

GROWING Together

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WHAT GOOD IS RELIGION?

Whether in caves, tree-dwellings or on open plains, thousands of years ago our ancestors looked for meaning in what they experienced. This dawning of human consciousness was allied with a spirituality of fear. Here lie the beginnings of what we call religion. Human sacrifice was made to appease the gods, guarantee fertility, or bring an end to plagues and other natural disasters. As time passed people saw themselves protected by their own special god who would make them victorious over other nations. A Canaanite farmer, hearing that Joshua's army was coming, might well have asked, "What right has this god of the Hebrews to claim my land and enslave my family?"



When whole communities embrace one religion, attempts to introduce new ones are seen as a threat. In the Roman empire Christians refusing to worship the emperor led to violent persecutions. When Islam dominated the Arabian peninsula, Christian leaders in Europe mounted crusades to fight "the infidel" and eagerly shed the blood of their brothers and sisters of the faith whenever they perceived "heresy". For challenging the Catholic Church, the Bohemian reformer John Hus was burned at the stake in 1415.

Across 17th century Europe many died for their faith. A wave of ignorance and fear led to the unjust persecution of innocent people condemned for witchcraft. This tragedy, which spread across the Atlantic, is clearly remembered in Salem, Massachusetts, where 19 women and men died in 1692. As European nations searched for new territories, countries like Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium and Britain crushed the faiths of the aboriginal peoples they encountered. Today tragic stories of anti-Semitism and sectarian violence continue to horrify us. Religion is responsible for much suffering.

Nevertheless the human condition would be much worse were it not for countless ways in which believing women and men have been moved by their belief in a loving, compassionate God. Through the darkest years of the Middle Ages, the light of learning was kept burning in the monasteries and convents of Europe, and education was steadfastly encouraged by Christian, Jewish and

Muslim spiritual leaders. They laid the foundation for our schools and universities and cared for the sick in religious houses - the forerunners of our hospitals.

In the early 19th century the Christian voice of William Wilberforce spearheaded the abolition of slavery in Europe. Elizabeth Fry worked tirelessly on behalf of homeless women and children struggling to improve the appalling conditions in women's prisons in England. Racist policies in the United States and in South Africa continued into the 20th century, but the Christian example set by Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama and Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Capetown, brought about changes that seemed impossible.

Religion has helped millions to see a vision of a world of hope, in spite of so much want and fear. Leaders of all faiths have opened our eyes to the suffering of millions worldwide. Recently we have heard the courageous testimony of three Canadians - Jean Vanier's compassion for those mentally and physically challenged; General Romeo DeLaire's anguish exposing the enormity of human suffering in Rwanda; and Senator Lois Wilson's actions and writings on behalf of injustices (especially concerning women) in our own country.

We cannot disregard the damage done in the name of religion throughout the centuries, and continuing today. But countless women and men, sustained by faith, continue to seek purpose and meaning in life's mysteries. They testify that great good can indeed come from religion.



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