

The Human Project and the Temptations of Religion

The world in which we live today is impacted on by many conflicts involving religion. Much of this religious conflict is taking place on the African continent which is an obvious cause for concern. In this regard consider the conflicts that erupted in Central African Republic, Nigeria, Mali, Somalia, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Kenya, etc. Since we live in a supposedly scientific age with its concomitant secularism, this would seem a bit surprising. According to prominent theorists in the history of anthropology such as Emile Durkheim (1915), James Frazer (1890, 1922), Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1923), E.E. Evans Pritchard (1937), Levy Strauss (1966), et al., human history is characterised by increases in human technological and scientific advancement through the ages. For example, it is common knowledge that human technology improved its scope through the successive stages of the Lithic (Stone) Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age. At the same time, according to the anthropologists mentioned above, human cultures have gone through successive cognitive stages according to which the first stage was the age of reliance on magical thinking whereby humans in their attempts to explain phenomena imbued inanimate objects with animistic powers. Thus, rocks, trees, rivers, etc. all were seen to exercise conscious powers over humans who in turn became their votaries and engaged in regular ritual practices including sacrifices meant to appease and adulate them. Such sacrifices often involved the ritual slaughter of animals and the sacrificial killing of humans.

But despite the fact that certain animals were being sacrificed some acquired the status of being sacred as in the case of Indian Hinduism, where the cow, the

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monkey, and the tiger were designated as sacred. As time progressed, the votary objects were anthropomorphised as they acquired human characteristics. They became gods and goddesses and, although residing in other realms, managed and controlled human affairs. Ancient Egyptian and Greek gods are of this category. The endpoint of all of this was that as knowledge of the empirical world grew, agency in matters involving causality was ascribed increasingly less to anthropomorphised deities but to humans themselves. Humans became the measure of all things for many thinkers and less reliance was placed on the invented deities. But only a minority of humans have attained this stage of cognitive development. Religious belief still holds sway for the vast majority of the world's population.

But continuing with the issue of the evolution of human metaphysical thinking, in this instance religious thinking, one notes that for most of human anthropological history humans were disposed to create their gods in polytheistic fashion. There was always a chief god but there were other gods who were seen to be occupied with specific aspects of human existence. Another aspect of note concerning human-created gods is that they were not perceived as beings of moral perfection. They were powerful and influential but not morally perfect. Apart from Ancient Egypt, the case of the Yoruba of West Africa is interesting in that one has here a polytheistic culture with a transcontinental reach in the sense that the Yoruba deities are

highly influential in places like Brazil and Cuba in the Western Hemisphere.

But what is of specific interest for this paper is the fact that there developed a specific branch of god worship that was strictly monotheistic according to which the sole god was imbued with infinite power and an infinite moral scope that was directly and indirectly 'goodness oriented'. Reference here is to Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that are adhered to by the majority of the world's population. There was a precursor to this form of deity in the monotheistic religion of the Ancient Egyptian heretic pharaoh, Akhenaten. The founder of psychiatry, Sigmund Freud (1939) argued in *Moses and Monotheism* that the monotheistic concept of the Jews was adopted from Akhenaten's heretical formulation of a single deity. And it was this possibly adapted monotheistic religion of the West Asian Hebrews (Jews) that set a large portion of the world on the path towards monotheism. The initial Hebrew narrative from Moses to Christ was later adapted to the Arabian culture of West Asia. Yet there are other notable metaphysical systems that hold sway over a significant portion of humanity. They are the Asian metaphysical systems: Hinduism and Buddhism. One interesting feature about them is that there is no ultimate finality for the living human individual given that physical finality is rescued through the concepts of reincarnation and karma. The human body dies but its spiritual *doppelganger* lives on to enter another newly born individual. The life fortunes of the newly born would then be determined by moral debits and credits of the soul's previous life. Buddhism maintains both reincarnation and karma but in the context of an evolving

consciousness which is distinct from the original human form of Hinduism. But the most noteworthy characteristic of both metaphysical systems as religions is that there is no single deity endowed with infinite physical and moral powers. In this regard both metaphysical religious systems are quite distinct from the Abrahamic religions according to which a single deity holds total sway.

The most interesting characteristic of the Abrahamic deity is that he is male and deemed to be not only infinitely powerful but also infinitely 'good' in the strictly normative sense of that term. The directions offered to humans by this deity are relayed to the adherents by chosen individuals named 'prophets' who are then assigned special status by the adherents themselves. What is of crucial importance in the monotheistic paradigm is that the belief in the whole narrative is determined by faith, thus the truth claims that constitute the narrative are not subject to doubt. Empirical and causal proof that is required of the natural sciences does not apply in this case. *Credo quia credo* serves as the bulwark against any epistemological query. This characteristic of the monotheistic paradigm facilitates its totalising ontology. The monotheistic faiths – unlike empirical science – offer a complete explanation of all phenomena in time and in space under the holistic supervision of the all powerful deity, the ultimate arbiter and controller of all events and phenomena. That is the version of truth accepted on faith by the faithful. Empirical science founded on experiment and critical analysis cannot rival this ontological structure of belief because science accepts the fact that knowledge is fallible and that there is no provable theory of everything. Thus the monotheistic religions continue to be dominant on account of the epistemological limitations of even holistic scientific theories. In fact, totalising attempts to understand the world under the rubric of science have been condemned on the basis of promoting what is called scientism.

Yet no such caveats exist regarding the faithful of the monotheistic religions. The term religion derives etymologically, as many sources claim, from the Latin verb 'ligare' which means to bind. In other words, religions bind their adherents to belief systems based on an unalloyed faith. In this regard, there are many among the faithful who act with utmost confidence on the dictates of their faith. It is

this lack of circumspection that leads to unreflective behaviour that brings violence, pain, and grief to many humans.

Humans, as sensory beings existing in a world of empirically sensed phenomena, place great store by truth, i.e., the actual state of affairs. It is for this reason that science has gained in ascendancy. Its truth claims can be readily confirmed or refuted. Theorist of scientific methodology, Carl Popper, argued effectively that what endows a scientific theory with its cognitive tenor is its capacity to withstand regular and increasingly robust tests which could prove it falsified. This explains the fact that scientific claims that were once taken as valid and sound but were subsequently shown to be false abound in the annals of science. Still, on account of its successes, science has proven to be a great epistemological temptress on the basis of its effective empirical yield. Similarly, the temptations of religion abound on account of its faith-bound temptations. But yet, faith like science needs an auditor. If not, peace will be perpetually threatened as the historically numerous wars based on religious identity demonstrate. Africa is immensely and unfortunately plagued by this phenomenon in present times.

In all this, what then is the human project? On account of the fact that humans have been biologically equipped with a central nervous system unique among nature's biological creatures, it would seem incumbent on them to optimise their efforts to get an understanding of the universe in which they live. This has been the case at two levels: the empirical level and the metaphysical level. The history of humankind is characterised by attempts to increase knowledge of the workings of the empirical world for survival purposes. This was the basis for the improvements in human technology and the foundations of empirical science. Certain regularities in nature in terms of cause and effect were observed and such became the later basis for the establishment of scientific laws. But empirical knowledge though testable would not be enough for full cognitive satisfaction. Empirical knowledge understood in terms of cause and effect could offer answers to 'process questions', that is, to questions asking how phenomena occur but such knowledge was ill-equipped to explain the ultimate meaning and significance of phenomena, in other words, the ultimate 'why' questions. This is not to

deny of course that scientists – especially theoretical physicists – have been attempting to answer the ultimate 'why' question, as in the case of Hawking(2010) as the latest popular example of such. Yet even though such explanations offer 'theories of everything' they do not answer the metaphysical questions of ultimate cause in terms of the 'why' question. One popular question of this nature is 'why is there not nothing' instead of the existence of phenomena. One possible answer is that it is impossible that there could ever be nothing since nothing, by definition, is an identifiable something. The cognate argument is that if phenomena exist they must exist for a purpose.

It is at this point that metaphysical systems enter the picture often in the guise of religious theory. The basic claim is that full explanatory knowledge of the universe cannot be obtained through empirical investigation but only through a posit that an extrasensory consciousness endowed with cognitive and moral sensibilities is the ultimate agent and cause of all phenomena. The monotheistic Abrahamic religions are clear on this matter. Everything is explained by way of the consciousness of this ultimate arbiter. But the posit goes beyond this with respect to the Abrahamic religions. Only certain chosen individuals can have access to the knowledge and moral principles promulgated by the ultimate arbiter. Such knowledge is epistemologically insulated and beyond the reach of critical analysis. Adherents to the particular faiths and their own subjective beliefs are then premised on faith or belief *qua* belief. But there is a problematic with this confident foundationalism. It has ultimately led to dogmatic beliefs that ultimately produce contentious sectarianism. Consider the multiplicity of interpretations that one finds in Christian monotheism. Such sectarianism also exist in Judaism and Islam but to a lesser degree.

But there is sectarianism in other forms of human knowledge and such could take on disputatious forms especially when human ideological interests are involved. In the natural sciences, for example, extant theories are always being improved on or challenged. In the case of theoretical physics there are a number of theories competing for dominance. Kuhn's popular text, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1961) testifies to this. Normal science punctuated by revolu-

tionary science is the rule as natural and biological science wend their way forward as they seek to increase the stock of human knowledge of the empirical world. There are often theoretical disputes bordering on human and ideological interests as was the case concerning AIDS research. Peter Duesberg, a theoretical chemist of much repute suggested alternative explanations for the relationship between the HIV virus and AIDS and was practically ostracised from his scientific community as a result. He was labeled an 'AIDS denialist' and effectively became a *persona non grata* in his scientific community. And even before Duesberg there is the classic case of Giordano Bruno, an Italian 16th century polymath who was immolated at the stake for promoting heretical beliefs including the heliocentric theory which ran counter to the dogmatic theological belief that the universe was a geocentric one.

It would seem however that the major determinant of dogmatic faith in any particular human ideology is that concerning human interests. Wherever human material and intellectual interests are threatened, the default position becomes an increased dogmatic faith in the received doctrine. This is indeed the case in the social sciences. Consider the case of the fierce ideological struggles between those theorists who sought to promote their own interpretations of how to put into practice state structures following Marx's critique of capitalism. Take the case of the Soviet Union where the struggle between those who followed Stalin's brand of communism and those who followed Trotsky eventually led to the murder of Trotsky. But the much more fierce ideological struggle took place between the West and the Communist world from 1917 to 1991 when the Soviet Union was dismantled and was replaced by Russia. In this ideological struggle both sides assumed theoretical and empirical certitude regardless of what the empirical facts demonstrated.

But the saving grace here for knowledge was that both social science ideologies of free market capitalism and the command economy system of communism both operated in the context of the material world. Hence their constituent claims could be falsified according to the principle of falsifiability. This principle works on the basis that a given claim is proven false if adequate countervailing evidence could be provided. Thus there

were theorists who claimed to have mustered adequate empirical evidence to show that both economic theories were false. But the issue here is that there were always grounds for saving the proposed theories given that parametric boundary conditions were not fixed. The fact is that the social sciences do not lend themselves to strict experimental conditions as in the natural sciences. But regardless of those constraints there was still the basis for the refutation of existing theories in both ideologically supported areas.

In the area of faith-based religious theory, matters are somewhat different. The fact that the epistemic foundations of those who believe on the basis of faith are assumed to exist in the metaphysical realm insulates such beliefs from critical evaluation based on empiricist criteria. Thus, beliefs based on religious foundations, when firmly held, are held on the basis of faith. The problematic here is that agents whose beliefs derive from an epistemic faith are absolutely convinced that relevant actions are fully justified since doubt is not countenanced. It is on this basis that beliefs based on such cognitive security without any scintilla of doubt or circumspection can often be an epistemic temptation to humans as agents. Once cognitive structures are set in place on the basis of early conditioning or psychological needs, cognitive probings based on epistemological analysis and strict logical analysis would not, in most cases, be successful. The psychological payoffs are much too rewarding for old beliefs to be so easily jettisoned. The question is under what conditions could Cartesian doubt be created? Matters are compounded by the assumption that the Abrahamic deity is "all good" and his actions are optimal for all of mankind. But there is the perennial question of how to explain what many call 'evil events' taking place in a world governed by a benevolent deity. That is the eternal question that theodicy grapples with in perpetuity.

Despite the rise of empirical science over the last five centuries, the vast majority of the world's populations base their holistic belief structures on foundations that are diametrically opposed to those of a much more effective empirical science. The issue here is that empirical science is incomplete in its findings and has not succeeded in establishing an empirically derived theory of everything. At the base of all these are two key issues which

empirical science has not addressed fully. The first issue concerns human mortality. Human self consciousness is so advanced that humans are the only living organisms that can ponder their own ultimate mortality. The Abrahamic religions answer this issue with the promise of an everlasting hereafter. The second issue concerns the purpose and meaning of existence. Theoretical and empirical science is not equipped to deal with the issue of the ultimate purpose and meaning of existent phenomena, especially the purpose of human existence. For the adherents of the Abrahamic religions the issue of purpose and the ultimate significance of phenomena is explained within the content of the will of the Abrahamic deity, the conscious and moral arbiter of all things. In this regard the cognitive gap afforded by the limitations of science and secular knowledge is filled by the metaphysical content of religion believed purely on the basis of faith. Thus the human mind is tempted by religion to lend purpose and significance to human existence, and especially so for those who argue that there are two forms of belief. One form is based on belief based on evidence supported by causality; the other is based on evidence supported mainly on faith. The cognitively insulating idea here is that epistemology which plays such an important role in auditing material evidence and causality is rendered otiose in this instance. The temptation is there but can one legitimately bifurcate the thinking attributes of the human mind in that way?

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