

ON THE QUESTION OF WHETHER RELIGION IS A GOOD OR BAD INFLUENCE

When people debate the question of whether religion is a good thing or a bad thing, the debate typically goes as follows. The side defending religion lists all the good things religious people and organizations do and the adds in all of the evil things non-religious people and organizations do. They do grant that religious people do sometimes act badly and non-religious people sometimes act well. But they explain that, when religious people act badly they are acting on bad instincts, not on religious instincts. They then argue that, when non-religious people act well, they are really acting because of religious longings, whether they know it or not. The opponents of religion then do the opposite. They list all of the bad things that religious people and organizations have done and all the good non-religious people have done. They grant that religious people sometimes do good things, but insist that they do so because they are good, not because they are religious. They also grant that non-religious people sometimes do terrible things, but they explain that they do so because something (e.g., ideology, desire for wealth or power) is really their religion. The side that gives the best examples or the best reasoning is then considered the winner. But no one is really convinced because it is generally understood that if you change the debaters, you can change the result.

I would propose a different approach. In particular, I would begin with two fundamental issues: what is good and what is religion? To resolve the first issue I would pose seven questions; and to resolve the second issue, I would add three more. Before beginning, I will state upfront that I maintain that the first set of questions all have fundamentally the same answer and the second set likewise all have a very related answer. The answer to those issues will then lead to a conclusion on the effect and need of religion.

I. What is Good

Regarding the first issue, what is good, I would propose the following seven questions. First, we consider freedom to be so important that we believe that freedom is necessary for human fulfillment and in fact praise people who die for freedom, their own and others. Thus, the Statue of Liberty welcomes, the tired, the poor, the homeless, the tempest tossed, the huddled masses because they “yearn to be free.” Thus, we recite the famous line of Patrick Henry “Give me liberty or give me death.” This sentiment is not limited to the modern era. Seven hundred years ago Dante wrote, “The greatest gift that God of His largess // gave in creation, perfect even as He // Most of His substance and to Him most dear // He gave to the will, and it was liberty.” One thinks of the famous Aesop fable in which the free but starving dog will not exchange his lot for that of the well-fed but enslaved one. One thinks of the Greeks fighting so valiantly for their freedom in such battles as Marathon and Thermopylae, and praised throughout history for it. But why is freedom so important, and even necessary for human fulfillment? What is wrong with the Brave New World scenario, in which people are perfectly content, but without freedom?

The second question is related to the first one. We speak, and rightly speak, much about

human rights these days. One thinks of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, adopted by countries throughout the world although concededly often violated. Likewise, one thinks of the European Charter of Human Rights, and of the prized American Bill of Rights. People will disagree about what are fundamental rights, but there seems to be broad agreement that there is such a thing as fundamental human rights, as our Declaration of Independence declares, when it begins its most famous paragraph, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” But what is the basis for such an assertion? What is the basis for saying that anything is a fundamental human right? If these rights are simply established by popular consent, or assemblies of governing bodies, they could hardly be considered fundamental rights, because they could just as easily be taken away by popular opinion or the governing assemblies. In fact, most societies and most governments throughout history have allowed such things as slavery, censorship of speech and religious discrimination, if not persecution. By what standard do we say that, even if popular and approved by legitimate governments, such policies violate a deeper law that establishes human rights, a law that governments and societies are wrong to violate?

Third, again citing the Declaration of Independence, we maintain that there is an equality among all people. In fact, Alexis de Tocqueville said in the classic Democracy in America that this belief is the most fundamental principle of democracy. But what is the basis for this claim? After all, people are very different in their intelligence, abilities, talents, even merits and good deeds. In what way then are all people equal? Is this equality merely a legal fiction? But if so, there would be nothing wrong with a society that decides that it does not need this fiction. Furthermore, if it is merely a legal fiction, it would be fine for a person to maintain in his own life that there is no such equality. In addition, if we maintain that equality is merely a legal fiction, then the conclusion is that our society, and in fact the goal of most societies in the modern world is a fiction, is actually false. Surely there is a better explanation.

Fourth, with this belief in equality, we then come across a paradox. All people have an equality, and yet we say that people can improve themselves, or get worse. If everyone begins with equality, but then some people improve themselves, and others get worse, how then can they still be equal? After all, if two piles of silver, gold or anything else, are equal, and we add to one, and subtract from another, they would no longer be equal. If $a = b$, then $a + 1$ must be greater than $b - 1$. How then can some people be worthy of praise, and others of condemnation, and yet there be an equality? How can two people be equal, one become better, another become worse, and yet both still be equal

Fifth, for that matter, what do we even mean by saying that people, and societies, as well, get better or worse. We speak of progress and development a lot. But, as Pope Benedict XVI asked in his final encyclical Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth) what do we even mean by those

terms? Surely progress or development does not mean simply having more wealth, technology, comfort, or power. For people can be very well off, technologically advanced, comfortable, and powerful, but still be evil. And, as the Beatitudes (and common sense) make clear, people can be poor, have little technology, live in difficulties and be powerless (at least in a worldly sense) and be quite good. What then is the essence of progress and development, of people and of nations?

Sixth, regarding technological development, another issue has gained prominence in the modern world. With machines, and now artificial intelligence doing so much, what is it that people can do and machines, no matter how advanced, can never do? Science fiction literature and movies have numerous dystopian futures in which machines take over. And everyone understands that such a future would be horrible. But why is such the case? What is lost if machines are in control rather than humans?

Finally, and fundamentally, we should ask a question rarely asked in modern society. People naturally want true human joy, the fulfillment of all human nature. Such joy is not simply emotional happiness, but the deep happiness that people long for most of all, for which they will sacrifice everything. It is what C.S. Lewis described in his autobiographical book Surprise by Joy, that unfulfilled desire that is itself more desirable than any fulfilled desire of this earth. What is it that, if a person has, he can be joyful in all circumstances whatsoever? We prefer peace, good homes, the ability to exercise our abilities, and the like, but none of these things is absolutely essential to happiness, for people can be joyful even if poor, ill, and restrained by circumstances. What is the essential element of joy? Along the similar lines, what is it that, if a person does not have, he will finally be miserable under all circumstances, regardless of his wealth, power or the like. After all people are often wealthy, healthy, powerful, and popular and yet still miserable. What is the missing element when that happens?

The answer to all of these questions is fundamentally the same: the ability to receive and to give real love, true and complete love. The love that answers all of these questions is not merely an emotion or a sentiment, although good emotions or sentiments can help. It is a love that is reflected in that love of husband and wife that lasts through all of the good times and bad, through sickness and health, wealth and poverty, unto death and beyond. It is reflected in the love of parents for their children that will sacrifice all for them, and delights above all in their goodness and love. It is reflected in the love of friends who want the other's good more than their own, and seek always to advance together, the friendship that Aristotle says in Nicomachian Ethics is essential to human happiness and fulfillment. It is the essence of the I-Thou relationship that the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber says that no one can really be human without. It is reflected in the love of the scholar, who will give all for his field, the patriot for his country, the martyr for his cause and finally for his God. It is what the British song I Vow to Thee, My Country calls, "The love that asks no questions // the love that stands the test // The love that lays upon the altar // the dearest and the best. // The love that never falters // The love

that pays the price // The love that makes undaunted // the final sacrifice”. It is what St. Paul says in First Corinthians, “The love that believes all things, the love that endures all things, the love that never fails.” 1 Cor. 13:7-8.

Going back to those first seven questions, we can see how this calling to receive and give love answers all of them. Freedom is essential because, as St. John Paul II pointed out in his last book Memory and Identity, “Freedom is for love.” The willingness to receive and give love is the one thing that cannot be demanded, or even forbidden, that cannot be bought or sold. It is true that an infant is able to receive, and in his own way give love, before he has the intelligence to make a free choice. However, as a person grows, he must choose whether to receive the love of others and to share love with others. As everyone must eventually learn, we can love another person, but we cannot force that person to receive our love. And we can never force another person to love us, nor buy another person’s love. It must be freely given and freely received. That necessity of freedom for love is what gives freedom its value and its goal.

Regarding the second question, human rights are based finally on this deepest of all callings, to receive and to give love. Thus freedom of speech is based upon the love of truth, and the calling to love others by listening to them and sharing the truth among ourselves. Freedom of religion is based upon the love of God and neighbor that religion should at least promote. The right of parents to raise their children in accordance with their values is based upon their calling to love their children, giving them the first and primordial love. The right to free enterprise and seeking out an occupation is based upon the love of society and desire to contribute to it, as well as the desire to provide for the family one loves. The right of the people of a land, a nation, and a culture to self-determination is based upon the love of people for their land, their nation and their culture. Every fundamental right comes before governments because the call to love is there before governments. It is a calling that governments should ever serve.

This conclusion brings us to the third question, in what way are all people equal? People are very unequal in most aspects of life. But we are all equal in what is most important, the ability to give and receive love. Regarding technical matters, people are of very different levels of proficiency. But regarding the most essential aspects of humanity, we are on the same level. That is why, for specialized things, such as building structures or writing textbooks, we use professionals. But for the most important things, such as raising a family, participating in government, or administering justice on a jury, we refer to the wisdom of the common man.

This fundamental importance of love also answers the paradox of how all people can be equal, and yet people also advance and decline, and of how all people can be equal, and yet some more meritorious of praise than others. People are equal in the *ability* to receive and give love. People, however, advance and decline in their response to that ability. And, as with all aspects of life, but even more, when people exercise the ability to receive and give love, they tend to expand in that ability; likewise the neglect of that ability leads to its decline. It is what Jesus

says in the famous parables of the talents and the gold coins, “To those that have more will be given; from those that have not, even what they have will be taken away.” Matt. 25:29, Luke 19:26. But still, we have a confidence that, no matter how far a person has fallen in his ability to receive and give love, as long as a spark of that desire for love remains, he can recover and become great in this ability. Thus, regardless of merit, the equality in the sense of being to receive and give love, and to grow in that ability, remains as long as life endures. That is why all life is precious, even of the most wretched, and why there is such joy at every repentant sinner.

A similar consideration answers the fifth question. A person becomes better or worse in accordance with his progress or decline in the ability to receive and give love. That is why people can still progress right up toward the end of life, when all abilities have gone away. That is why we consider glorious the end of the life of a couple who is loving to the end, even when they cannot do much. It is also why we treasure those who are least in the world, e.g., the special needs child, the handicapped person, the poorest of the poor. They give us the ability to offer love without any earthly reward, and thus in its purest fashion. This fact is the reason why Jesus can say that whatever we do for the least of his brethren we do most perfectly for Him, and will be judged accordingly. Societies can also be judged along the same lines. A society progresses insofar as it more enables people to receive and give love, and declines in the opposite direction. The reason why the Brave New World scenario is so terrible is that the government provides everything that makes people comfortable, but at the cost of real love, and thus takes away everything of final value in exchange for giving nothing of lasting worth.

We can also see this standard of love as the rightful standard for judging whether a particular type of technology is helpful or not. The question should be: does this technology enhance or diminish people’s ability to receive and give love. The Amish people are fascinating because they actually ask this question. They do not reject all technology, or even all uses of electricity. Rather, they ask whether a technology enhances or diminishes the community life. Although perhaps they answer such questions in a somewhat excessive fashion, the fact that they try to get it right puts them on the right path, and thus makes them fascinating in a world that is addicted to technology. And, when people ask, if technology can do so much, and replace human effort in so many ways, what is it that technology cannot do, the answer is that no machine, no technology can ever receive or give love. People may love technology, and generally do in an excessive fashion, e.g., by carrying their iphone with them wherever they go. But the machine cannot choose to receive this love, nor return it. Only people can fulfill this deepest longing of the human soul. And, to the degree that technology brings people together, it serves this goal. But to the degree that it takes people apart, it is a curse.

Finally, we come to the question of what is it that brings people final joy. St. Thomas Aquinas said long ago, “Joy is caused by love.” And because we can always have the deepest love, we can always have joy. Theologica II-II q. 28 art. 1. As he points out in that article such joy can co-exist with sorrow, and is in fact open to sorrow. For one is sorrowful at whatever injures the one a person loves, or makes him more distant. But that sorrow is more desirable

than any pleasures of this world because it is a part of the joy that is what we finally seek. That is why a wise person prefers to be sad about things (e.g., sin, injustice, death) rather than be more superficially happy by ignoring them. Ignoring such things may lead to a surface level and temporary pleasantness, but it takes away that love that alone leads to joy. This coexistence of sorrow and joy is behind how Jesus can say in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are those who weep and mourn, they will be satisfied.” In fact, as C.S. Lewis points out in *Surprised by Joy*, because our loves are always imperfect on this earth, real joy on this earth always has a sense of longing for something better. But this longing is what we really want; to ignore it will in the end make us miserable. Thus, at the same time, we are called to a noble sorrow and a final joy.

With these answers, we can then address the first issue: what is good. The answer very simply is that the good is that which enhances our ability to receive and give love. Evil then should be considered that which diminishes our ability to receive and give love. In this context, we can distinguish between evils in general and sins in particular. All things that diminish our ability to receive and give love (e.g., loneliness, psychological illnesses, a lack of opportunities) can be considered evil, even if they are not specifically sinful or blameworthy to any particular person. Sin in a *choice* for something that diminishes our ability to receive and give love, or at least a tendency to make that choice. We also see the more positive side. Virtues can be defined as characteristics that enhance our ability to receive and give love. That is why something can be a virtue in some circumstances and a vice in other circumstances. Thus, a desire for learning can be a virtue insofar as it reflects a love of truth, a desire to share truth with others, and a desire to understand better what one loves. But it can also be a vice if it leads people away from those whom they love and towards knowledge for the sake of power, prestige and the like.

In fact, all of the classic virtues can be seen in this light. Justice can be seen, not just as rewarding good and punishing evil, but as establishing right relationships between people, and thus enabling people to love. Prudence (or right judgment) is generally understood as the ability to use one’s intelligence well in the variety of different circumstances. But what does it mean by using one’s intelligence well? After all, a criminal may use his intelligence well to commit crimes; but such prudence would not be a virtue. When prudence is a virtue, it means the ability to use intelligence well in a manner that enhances the exchange of love. Thus, it may well be prudent in the real sense for a person to give up power, wealth, privilege, etc, for the sake of real love. Along those lines, prudence does not simply mean avoiding risks, but rather judging well, that is, in accordance with whether taking them enhances or diminishing relationships of love. Courage then is the willingness and ability to take on struggles and difficulties when doing so enhances love. It is different from recklessness, which delights in the risk themselves, with no reference to love, or in the dour faced desire to take on difficulties that one may boast about one’s virtue. Courage rather is willing to sacrifice lesser goods for the final good of love. Finally, temperance (or moderation) is the ability to enjoy the good things of this earth (e.g., meals together, good literature, nature) in accordance with reason, neither neglecting them nor being too attached to them. But what is “in accordance with reason?” What is too much?

Reason itself points to something higher, saying we should enjoy such things to the degree that they enhance our ability to love.

II. What is Religion

With that answer, namely that the good is defined by what enhances or diminishes our ability to receive and give love, we turn to the next issue, what is religion. To address this issue, I would in turn ask three questions. The first question is simply: what is the origin of love? People learn how to love because they are loved by another, generally first in the family, which is as the Vatican II Council says in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* the primordial society and the domestic church. The people who love one in turn were loved by others, and they in turn were loved by others. But this process cannot go back forever. And it does not go back to the universe as a whole. For, while the universe is majestic, glorious, beautiful and the like, it does not love us. There is no point in asking the law of gravity or the second law of thermodynamics to love us. As often pointed out, God always forgives, humans sometimes forgive, nature never forgives. No, to find the source of love we must look further. We must look beyond nature for a first primordial source of love.

Approaching a second question, C.S. Lewis addresses a related issue in one of his great philosophical works, *The Four Loves*. As he points out, individual types of love, for example, love of family, love of friends, romantic love, love of country, love of nature, love of truth and wisdom, are all crucial to humanity. However, any individual love can go astray. For example, the love of family is that first source of human happiness on earth. But we all know people whose preference for their family makes them unjust to others. Likewise, patriotism, local and national, is crucial to common efforts and mutual benevolence and is the source of great and heroic efforts. However, human history is strewn with situations in which people's preference for their own nation or group makes them unjust or even violent towards others. On a more personal level, friends can certainly help each other grow to be better people and engage in good efforts. In fact, we would consider a person miserable who has no friends, and a person extraordinarily crabbed who does not desire friendship. But friends can also tempt each other, and people can compromise on what they know, or should know, to be true and noble for the sake of getting along with their friends. Even benevolence can go astray when people do good for others, but in the process interfere too much in the lives of others, or try to put others under them. Love of knowledge and even more so wisdom certainly leads us to higher levels; but such a love can also make a person abstract or even arrogant. Thus, specific types or human loves are all good and crucial. But there must be some guide to all of them, something that governs them so that they all cooperate together for people truly become what we are meant to be. What is this guide to all human loves?

The third question is related to the first two. What is the unifying force behind all human loves? Different human loves are all distinct, but we still call all of them love. The different types of love at one level give us the joy and the ability to reach the heights of human nature. But

they do so in different ways. We sense that there is a unity among them, even though they are all distinct. What brings them all together in the human heart and in reality as a whole? What is it that unites all of them together?

Actually, those questions should be slightly changed. For things do not love, only people do. And so the question is not what but who. Who is the primordial love, the source of all love? Who is the Father of love? Who rules over all loves, judging and guiding them all? Who is the King of Love? Who brings all loves together into one family? Who unites all loves together, as a mother unites her children? The King of Love, the Father of Love, the Mother of Love is He whom we call God.

This conclusion then leads us to an answer for the second issue what is religion. People usually define religion as a system of belief about God or gods, and worship and practices based upon that system of belief. That answer is good as far as it goes. However, one then comes across a couple of problems. First, there are religions such as Buddhism that do not have any specific belief in a final God or gods. One likewise comes across vague forms of spirituality (e.g., transcendental meditation or some types of yoga when they also call themselves forms of spirituality) that are quite ambiguous regarding the connection to any belief about God. Second, one comes across the phenomenon of people who say that they are a member of a religion (e.g., Judaism or even Christianity) but do not believe in God. How are these beliefs religious without having a specific belief about God?

Without rejecting the more common definition of religion, I believe that it can also be helpful to define religion in two ways that encompass this conclusion that God is the source, ruler, and uniting principle of love. Secondly, religion is our search for this source of all love, this ruler of all love, this uniting force of all love, a search that involves all levels, the intellect, the will, the sense of beauty, all our hopes and desires. However, it should be noted that a love that is above us would search us out first, not wait for us to make the first move. After all, love inspires a person to bring that love to another, not simply wait for it. And so, religion can be primarily defined as our response to this source of all love, this ruler of all love, this uniting principle of all love, who searches for us. Fr. Paul Murray, O.P., a teacher of the Angelicum University in Rome, described a person who experienced a deep conversion in his life when he learned to pray, "God, I cannot find You. You have to find me." Religion is at its essence God's offer to find us and help us then find the source, the guide, and the union of all love, that is God Himself. Our religious practices are our response to this greatest of all callings, to love calling us by name.

I would make several arguments for this conclusion. The first argument is very simple. Surely there is no greater cause than to respond to love itself. But what other field, what other subject, what other calling at its essence is the response to this love? Certainly, art, music, literature and the like express the desire for love and the response to it. However, they are not themselves this response, but only one way of expressing this response, or the longing for love,

or sometimes its absence. Philosophy comes the closest to this calling. However, philosophy proceeds by reason. But love is above reason, and while philosophy can understand more about love (as in C.S. Lewis' great book *The Four Loves*), philosophy cannot embrace all of love. That is why the philosophies such as Platonism, Aristotelianism or Stoicism as brilliant as they are, have never been the basis for a religion, although religions could bring their insights into them. That is why the Deistic philosophy of the Enlightenment, although acknowledging a God, never really led to a religion. For such philosophies make many observations, and many of them are helpful. But, while they do involve the specific love of wisdom, they cannot finally encompass all of love and thus we cannot do what religion does. There is no field other than religion that can satisfy this deepest of all human longings.

Second, religion and love both share the same great results, as well as the same dangers. Religion and love are the most creative sources of art, music, poetry, architecture, and all sorts of creative beauty. Religion and love (whether love of family, country, justice, or God) are the motives for the greatest sacrifices people can offer, the greatest heroism, the greatest acts of devotion. It should, of course, be noted that religion can also be the opportunity for charlatans, for greed, and for violence. But that is true of love as well. Thus, love and religion come together both at their best and at their worst.

In addition, this focus on religion as the response to the source, ruler, and uniter of love helps explain what is the common element of religions throughout the world. Given that I know the most about Christianity, I will begin with this faith. And the demonstration here is quite straightforward. Christianity teaches, as St. John says, that "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." 1 John 4:16. This fact that God is love is in turn the basis for the Trinity. God does love us. But, prior to any creation, God is love in Himself. He cannot depend on creation to be who He is. And, therefore, if God is love Himself, there is within God a divine Lover and a Divine Love, or to use Dr. Martin Buber's terms, an I and a Thou. Also, as Dr. Buber points out there is a spirit of any relationship, such as a family spirit, a team spirit, a national spirit, in the military an esprit de corps. In these lesser cases, the spirit is analogous to a person. However, central to the Christian belief in the Trinity is the affirmation of the Holy Spirit. The love of the Father and the Son is so great that the spirit of this divine love is not analogously a person, but actually a person, the divine Holy Spirit of Love.

And then, Christianity teaches that, because love is creative, God created the world out of sheer love. As then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger pointed out in the book *In the Beginning*, his commentary on Genesis 1-3, the creation account of Genesis 1 parallels the structure of the Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish*. But the theme is completely different. The Babylonian myth presents the gods as creating the world out of violence and creating humans because they needed us to serve them. Genesis presents creation as totally out of gratuitous benevolence. At the end of each day of creation, God declares what He has created as good, and then the whole of creation as very good. The essence of love, as Joseph Pieper points out in *Faith, Hope and Love*

is the celebration of the goodness of the other and the desire to bring it out. In love, we participate in God's declaration of the other as good.

And, of course, Christianity teaches that, when humanity sinned, God so loved us that the Son of God became incarnate to be among us and thus save us from within. The teaching is that, Jesus Christ, by the perfect act of love, His sacrifice on Calvary, overcame the guilt of sin. And then, by His resurrection, He brought about the triumph of love over death; and He promises to unite all creation to Himself at the end of all things. The way we accept this saving sacrifice and resurrection is to act in accordance with this love. For, as Jesus points out, the greatest commandments are love of God and love of neighbor.

While Judaism would not accept a belief in the Trinity or the Incarnation, Judaism does begin at the same point of maintaining that God created us and all of creation out of pure love. Judaism also maintains that the greatest commandment is that of love, for the great daily Shema prayer proclaims love of God with all of one's heart, soul and mind. The liturgy of Judaism is also a celebration of God's love in different ways. The feast of Passover, the highest of the Jewish feasts, is the celebration of God's liberating power. This liberating sense of God's providence is also at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery." And, as noted above, the reason why freedom is so important is that it is the prerequisite of love; and in fact love is the final motive for freedom. The next two Jewish feasts likewise celebrate in their own way the love of God among us. The Feast of Weeks celebrates the glory of God come down to earth on Mount Sinai. But the Jews would maintain that whenever people live in love the glory of God is still coming down upon earth as it did on Mount Sinai long ago. The other greatest Jewish feast is the Feast of Booths, which celebrates the journey of the Chosen People to the Promised Land. But it is also a celebration of God's guidance always toward the Promised Land of love, for whenever people truly love God and each other they are making their homes and neighborhoods a second Promised Land. Jews may also debate about whether the Temple of old should be rebuilt or whether it is needed to find the Ark of the Covenant again. But they would all agree that the Temple and the Ark were the dwelling place of God on earth. And they would all, I think agree that when people love each other, the ark is being rediscovered and the Temple is being rebuilt here and now.

The emphasis on living in love is also, I think, an answer to the question of why the Jewish faith does not insist on a belief in individual resurrection. Some Jews do believe that souls can go individually from earth to heaven and that there will be an individual resurrection. But it is not considered an essential belief of that faith. I think that the reason God did not reveal this doctrine to the ancient Jews is to emphasize another point. The Jewish people believe (as do Christians) that when one person loves another person, or even more so loves God, he brings a part of his life to that other person, and finally to God Himself. And so, through this love, such a person does live on *in the other person or people whom he loves*. Thus, when a person loves his family or nation (a love very much emphasized in Judaism) he brings a portion of his life to his

family or his people; and thus he lives on in them even after he dies. Likewise, when a teacher loves his students, or a person loves the advancement of the truth in scholarship, he lives on in those students, or lives on in the wisdom handed on to future generations even after he dies. When a person loves the poor or the disadvantaged generally, and when he shows that love to them by raising them up, a portion of his life goes into them. And thus he lives on in their lives. When they in turn are inspired by his generosity to do good to others, his life is handed on further. When a person expresses his love for God in the prayers and liturgies of the faith, the teaching is that he enters into those liturgies and other prayers, and thus lives on as the prayers and liturgies continue on into the ages. That is one reason why the Jewish faith (like the Catholic faith) maintains that the liturgy unites the people of God throughout the ages. By contrast, to be without love would be a living death, and a resurrection would be a curse. Central to Judaism is the principle that God is the Lord of Life and the Lord of Love and that these two titles are really the same thing because to love is to live. And it is in the love of God and others that we enter into a realm beyond death.

Christianity does certainly now teach the individual Resurrection, as Jesus Christ did long ago. But, while certainly maintaining this teaching, it is helpful to reflect back upon this Jewish wisdom and realize that it is not only a matter of individual resurrection, of this person going onto to his reward. Rather, as Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out in his book on Eschatology, no one can fully celebrate happiness without the people one loves. And thus the communion of saints is needed for the full joy of heaven.

I do not know as much about other religions. However, I think that they can also be seen as essentially a response to the calling of love. Thus, Islam maintains above all the glory of God and submission to Him. It does not reject reason, but very much emphasizes the mystery of God above reason. And yet, at the same time, it emphasizes that, while we cannot understand God, He is not arbitrary. Even as Islam says there must be an absolute submission to God and His law, even and especially when we do not understand it, that faith maintains that this absolute and unquestioning submission to God is not an abnegation of human dignity. How can there be a person who demands absolute obedience, and yet is not a tyrant? How can God be above all reason and understanding but not be arbitrary? The answer can only be that God is at His essence the one thing that is completely demanding, and yet a defender of human dignity, the one thing that reason cannot encompass and yet is not arbitrary. And that is love itself. To have complete submission to anything other than love would be degrading, as a submission to a tyrant, or popular opinion or mere earthly desire is. But to submit totally to love is elevating of human nature. And to recognize a love above human reason, but that is not arbitrary, instead adhering to its own laws, does not diminish the human mind but elevates it to the highest expression of the intellectual, artistic and sacrificing endeavors.

We can then consider Hinduism. Hinduism has many different beliefs about gods and goddesses including interestingly a belief that one of the three highest gods, Vishnu took on human form out of love for us. But central to Hindu belief is the idea that a person's fulfillment

of his state in life results in a reward of a better state in life. Thus, the Hindu idea of reincarnation states that, if a person has done well in whatever life he has been given (whether that of an animal, different levels of human life, or even that of a god) he will advance to a higher level in the next life. But if he does badly, he will sink downwards. But, we have to ask the question: what does it mean to do well or do badly? What is the one standard that unites all people of all times and situations together? As stated above, that one standard is whether a person has learned to receive and give love. Thus, the Hindu view can be restated that person keeps advancing or declining according to whether he has learned to receive and give love in his current state. There is also a belief in Hinduism that, if a person advances enough, he can escape the entire cycle of death and rebirth. But what does advancing enough mean, and where does one escape to? The answer would be that a person is called to advance to perfect love and to escape from this world subject to death into this pure love. While Christianity would certainly reject the notion of reincarnation, there is the common belief that all people are called to advance in love; and when we have been freed from sins and learned this pure love, we will advance above this world subject to death and be in a realm never-ending love.

We then come to Buddhism, which emphasizes renunciation and in fact entering into nothingness. In fact, the word Nivana literally means nothingness. When I took a class in Eastern religions in college, this notion of wanting to be nothing did not seem to make any sense. However, I have learned since then that there is also a great tradition in Christian mysticism of embracing nothingness. If one rephrases the focus this notion in terms of love, one can see the attraction. The calling is to be nothing except love, to care about nothing except love. As St. Paul says, "Owe no one anything except to love." Romans 13:8. There is, as with Hinduism, a desire to escape the circle of life and death. And once again, the question arises of what one is escaping into. The answer would be the realm of pure love. Christianity would certainly reject the Buddhist belief that there is no permanent soul, or really permanent essence of anything. But this desire to let go of all things in order to love perfectly is central in the Christian calling. As Jesus says at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And we add, of course, that we can only fully enter love through Jesus Christ and His perfect act of love on Calvary.

I would even add that the desire for love is even at the essence of pagan religions. Despite all of their variety, pagan religions share in common the idea that there are divine beings behind natural things or forces (e.g., the sun, the moon, the wind, the seas, etc.) Cynics would say that, because they did not know the scientific laws behind nature, they made up gods and goddesses to explain natural forces. However, while this view may partially explain pagan beliefs, there is a serious limitation. For, while people may not have known the exact scientific principles behind natural forces, they did know that laws governed them. They knew what led to the growth of crops, what led to birth and generally what led to death. They developed over the course of time at least a basic knowledge of building and constructing things, as well as a knowledge of the sort of things that are destructive. They knew that there were laws according

to which nature operates. And they also knew that there were things they did not understand. Why could they not simply posit that, in addition to the scientific laws they knew, there were more natural laws that they did not understand, which would explain the gap. I would answer that there was an intuition that the mechanical laws were not the final reality, that there had to be a person or persons behind it. What was the basis for this intuition, or even this desire for people behind nature. Once again, it was the desire for love. For laws of nature, while majestic and often useful, do not love us. The pagans intuited that natural realities were a manifestation of love in some way or another. They intuitively knew that there is, as Dante says at the end of the *Divine Comedy*, a “love that moves the sun and the other stars.” And, because only people can love, they posited people behind them. Not knowing the Almighty God, or for that matter the angels, they posited gods and goddesses. Their intuition that there is a love behind nature, and that natural things reflect the beauty and majesty of that love was not wrong. The just did not see the final reality behind all of it, that nature is the artwork of God. As G.K. Chesterton said in his work *The Everlasting Man*, the pagans were in error when they thought that a grove of trees had a god. But they were right in thinking that a grove of trees deserves a god.

This notion of the search for and response to love as the essence of all religion also explains the phenomenon of people who adhere to a religion even though they do not believe in God. They have erroneously stopped believing that there is a person, or divine persons, behind all love. But their search for the essence of all love, for the source, the guide and the uniting principles of love still continues. And, because the rituals (e.g. the Catholic or Jewish liturgies) still express this longing, they still adhere to them. Hopefully, while travelling up the stream, they will finally come to its source.

III. Conclusion: Religion is Essential for Humanity

We now come to the conclusion. The answer is not so much that religion is a good thing, but that it is essential to humanity. It can be conceded that religion is a very dangerous thing. For love is a very dangerous thing. As the Dowager Countess Lady Violet says in one of the episodes of *Downton Abbey*, “Love is a far more dangerous motive than dislike.” For love guides all of one’s life, and is demanding of all things. As noted above, St. Paul says, “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” 1 Cor. 13:7. Such great guiding power, such direction of the entire life of a person and even a nation, certainly can go very much astray.

But what is the alternative? To shun the pursuit of the essence of all love, to refuse to respond to callings of the source, the king, the union of all love because of fear? Such an approach would deprive life of its fulfillment and make it sad and empty. As even the cynic Bernard Shaw so famously said, “To fear love is to fear life.”

One can of course pursue love superficially, having only the aspects of love here and there, without any desire to pursue the essence of all love, or to respond to the callings of the source and king and uniter of all love. But such a path means that life only skims the surface, never asking where love comes from or where it is going. Furthermore, such powerful, but unreflective love has the dangers of religion, but without the wisdom of deep thought or common effort. In such a case, a person is simply on his own to hope that his loves will be fulfilling and good without much help or lasting values.

Thus, religion is essential to humanity, for religion guides humanity above all else to the fountain, to the source and summit of love. And, as love is above reason, religion is above reason and cannot be entirely judged by it. However, that fact does not mean that there is no way of determining whether a specific religion is good or bad, or whether a specific religion comes from the source, the guide and uniting force of all love. We can ask whether a religion leads people more to love or less so, whether its force makes people more noble, true, brave and caring. It is not as though simple moral improvements are the essence of religion; but we would expect any good religion to lead to things that make a person more loving. As Jesus says, "By their fruits you will know them." Matt. 7:20.

As for reason, a true religion will not reject reason, but will rise above it. Because love is above ordinary reason, and even a person's reason can lead him astray, we can also presume that He who is the source, guide and uniting force of love would not leave us on our own, but rather reveal Himself to us. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that God would give us a revelation that is above reason. However, as real love does not lead a person to fall below reason, but rather to use reason and then rise above it, so a good religion would not call a person to abandon reason, but rather to use reason and soar higher. And we can judge from the wisdom of the ages how love has developed before, for we know that, although it is above reason, love is not random but rather ever reveals itself more and more. Thus, while religions require faith, they are not unreasonable, but rather like love ascend from reason to a level that reason itself longs for.

The religious pursuit is no doubt a difficult and dangerous one, subject to error and suffering. But the same could be said of any adventure, or for that matter of any great pursuit. Religion is the greatest adventure, a pilgrimage through the ages and lands of this earth to that final kingdom from which all love proceeds. Surely such a journey is necessary to real human life.