

Religion and the Sources of Social Values

Easter – 2012

Thomas A. Burns, Ph.D.

Chiloquin, Oregon

Introduction

“He has Risen,” is the cry of the Christian faithful on this occasion of Easter. But as Mark Chaves reveals in his American Religion: Contemporary Trends, (Princeton Univ. Press), 2011, this is a cry more and more occurring in the American wilderness. Chaves identifies a large number of indicators that all point to the long-term trend of the American populous becoming less and less church and faith oriented and more and more secular. Yes, the social values often associated with religion remain in evidence, and there are those that would claim that the persistence of these values implies that the influence of religion in America is both stable and strong. But there is reason to question whether the sustaining of these social values depends in any fundamental way on a commitment to any religion.

You would never know about the decline of religion in America considering the ascendancy of the Christian religious right since the Reagan era, its prominent influence in the Republican Party, and the media fascination with and coverage of this special religious interest group. But it is the disease of the media to focus on the sensational extremes and to ignore the quiet center where religion in America has been in free fall for the last century.

The Multiple Basis for Social Values

America, and Western Culture in general, unfortunately subscribe to the simplistic dichotomy – religious versus secular – with the religious pole regarded as the primary zone and source for social values [restricted among conservatives to “family” values]. One result of thinking in terms of this reductive dichotomy has been that no leader wants to be seen as irreligious and therefore “valueless.” So, in spite of the rise of the secular orientation in our society, no leader has emerged to challenge this underlying false dichotomy and to offer an alternative justification for social values apart from the religious domain. I suggest that it is incorrect to think that religion is the only source or even the primary source for social values.

E.O. Wilson argues in his recent work, The Social Conquest of Earth (Norton) 2012, that there is as much a genetic and evolutionary basis for empathy and the social values surrounding cooperation in human societies as there is for the self-centered biological survival values surrounding competition among humans and between their societies. Anthropologically, there is no question that

humans are fundamentally social animals and that only the mentally debilitated and diseased among us [the autistic, brain injured, sociopathic and psychopathic] lack social sensitivity. Clearly humans are driven by rudimentary biological survival forces and the individualistic values that correspond to this perspective. But equally clearly, humans are driven by essential cooperative forces and the social values that correspond to this perspective. Humans are both selfish biological creatures and empathetic and cooperative social creatures – these two forces ever in dynamic tension.

But apart from religion, there is more than genetics to consider in accounting for social values. At the secular level, society promotes social values as a result of understanding its own needs and identifying what constitutes appropriate social behavior. We refer to such social direction as ethics, the rules [the “oughts” and “shoulds”] that are intended to inform social relationships. Parents, siblings, relatives, elders, teachers, law enforcement, and even peers all participate in instilling adherence to the social rules regarding truth, honesty, consideration and respect in all of those under their influence and protection – without the need for any input from religion. Indeed, young people and even adults are regularly punished for failing to abide by these ethical rules.

Now, let’s consider the role of religion as regards social values. Religion is a cultural institution that provides support for appropriate social behavior and respect for society by locating justification in a transcendent source [God, gods, ancestors, spirits, etc.]. As such, religion defines the rules of social behavior on what I refer to as moral rather than ethical grounds. In most cases, the moral social dictates from religion correspond to the ethical requirements as defined by society, and so religion adds weight to the rules of proper social behavior. But it is important to note that religion confirms social values; it does not originate them. After all, in the history of human societies, social bands of humans were respecting ethical rules long before there is any evidence for religious belief, much less religion as a cultural institution.

So, there are at least three sources supporting social values. Religion is one of these, but it comes relatively late into the picture among social humans. I suggest that there is a more fundamental awareness, which underlies the moral viewpoint within religion and which is in fact a primary source supporting social values. From this point of view, religion is a manifestation in diverse cultures and in very diverse forms that is motivated at least initially by this more fundamental awareness. I refer to this awareness as spiritual awareness.

How is spiritual awareness related to religion and a key source of social values? To answer this question requires a few steps, some of which may be unfamiliar

to many in the modern world who think they have lived their lives almost totally defined by everyday objective reality as revealed by human rational faculties. So, stick with me for the next few paragraphs as we make our way to answer this important question.

In the objective perception and conception of reality, the discreteness of things is a given – a basic assumption. These things and individuals are separate and related only by sharing proximal space through cause and effect relationships over time. But there is another way to understand, experience and interact with reality, and reality is seen very differently from the perspective that corresponds to this view of reality. I refer to this alternative view as the spiritual perspective, and I refer to the awareness that experience in this dimension reveals as spiritual awareness. Other terms are used to refer to this alternative perspective – subjective, transcendent, or universal are common. It does not matter what term is used; they all refer to the same phenomenon.

All humans experience and interact with reality from this alternative spiritual perspective, but we may not pay much attention or make the effort to develop our capabilities within it. The most obvious experience which we all have and which touches on reality as understood from this spiritual perspective is dreaming. Clearly the reality in dreams is not the same reality as defined by objective awareness, which we consider to be under rational control. Yet we know that our dreams can be productive and suggest solutions to problems that we could not resolve when working on them rationally within the objective. Indeed, many creative people have learned the secret of taking “time outs” from rational “thought” to allow ideas to come to them from an alternative source. After learning their craft, many artists, inventors and theorists of all kinds often learn to dwell at least periodically in this “time out” limbo state [in its deeper form a meditative state] in order to be most productive. In a sense, they experience some of their most outstanding art, inventive ideas and theoretical breakthroughs as coming through them rather than being the consequence of intentional and rational effort. In the same vein, athletes and actors refer to entering the “flow” of the game or character and experiencing what subsequently occurs as if it is effortless, without any reference to objective time or space. There are myriad other examples, quality sexual interaction being the most obvious in which the criteria of surrounding objective reality “disappear” as two entities merge to become one. These experiences are very real and very important, but they are non-rational, and the nature of the reality in which they occur does not correspond to the objective reality on which so many of us place so much emphasis and value.

When it comes to spiritual awareness and experience, the more common examples above are just the tip of the iceberg. I refer to the human mental faculties that are focal in many of these non-rational experiences as our intuitive faculties, and while our culture allows for the idiosyncratic development of these faculties, other cultures have derived systematic processes for developing these intuitive faculties to a relatively sophisticated level. Often this development occurs in a religious context, and some of the great practitioners of the intuitive “arts” are in fact the central figures in our major religions. This is the case in spite of the fact that most of the “mystical” events that are ascribed to these religious figures are viewed only as “unusual” in cultures that are familiar with individuals who display a high level of intuitive competence. On a worldwide basis, shamans are common spiritual leaders and practitioners in a great many simpler societies. Much of what they know and can do can be understood in terms of their ability to utilize their intuitive competence in subjective reality to have consequences in objective reality. I suggest that just as we find our dreams to be mysterious, we tend to view the shaman’s or psychic’s or ascetic’s or prophet’s abilities as miraculous. In both cases, the results do not fit the expectations of our objective view of reality.

So, there are different ways of being in the world depending on which of our faculties are in play and to what extent they are employed. Most of the time our intuitive and rational faculties are operating simultaneously to address the challenges we face. But with training we can shift the emphasis more purely one way or the other and hold that position to access information or accomplish certain tasks. We are familiar with doing this to address tasks that require rational thought. There is nothing any more mysterious about the intuitive and what it can achieve than for the rational. Both faculties are needed and productive for human biological and social survival. But the tie between intuitive faculties and subjective or spiritual awareness is particularly relevant for understanding one important source of social values. I return now to that subject.

When human intuitive faculties are engaged at a relatively pure level, the spiritual perspective emerges which in turn results in opening the individual to the core spiritual experience and the spiritual awareness that comes with it. The intuitive based spiritual experience reveals that the transcendent or subjective reality is governed by the basic principle of interconnectedness among all things. Within this awareness, the individual self dissolves to merge with all others and all other things in the universe to ultimately become one unified and totally shared identity – the All. So, while discreteness, or the separateness of things, seems to be a constant characteristic of our everyday objective reality as seen through our rational faculties, separateness or

“thingness” disappears in the transcendent or spiritual experience of reality. The deeper the intuitive shift into spiritual awareness, the more inclusive the scope of interconnectedness becomes. And the more inclusive the self becomes, the more it expands to merge into ever greater shared identity with more and more of the layers of the universe – far beyond just the matter of social relations among humans.

Within this spiritual awareness and unification experience, the motivation for social or communal values [cooperation] lies in the understanding and experience of one’s self as including “others” within the realm of total interconnectedness. Ultimately from this spiritual perspective, the consequence of knowing one’s self as expanded infinitely to include all others is to require behavior to respect – even love – this greater, more inclusive self [the universal Self]. Moral obligation to others emerges in this experience of the inclusive self in the subjective or transcendent dimension of reality because to deny or diminish others is to denigrate one’s self. So, morality and the social values it encompasses have their source in spiritual awareness, and they are only secondarily expressed through religious belief and ritual systems. I hope this “excursion” helps to clarify the relationship between spiritual awareness, religion, morality, and one of the key bases for social values in human societies.

Humans experience the awareness of a subjective or universal reality in various ways through the employment of their intuitive faculties, but traditionally they achieve this awareness most intensely through the vehicles of symbolic art, belief and ritual. Unfortunately, humans mistake these symbolic vehicles that they create for the spiritual awareness that underlies them. And over time, societies inevitably transform symbolic expression into literal belief, which then becomes ensconced in institutionalized religion. And religion further “adjusts” these literal beliefs so that they come to support an exclusive set of social values peculiar to that group. The universal Self is thereby confined and reduced to the social self of a single society or group – to those sharing the “faith.” Unfortunately, in this process, literal beliefs and their associated social values become only remotely related to the core underlying message about shared universal identity arising from spiritual awareness itself. Indeed, the social values supported by some institutionalized religions are so restrictive that they end up promoting racial, ethnic, caste, class, sect and/or denominational distinctions which justify treating “others” not as self, but as strangers and even enemies.

So, while all religions are motivated initially by the human experience of universal interconnectedness, religions tend to lose unfettered contact with this source rather rapidly. It is just an unfortunate fact that all institutional religions

– including all of today’s major world religions – promote at best a rather highly diluted version of the universal social values implicit in spiritual awareness. Indeed, spiritual awareness can be so faint in some religious groups that they can allow for and even motivate the most horrific human social behavior [ethnic cleansing, genocide, crusades, jihads, etc.].

While religion could potentially support awareness of the self as the universal Self, and while the ascetic traditions of some religions remain in more intimate contact with the spiritual principle of universal identity and recognize the need to support universal social values, virtually all religions lose it as they are understood and practiced by the vast majority of their followers. And in tolerant complex societies where multiple religions and denominations and sects exist under the same secular umbrella, the social values of one religious group are in competition with those of other groups and are often a source of significant conflict. Spiritual awareness and the universal social values associated with the inclusive understanding and experience of Self are much needed, but they do not apply because socially constrained religious dogma comes to replace spiritual awareness. And in nearly all cases the leaders in these modern complex societies are cognizant of neither the problem nor the need to recover spiritual awareness and the spiritual perspective as an essential part of the answer. Indeed, caught in the religious vs. secular dichotomy, these leaders often escape quietly into secular humanism, or superficially into “regular” church going, or loudly into religious fundamentalism – unaware that there is another, much more fundamental and productive choice.

Conclusion

In the absence of religion, social values in human societies are not just supported by secular social philosophy [ethics] and perhaps genetics. Social values are supported by the moral perspective of spiritual awareness, which recognizes the fundamental interconnectedness and shared identity of all things and which thereby requires empathy and respect for others. It is not necessary to be religious to be morally, and not just ethically, oriented – whatever contribution human genetics may play!

Instead of getting bogged down in the religious trivia of burka styles, sacred cows, taboos on pork, insect reincarnations, and debates over gay marriage, we have the option to tap the spiritual root of all religions, and stop thinking that it takes religion per se to render humans socially sensitive, cooperative, and moral. We can choose not to support leaders out of fear and anger who suggest that there is security for all if we withdraw from socially oriented government and focus only on taking care of ourselves. Instead, we can

support positive leaders who suggest that our security lies in sharing our mutual identity and resources with all of our neighbors. We have a choice: we can retreat in fear further into individualism or we can support social values while leaving behind the unfortunate limitations and vast complications of religion.

In a world that suffers horrendously from all forms of divisiveness and where the future success for our species depends on ever-greater degrees of integration among human communities, my choice is to support comprehensive social values based on the very strong combined evidence from ethical principles, spiritual awareness and perhaps even from genetics.

If I am willing to share my identity with all of my neighbors, I must require the same commitment and level of responsibility from them. As I see it, requiring and getting that commitment based on knowledge of this same overwhelming evidence is one of the most significant challenges for modern humankind. And in spite of all their posturing about “family values,” I think we have no chance of reaching this social-values based goal by pursuing the regressive illusion that our wellbeing can be secured in any religious or secular version of individual, social, and societal isolationism that is currently being touted by far right conservatives.

The resurrection for America and the developed world that I am hoping for this Easter of 2012 is one that occurs here and now – the one led by social values that are based on spiritual awareness and the inclusive concept of Self.