

ENTERTAINING OURSELVES

Rethinking the Roles of Religion and the Arts in the Quest for Peace

I would like to preface the following remarks by emphasizing that the ideas presented here are exploratory, preliminary, and synoptic, marking the beginning of a new research direction for me.

Now, while those of us who are attending this Forum love and seek the preservation and promotion of religious diversity, the world is fraught with those who are fighting it with all the fundamentalistic vigor and narrow-mindedness they can muster. Difference and plurality continue to anger those who lust for a mono-culture that excludes a healthy range of religio-political ideologies. During this Forum, Dr Antony Fernando has spoken of the “clan psyche,” and Ian Lacey referred to the denigration of some religious groups by others.¹ This sad state of affairs is not new: it is age-old, and the outlook isn’t heartening – to say the least. What, then, can be done about it? As a philosopher – who also chooses to believe in the emancipatory and progressive tenets of Judeo-Christianity – what thoughts can I offer in order to make my small contribution to the transformation of this

beautiful,” and “the good.” No doubt, this is a virtuous pursuit—but what of “the peaceful”? One is hard-pressed to find any scholarly works offering “a philosophy of peace,” for example, or “a critical theory of harmony.”

The few works that one is able to identify include John Somerville’s *The Philosophy of Peace* (New York: Gaer Associates), published in 1949, Singh Rishi Grewal’s *Philosophy of Peace, Power and Plenty* (Santa Barbara) published in 1932, and more recent, sociologically-oriented works, such as David Basinger’s *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate), published in 2002. Thus far, I have been unable to get my hands on the first two works. The latter work is more sociological than philosophical; more descriptive than analytical in orientation.

In light of this philosophical lack, it is certainly time to investigate or rethink ways of achieving peace in an age of multiple terrorisms—particularly Islamic and American fundamentalisms, but also our anthropocentric devastation of the planet, our racism, sexism, and so on. How, then, to live harmoniously with each other?

possible. But this avenue is thwarted by obstacles like authoritarian regimes governing conditioned or frightened citizens who consider liberal education evil, or perhaps communities lack funding and other supports to aid progressive education's establishment, growth, and positive socio-cultural consequences. Education, then, is a way of approaching peace, but it is littered with socio-economic and political impediments.

Another path to peace involves the search for a "common ethic" – which was touched upon by Professor Cahill² – a task undertaken by many thinkers from diverse fields, including the prominent theologian, Hans Kung, who devised a "Declaration of the Religions for a Global Ethic" for the *World Parliament of Religions*.³ But this task – as undeniably noble as it is – is also problematic on a number of fronts. First of all, what does philosophy reveal if not the difficulty of ascertaining such an ethic? Consider the smorgasbord of ethical theories: virtue ethics, consequentialism, utilitarianism, Levinasian ethics of the Other, etc. There is also the problem of maintaining the tension between shared axioms across different religions and spiritualities, and the particularities that make them

Secondly, assuming that we *are* able to come up with an agreed global ethic, how could we assert it? Wouldn't it require force in the face of the fundamentalisms that would resist it at any cost? Assuming many of us could perhaps agree on a "common ethic," the task is therefore further complicated in terms of its assertion and promotion. To be sure, I do not recommend the abandonment of this noble task, but I *do* think it is extremely difficult and, on a global scale, perhaps somewhat unattainable—even though I am someone who believes in the implausible. I do not rule out its possibility—to do so would be presumptuous and even arrogant—but I remain skeptical as to whether any such ethic is indeed realizable and whether its adoption could be enforceable.

And so, we should acknowledge the problematic aspect of some of the more conspicuous avenues to peace, even though cultural movements like the Enlightenment and ecumenism are understandably perceived as ways through or beyond the religious violence that plagues us. However, we should also consider the possibility that there may be additional—and perhaps even more effective—paths to peace: such as, *the arts*. How so? To begin with, I utilize the phrase "the

commonsensical validity and self-evidence nevertheless begins to show itself as soon as we begin to contemplate it: when people pay more attention to leisure and recreation in contradistinction to their religious beliefs and affiliations, or, when entertainment becomes more culturally prominent and religion takes on a more “private” role, there is more likelihood of harmony between different religious groupings. Social exchanges and interactions are guided by the pursuit of pleasure over above the search for truth and the ascent to salvation.

My contention, therefore, is that cultures whose identities are significantly shaped by the arts appear more likely to experience relative peace than cultures where social phenomena like extremist religious movements and other divisive forces (including the politics of these fundamentalisms) fundamentally determine those societies.

We should therefore ponder and pursue the possibility that one way of moving towards peace is to allow the arts a greater role in the shaping of societies. The country in which I was born, raised, and live in, Australia, exemplifies this kind of

population – and how well our cricket and football teams are playing; we are more interested in participating in dance parties and wine festivals on a massive scale; we are more interested in attending art galleries and museums in very large numbers – rather than passionately debating the superiority of our respective faith positions and the tacit politics that come with them, zealously converting each other.

This train of thought makes sense: many Australians consider themselves religious or spiritual in some sense, for, by and large, Australia is not “irreligious,” and the popularity of Buddhism and New Age spiritualities attests to that. But any such acknowledgment and embrace of divinity or transcendence is mediated by a leisure lifestyle that rules out a fanaticism which opens up the possibility of violence.

To allay Professor Cahill’s concerns: this is not an “aggressive secularism” but a hedonistic secularity or post/secular hedonism: our pursuit of enjoyment is not a calculated attack on religion, nor a pointed division of the sacred and secular.⁴ It is

proposition risks tending towards simplification and generalization: to assume that Australia's relatively peaceful multicultural society is the way it is *strictly* because of the secular hedonism which predominates is obviously simplistic: Australia's startling harmony results from a matrix of plausible factors – perhaps including “luck.” After all, the question “Why, relatively speaking, is Australia so peaceful?” is an imposingly complex one: one would have to consider historical, geo-political, and other factors in order to begin broaching it. But I think it is fair to postulate that Australia's focus on the arts has fundamentally contributed to the relative harmony which exists between different religious affiliations.

To be sure, Australian hedonism is not one-sided: I recognize that there may also be cultural downsides to the pervasive recreationality marking Australian culture. For instance, from a critical-Marxist perspective, the arts may act as a way of keeping the hegemonic forces powerful and wealthy: in a recreational culture, it may be argued that the masses are appeased while the elite maintain and fortify their influence and affluence. I should also note here that a thorough examination of this issue would consider the problematics of the link between big business and

This kind of critique is certainly compelling: does this mean that the argument outlined above should be rejected? No. To begin with, it should be noted that all kinds of complex, prevalent cultural phenomena and movements are doublesided: like religion itself, secular hedonism is marked by both positive and negative elements. Like religion, the pursuit of pleasure can be both illuminating and blinding, both liberating and debilitating, fulfilling and bankrupt, charitable and greedy. In light of its duality, recreationality should – like religion – therefore be tentatively affirmed rather than uncritically embraced.

And so, approaching the harmonizing role of the arts in a nuanced, qualified way, I propose that the global movement of secular hedonism may act as a path towards overcoming the religious conflict that halts the possibility of peace. Hence, governments, the media, and other culture-shaping forces should critically encourage the continuing development of recreational culture by funding and assisting leisure and entertainment industries which contribute to more playful and consequently more peaceful societies.

Arts Council and government departments specifically devoted to the cultural sector, dealing with recreation issues and initiatives.

I should like to emphasize two further points regarding the movement towards a more recreational world. First of all, we should certainly have serious misgivings about globalising American popular culture: not only is it diversionary, but it also threatens the survival of the precious cultural differences which make places like Kolkata amazing. Nevertheless, at least one possibly positive outcome is that inhabitants of other-than-western countries appear to increasingly turn more of their attention to the arts and the pleasures they provide, while the roles of religion and spirituality become more personal than political. With the rise of secular hedonism—which does not automatically have as its correlate the waning of belief—comes the possibility of a world entertaining itself rather than destroying itself in the names of faiths and their politics.

Secondly, and perhaps most crucially, it almost appears obscene to me to be talking about entertainment when I am amidst an amazing city like Kolkata, a city

And so, in light of the exploratory thoughts offered here, offered with crucial qualifications, I propose that we should begin to take play and pleasure seriously – we certainly owe peace that much.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dr Antony Fernando, "Religious Challenges: policy, challenges and opportunities," *Third Diversity Matters Forum*, "Religious Diversity: Global Challenges and Local Responsibilities for the Commonwealth," Kolkata, India (28 February – 2 March 2005) [henceforth *Third Diversity Matters Forum*, 1 March, 2005; Ian Lacey, "Religious Vilification and Discrimination in Multi-Faith Societies," *Third Diversity Matters Forum*, 2 March 2005.

² Professor Desmond Cahill, "Regulating Religion in a Global Context," *Third Diversity Matters Forum*, 1 March 2005.

³ Refer to Kung's "Explanatory Remarks Concerning a 'Declaration of the Religions for a Global Ethic,'" cited on <<http://astro.temple.edu/~dialogue/Center/kung.htm>> accessed 24 February 2005 ; also refer to the article "Hans Kung: In Search of a Global Ethic" by Diana Holland, which appears on the *Share International* website <http://www.shareintl.org/archives/religion/rl_dhHansKung.htm> accessed 24 February 2005).

⁴ While one may perhaps argue that the sacred/secular binary is ultimately problematic, we contend that the distinction – which should be figured non-hierarchically – still holds, particularly on the level of intentionality: the secular is marked by a lack of any overt recognition of a relationship between creation and divinity/transcendence.

⁵ Two fellow-guests at the *Diversity Matters Forum* who informed me about India's economic plight and positive outlook included anthropologist Dr N. K. Das, and Professor Krishna Sen from Kolkata University.