

We live in an age of enlightenment, in an age where science and reason has done away with the need for such archaic things as superstition or religion. In such an age we can do away with the guilt ridden moralistic teachings of these religions and focus on getting on with life... or can we?

Even if we are to accept that there is no higher power, no afterlife, no greater purpose to life than what is here and now, we have to accept that religion has its place in society. Religion from a stand point of a cultural anthropologist is not only a vehicle by which 'primitive' societies explain the unexplainable, it is also a way in which a society structures itself and explains its world view. Religion gives the society a list of do's and don'ts that help that society function, and help people interrelate with one another. We are not talking here about moralistic rules that stave off the wrath of a vengeful god, but rather rules that actually form the glue of society, holding it together.

That is why there are so many parallels between the major religions of the world. The easiest example to illustrate this point is the concept of murder. All the major religions of the world see murder as wrong, for many of them there is a spiritual or religious quality to this view (e.g. negative karma for Buddhists, or the concept of humanity being made in the image of God for Christians and Jews), but there is a much more practical, societal function to denouncing murder. Obviously if there are no rules governing the taking of people's lives then society will struggle to thrive, and if allowed to go unchecked rampant murder would lead to the extinction of said society. It's a no brainer, society needs rules around murder, that is why there are laws against it in all modern societies, but before these rules were put into place in a formalised legal system, they were present in society's earlier guide for living – Religion.

Interestingly, another parallel belief between the major religions (Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and even some forms of Hinduism) is their teaching on alcohol and more specifically inebriation. Again, we could look at these teachings from a religious or spiritual context, and suggest that such beliefs are outdated, that we do not need such moralistic teachings in today's society. But surely there is more to these beliefs than just superstitious spirituality?

I was recently talking with a Muslim friend of mine on this subject and he told me that the consumption of alcohol in Islam is indeed a greater sin than eating pork! He said that if a Muslim was faced with the choice of starving to death or eating pork, he was permitted to eat pork, however there was no situation in which a true Muslim was permitted to consume alcohol. He illustrated the importance of this by telling me a parable (My friend has very broken English and whilst I tried to look the parable up online to get more info on it I had no luck, so we will have to make do with my retelling of it). The parable was about a Muslim man who was captured by a mortal enemy. The mortal enemy wanted to torment the Muslim man so put four tests in front of him, stating that if the Muslim partook in one of these tests he would not be killed, but rather set free. The first test was a baby which the Muslim man was told he must kill. The second test was a prostitute which he must sleep with. The third test was a meal of pork

which he was required to eat. The fourth test was a bottle of alcohol that he had to consume. The Muslim man did not want to die at the hands of his enemy and so considered the four tests in front of him and decided that the lesser of the four evils was to drink the bottle of alcohol, which he did. The parable ends with the Muslim man becoming inebriated and in his intoxicated state participating in the three remaining tests.

Parables often make their point through exaggeration and it could be argued that this parable is an example of this. However I am beginning to wonder if there is less exaggeration in this parable than one would originally think; we know from the statistics that young drivers are dying on our roads due to intoxication, we read about the alcohol fuelled violence in our capital cities, stabbings, rapes and other offences... can we really argue that alcohol is not as dangerous as the above parable suggests? We can try and argue that religious teachings about the dangers of alcohol and inebriation are outdated, guilt ridden and moralistic. We can label those that speak out against such things from a religious stand-point as wowsers and suggest that drinking is just about letting loose and having fun. But could it be that the world's religions speak out against this problem because there is an important sociological implication to minimising or abstaining from alcohol consumption.

It would be naive to place all the blame for society's ills at the feet of alcohol but it is interesting that it is a contributing factor to so many of the major areas for concern in our society today. Ignoring the warning of religion on this subject seems to be weakening the glue that is holding our society together. Surely it is a no brainer!

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