, the general opinion, and even the convictions of the mass of the faithful, or of those who directly elect them. They are to follow, in a prayerful attitude, the dictates and promptings of their conscience." Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 153-154.

will serve both a political as well as a religious function.³⁵ The decisions of the Universal House of Justice are infallible and unchallengeable.³⁶

In the modern western context, the combination of secular and theocratic ideals of the Bahá'í Faith are not only difficult to understand, but appear contradictory. After all, did modern secularism not arise out of a 500 year history of rebellion against a theocratic institution? The early Protestant reformers resorted to freedom of conscience to challenge the injustice of an infallible authority, surely dissent against injustice is necessary. Has history not shown that no religious institution can place itself beyond truth and justice? Has history not shown that independent investigation, independent enquiry and an independent judicial system are all required if we are to protect ourselves against the all-too-frequent experience of religious people falling far short of their high ideals? Has democracy not replaced theocracy as a viable form of Government? Where in the world is there an example of a successful theocracy? The most recent effort at creating a theocracy was made by the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and that exhibited all the dogmatic and intolerant aspects of religious institutions that modern secularism rightly opposes. Has history not shown that religious institutions are fallible and that they can easily be corrupted? Has history not shown that religion and political power is a

³⁵ "He has ordained and established the House of Justice, which is endowed with a political as well as a religious function, the consummate union and blending of church and state. This institution is under the protecting power of Baha'u'llah Himself. A universal, or international, House of Justice shall also be organized. Its rulings shall be in accordance with the commands and teachings of Baha'u'llah, and that which the Universal House of Justice ordains shall be obeyed by all mankind. This international House of Justice shall be appointed and organized from the Houses of Justice of the whole world, and all the world shall come under its administration." `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 455.

³⁶ "The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abha Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God." `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, p. 11.

dangerous mix? How can Bahá'ís be successful in building religious institutions when the most influential forces in the modern world have been busy tearing them down? Is it really possible to believe in freedom of conscience and independent enquiry and still aim towards some sort of theocracy?

These are big questions. Perhaps too big at this early stage in the growth of the Bahá'í Faith to consider. The Bahá'í Faith is only some 150 years old, and Bahá'í communities around the world are only just beginning to address some of these issues. One key element in understanding a Bahá'í approach at reconciling modern secular independent thought with traditional religious obedience is the importance given to the act of consultation. The task of building up Bahá'í administrative institutions can only be combined with freedom of conscience and the individual right of self-expression if assembly members serve in "humble fellowship" and are imbued with a spirit of "frank and loving consultation":

"It devolves upon us whose dearest wish is to see the Cause enter upon that promised era of universal recognition and world achievements, to do all in our power to consolidate the foundations of these Assemblies, promoting at the same time a fuller understanding of their purpose and more harmonious cooperation for their maintenance and success. Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views. If certain instructions of the Master are today particularly emphasized and scrupulously adhered to, let us be sure that they are but provisional measures designed to guard and protect the Cause in its present state of infancy and growth until the day when this tender and precious plant shall have sufficiently grown to be able to withstand the unwisdom of its friends and the attacks of its enemies. Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Baha'i can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice,

of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other.³⁷

The “Bahá’í spirit” here is, of course, easy to state as an ideal, but difficult to arrive at in practice. If total obedience is required on the part of the community to their respective assembly, an obvious question is whether Bahá’ís can question the decisions of their assemblies. Is criticism allowable? The answer to this is a qualified yes: yes they can criticise—in fact they have the duty to do so—but it must be done with respect and not in a way that undermines the authority of the Assembly.³⁸

What should an individual do if after having put forward his or her criticisms in the spirit of “frank and loving consultation,” an Assembly does not change its policy? Should the individual try to lobby support for his or her views from the rest of the Bahá’í community? Should the individual organize a protest? These forms of dissent are quite common in modern secular society, but they are not the Bahá’í way of resolving conflicts. Bahá’ís must give priority to the unity of the community. They are asked not to engage in protest and dissent against the decisions of their

³⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration*, pp. 63-64.

³⁸ “Now with reference to your last dear letter in which you had asked whether the believers have the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly action or policy: it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local Community, and it is the duty of the Assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers. The best occasion chosen for this purpose is the Nineteen Day Feast, which, besides its social and spiritual aspects, fulfils various administrative needs and requirements of the Community, chief among them being the need for open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Baha’i Community. But again it should be stressed that all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the Community.” Letter of 13th December 1939 to an individual believer, Revised November 1990, Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation on the Nineteen Day Feast*, p. 27.

spiritual assemblies. If a mistake has been made, in time, the truth will emerge.³⁹

Many details of Bahá'í administration have yet to be worked out in the future,⁴⁰ and there are many things that need to happen before a Bahá'í theocracy can emerge. The world at present is struggling to arrive at some form of multi-cultural secularism. If this new form of secularism is to strengthen family unity and provide for community identity, as well as preserve the rights and freedoms of the individual, religion in some form or other is required. Whether the interfaith movement can rise up to this

³⁹ "A believer can ask the Assembly why they made a certain decision and politely request them to reconsider. But then he must leave it at that, and not go on disrupting local affairs through insisting on his own views. This applies to an Assembly member as well. We all have a right to our opinions, we are bound to think differently; but a Baha'i must accept the majority decision of his Assembly, realizing that acceptance and harmony - even if a mistake has been made - are the really important things, and when we serve the Cause properly, in the Baha'i way, God will right any wrongs done in the end." From a letter dated 19 October 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, Shoghi Effendi, Compilation on *The Local Spiritual Assemblies*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ The infallibility of the Universal House of Justice must be relative and not absolute. It must be some form of restricted infallibility. It cannot for instance extend to matters of science, economics or history. The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, who was appointed the leader of the Bahá'í Faith after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, defined the scope of his authority: "The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretation of the teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc...." (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives of the Guardian*, p. 33-34). At some point in the future, it will also be necessary for the Universal House of Justice to do the same. But even within matters that relate to the application of Bahá'í principles to the Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice is referred to as primarily a Legislative body. It is given the task of legislating on laws that are not specifically dealt with in the Bahá'í writings: "Those matters of major importance which constitute the foundation of the Law of God are explicitly recorded in the Text, but subsidiary laws are left to the House of Justice. The wisdom of this is that the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Compilation on the *Establishment of The Universal House of Justice*, p. 11). The Universal House of Justice is not, for instance, infallible in its interpretation of the Bahá'í writings. It is inevitable that in its role as spiritual leader of the Bahá'í world international community, it will have to make some interpretation of Bahá'í writings, however, unlike the interpretations of the Guardian (Shoghi Effendi), they are not authoritative. There are many more aspects to the authority of the Universal House of Justice that will need clarification in the future. This matter is discussed in a recent article by Udo Schaeffer entitled, "Infallible Institutions?" *The Bahá'í Studies Review, English Speaking Europe*, Vol. 9, 1999/2000, pp. 17-45.

challenge remains to be seen.⁴¹ Bahá'ís can play a significant role in this process. The Bahá'í Faith has within it both elements of modern secularism and traditional religion. It can in this way serve as a bridge or mediator between the modern West and the world's more traditional religious communities. The Bahá'í writings consistently declare the main purpose of religion to be the creation of love and unity: "the fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men."⁴² Bahá'ís must demonstrate that religion can be the cause of bringing together people of diverse backgrounds in a spirit of unity, rather than in conflict. Bahá'ís must build communities that can offer fellowship and love not only to Bahá'ís, but to the world at large. No amount of science, freedom or democracy can do it.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the secular challenges that religion faces in the world today. It argues that the fundamental aims of secularism are not against the fundamental truths of religion, but have historically derived much of their inspiration from religious ideals. However, parallel to the acquisition of secular values, religions need to regenerate family and community bonds, something which secularism cannot provide. Religious people in the modern day need to return to their age-old goal of bringing a greater measure of peace, love and unity into the world.

⁴¹ A. Khursheed, "Crossing Religious Boundaries: Interfaith Challenges for the Future," *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1999, pp. 105-189.

⁴² Baha'u'llah: *Gleanings*, p. 215. Similarly from 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "All the divine Manifestations have proclaimed the oneness of God and the unity of mankind. They have taught that men should love and mutually help each other in order that they might progress. Now if this conception of religion be true, its essential principle is the oneness of humanity. The fundamental truth of the Manifestations is peace. This underlies all religion, all justice." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 32.

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