

Two Appetizers on The Nature of Religion

Paul Marshall

Paul Marshall, in the context of the Canadian constitutional struggle, warned that the occasion called for taking stock of Canada's religious inheritance because of its central place. The widest and most basic dimension of our place and task in the world is a religious one. This is true even for people not conventionally called religious. In the past few hundred years within the secular-rationalized world of the West, religion has often been assumed to be the domain only of certain types of people—religious people. Only certain types of activities, like prayer or worship, are considered religious activities. Though this notion of religion is common in the West, it is by no means universal. It is in fact quite sectarian and bound up with Western culture. It is often used to ghettoize religion. Religion should properly be understood in a much broader way. In seeking to expand our understanding of religion, we cannot restrict it to questions about God.

Sociologists of religion have frequently pointed out that political movements like fascism or communism, which attempt to articulate an ordered understanding of the whole world, bear all the marks of religion. Indeed, nearly all states and societies seek to understand and express themselves in terms of ultimate meaning. Words like "freedom," "democracy" and "human rights," when considered in any depth, reflect a particular understanding of the nature of human beings and their place in the world. Their meaning, most basically, is religious. Religion refers to the deepest commitment and deepest identity of a person or group. Hence, the opinion that one may discuss constitutions, politics, education, or sex without any reference to God is as much a religious view as the opinion that we are responsible to God in all we do. An expanded concept of religion allows us to take account of the fact that our lives reflect and are rooted in a particular view of the meaning of life: of the nature of society; of what human beings really are; and of their essential responsibilities, whether to self, society, or another source. If religion is particularly concerned with the roots of our lives, then we need to pay special attention to its influence on our culture. Indeed, the root of culture is religion, in the sense that the basic patterns of our society are shaped by our basic commitment and belief in life, which is, in turn, our religion. Our "god" is that in which we place our faith and trust, and our culture expresses what lies in our heart.

P. Marshall, quoted in Jan H. Boer, *Studies in Christian Muslim Relations*, volume 5, 2006, pp. 198-199. See Islamica page of www.SocialTheology.com.)

Hammudah Abdalati

“Religion is not to bewilder man but to guide him. It is not to debase him but to elevate his moral nature. It is not to deprive him of anything useful, or to burden him, or to oppress his qualities, but to open for him inexhaustible treasures of sound thinking and right action. It is not to confine him to narrow limits, but to launch him into wide horizons of truth and goodness. In short, true religion is to acquaint man with God as well as with himself and the rest of the universe.”

(Hammudah Abdalati in *Islam in Focus*. Quoted in Jan H. Boer, *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*, volume 4, 2005, front page. See Islamic page of www.SocialTheology.com.)