

Religion, Spirituality and Cooperation

2016

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{This essay is one section in a general essay on cooperation in social relations, "The Crisis of Cooperation," see my website: www.dynamic-humanism.com }

In all societies at all levels of complexity, there are two basic sources of cooperative social relations: ethics – the culturally determined rules of social behavior; and morality – the spiritual awareness of how others are to be regarded. With regard to ethics, citizens are explicitly taught from an early age to respect, assist, and treat other of their fellow citizens fairly and honestly. This ethical source of cooperative social behavior is very important; and it is a component in all societies – large and small, modern and traditional. By contrast, morality has is often framed by religion with spirituality at its core providing the essential awareness. Religion is the social institution within societies that asserts itself as the primary authority to represent spiritual awareness. However, spirituality itself is only secondarily housed in such institutions since religions arise to support the other institutions of society at least as much as they serve to connect citizens to spiritual awareness. It is necessary to further explore the relationship of spirituality and religion before we come to a discussion of spirituality itself and its relationship to cooperation.

The role of religion in complex society is a double edged sword. On the one hand, religions specify a moral code of social behavior and tie adherence by its devotees to this code as necessary if they are to be accepted by society and if they are to expect a positive life after death. Many religions do not treat their members equally, so, while the behavioral code they require does produce shared social rules within the group, what may appear as cooperation in the membership often amounts more to demanded complicity. In addition, at the level of relations among different religious groups, contrary religious beliefs constitute a major source of competition which ranges all the way from disagreement to violent conflict/warfare. And some of the worst religiously motivated, aggressive behavior occurs across sects of the same religion where life and death can literally be put at stake over relatively minor differences in belief. So, internally religion promotes mostly complicity, not cooperation; and externally religion is a major motivator of competitive, often violent behavior.

At the present time, much of the citizenry of modern, developed, western society has withdrawn from membership in the churches, mosques, and synagogues of the religions of Abraham. For most of these citizens, this withdrawal does not mean rejection of the beliefs of these religions, just the adoption of an

agnostic/bystander position. This agnostic fence sitting stance, which is practiced by the majority of the populace, together with the policy of religious tolerance, which most mainstream religions espouse for their members, are what allow the extreme fundamentalist believers to commandeer representation of the Christian, Islamic and Jewish faiths. The media loves to focus on the extremes, so these fundamentalists enjoy a totally disproportionate amount of both attention and influence. The result is that while most citizens of western society do not support the religious dogma that leads to religious conflict, they do not step forward in a vigorous way to challenge those believers that do support such extreme beliefs.

Until tolerance and agnosticism in the populace become rejection of religious belief systems, religions will continue to supply a major motivation through fundamentalism for social relations across religious groups being regarded as impersonal and competitive – inviting serious conflict. An allied problem is that the majority of agnostic fence sitters are unfamiliar with the spiritual experience and perspective, which could replace the literal religious beliefs from which they have withdrawn and both relieve the impetus to competition and promote cooperation instead. Unfortunately, for many citizens, spirituality has been lost together with the withdrawal of support for religious institutions. If spirituality could be retrieved for the citizenry without reinstating religion, then humanity could revive a significant support for social cooperation.

All religions contain at their core the spiritual experience and perspective, which, properly understood, supports cooperation in human relations. Religion provides a framework for accessing and understanding the spiritual experience, but access can be more or less exclusive and beliefs more or less literal and convoluted. Spirituality is universal; religion provides the cultural container, and there are many different containers, each of which has its own issues, but each of which tends to lay exclusive claim to the truth – the one and only way to achieve spiritual awareness, proper behavior, and life eternal.

In the structurally simpler hunter gatherer/aboriginal societies of the long period of human social development, the spiritual perspective is conceived mostly in terms of a sacred principle that pervades all of reality in which all natural things, including humans, are alive/active, relate to one another, and in some way share in a common, unified existence [animism]. Young citizens within these societies grow in spiritual awareness, particularly as they are exposed to and increasingly participate in adult rituals [art, music, dance, story, and song]. At the time of physical maturity, adolescents are often encouraged through initiation rituals to have a deeper and more personal spiritual experience [eg. vision quest]. This experience inculcates the spiritual/moral source of cooperative social behavior

in the individual, who, following this ritual, returns to the group with this newly solidified spiritual perspective, social understanding, and sense of self.

As societies have become larger and more complex – first as chiefdoms, then as city states, and finally as civilizations – full blown religious institutions with elaborate belief and ritual systems have arisen. In this process, spirituality became institutionalized and regulated with access controlled by specialists [eg. priests]. In addition, what had been a relatively simple sacred principle in all of reality evolved into highly defined literal and absolute belief systems with mostly social implications. And this religious system frequently justified subservient behavior by the common citizens, and served primarily the economic, political and social interests of an elite class of citizens.

In the last 500 years and within western civilization, as science emerged and as an independent artisan class arose together with the beginnings of a moneyed economy, religion was first challenged for its social exclusivity [Protestant Reformation]. The result was that devotees gained more direct access to the spiritual experience, but the core defining beliefs remained literal and absolute.

In the last 200 years capitalistic enterprise has exploded to take advantage of technological opportunities revealed by science with the result that the quality of life for modern humans has been substantially improved. As this has occurred, many citizens have discarded the literal beliefs and earth centered worldview that underlie the major religions of the developed world. In this process, spirituality was freed from the confines of religious dogma, but instead of its inherent value being recovered, it has been rejected along with the religions that circumscribed it. In its place, the perspective of secular materialism has become dominant with citizens focusing their attention on the satisfaction that can be gained through the accumulation of wealth and material and physical well being.

From the spiritual point of view, this secular material result has merely replaced one error with another: the error of an exclusive and absolute materialism substituting for the error of an exclusive and absolute religious belief system. And in this pendulum swing, the opportunity to recover the major support for social cooperation that spirituality potentially offers has been largely squandered. More recently, the extreme activities of Islamic, Christian and Jewish religious fundamentalists have provided further motivation for the public of modern secular societies to reject religion, and, unfortunately, spirituality along with it.

Since the deeper form of spiritual experience is unfamiliar to many in modern secular societies, it is necessary to describe what occurs in this experience so that its relationship to social cooperation becomes clear. As far in the past of human history as we can determine, humans have regarded their world in both pragmatic, objective, material, and rational terms and in sacred, subjective, spiritual, and intuitive terms. These perspectives and mental faculties [reason and intuition] are coordinated and flow imperceptibly in and out of one another most of the time as they are called upon to address different tasks. They are separated in this discussion purely for heuristic purposes.

With the preceding background finally in place, we are now ready to explore the relationship of spirituality and social cooperation. The core of spirituality is the experience of the unification of the self and reality. This experience occurs at different depths and encompasses more or less of the surrounding social and natural world. The spiritual experience offers a perspective that is as fundamental as the material perspective in human existence. It requires no particular religious beliefs or rituals, just activation, development, and utilization of the intuitive faculty of the human mind. And intuitive mental competence is a basic human mental capability, as basic as rational competence, which also requires development and training. Spirituality is just an alternative way of knowing and experiencing one's self and of operating in the world. Disregard the intuitive capability or overlook the development of human intuitive competence and humans exist in a diminished condition of who they are and can be.

Spirituality, which is the foundation for religion, provides the moral basis for the communal perspective and the cooperative behavior that proceeds from it. Here is how this occurs: When humans open wide their intuitive faculty [which accesses the spiritual/subjective perspective] and quiet their rational faculty [which accesses the material/objective perspective] the path to the deeper experience of the spiritual emerges. With guided training along this path, the unification experience emerges gradually as the self progressively incorporates more and more of the social and natural world. Without training and under circumstances that promote a breakthrough into intuitive activation, the unification experience can arise suddenly and be experienced as the complete transformation of one's self. In the fundamentalist Christian religion this more sudden form of the spiritual experience is called being "Born Again." In native American culture it can be the consequence of a successful vision quest in which a new personal identity is discovered by the initiate and a new, more refined way of understanding the self in relation to the band/tribe and the surrounding ecology emerges.

The core spiritual/unification experience is one where the sense of self expands to include more and more of both the social and natural world – as an integral part of the self, no longer separate and distinct. And as the social and natural world is incorporated into the self, or put another way as the self expands to include the “outside” social and natural world, it becomes an obligation to treat the components of that world with respect. As an extension of one's own being, the individual shares identity with this “larger” world and therefore has responsibility for it. That is the moral sense and motive that lies at the heart of social cooperation because in the deep spiritual sense all other humans or animals or plants are YOU. With developed spiritual awareness, the requirement to cooperate and share and care is not just a matter of social rules [ethics]; it is a function of recognizing that these “others” are really extensions of yourself [morality]. In a sense you are just treating your “greater” self with the consideration and respect that You deserve.

It is a grave loss when humans and their societies and cultures lose this deep spiritual sense of knowing the self, society, and the natural world. And the loss shows up dramatically in the reduction of support for the human “instinct” to cooperate, allowing the competition “instinct” to prevail in the vacuum that is created. The tendency to treat social relations as impersonal and competitive supports exploitation. By contrast, an inclination to treat social relations as personal and cooperative supports respect and assistance. And the modern, secular, material, a-spiritual western world suffers from the loss of input from spiritual awareness and its support for experiencing all social relations as personal – as extensions of the personal self. Relying solely on ethical training to promote cooperation is a weak alternative to having both a strong ethical and moral/spiritual basis of support for social cooperation – for treating all humans as personal relations. In today's world, between secular materialism on the one hand and religion on the other, spiritual/moral support for cooperation is much weaker than it could be.