

## WE COULD BE SIBLINGS YET

Midway through his book *Gandhi's Truth*, Erik Erikson interrupts his psychoanalytic study of Mahatma Gandhi with a very different kind of chapter—a short chapter that he titles “A Personal Word.” It takes the form of a letter addressed to Gandhi as if he were still alive. Its salutation, Mahatmaji (Revered Great Soul), makes clear Erikson’s deep regard for Gandhi, but Erikson then explains that he wants to tell him in person, as it were, that the second half of his book will call attention to some flaws in Gandhi’s character that Erikson thinks his psychoanalytic training has enabled him to detect. He feels confident, he says, that Gandhi would want him to report what he has found, for no one dedicated his life more unswervingly to truth than did Gandhi.

The sensitivity with which Erikson leads into his approaching criticisms makes his letter a model for this Epilogue, whose title readers will recognize as paraphrased from Chief Seattle’s most famous oration. Paraphrasing Erikson, I proceed as follows:

Respected scientists, and by extension keepers of the high culture—but let me stop right there, for that salutation is poorly phrased. It should read, “Respected keepers of our high culture with a handful of polemical scientific materialists thrown in,” for the majority of scientists are sensitive and tolerant citizens who treat religion with respect, just as the great majority of religious people belong to moderate denominations that treat science with respect. Dogmatic scientific materialists are as exceptional as dogmatic religious fanatics, but because they stir things up and the media loves a good fight, their number and importance gets exaggerated. So I shall rephrase my salutation and address my “letter” generally to the officiants of our high culture while aiming it pointedly at the sprinkling of militant scientists who make up in polemical zeal what they lack in numbers. With that correction I shall start over and try to say it right this time.

Respected adversaries, I should like to suggest what is required of militant scientists if the two great shaping forces of history are to join hands in the coming century. Like a dysfunctional family trying to become functional, the change will take time, but as a step toward it, I suggest that you try to understand where we believers are coming from.

The polemical among you are not good at doing that. My shelf of books on science-for-the-laity is as long as my shelves on each of the major world religions, but I will be very much surprised if you can say as much from your side. Your standard criticisms of religion sound so much like satires of third-grade Sunday school teachings that they make me want to ask when you last read a theological treatise and what its title was.

The greats in your number did better than you in this regard. Schrödinger’s trilogy of small books for the general public ends with the Upanishads’ resounding refrain, “Atman is Brahman.” Niels Bohr credited Søren Kierkegaard’s writings with sparking his doctrine of complementarity. Robert Oppenheimer read the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit (which I cannot) and quoted from it

when the first atomic bomb exploded in New Mexico. Werner Heisenberg and Arthur Compton were the leading lights in the conference on Science and Human Responsibility that Washington University mounted in the 1950s, and its program reserved Sunday morning for divine worship.

What I feel that you do not understand is why we, your potential partners, are so persistent in pressing our case. You know by heart the pathological reasons for our doing so, but the first requirement in conflict resolution is to try to understand the person on the opposite side of the negotiating table at his or her best. At our best, we seem to possess a sensibility that you lack, and I shall try to describe it.

Most simply stated, to be religiously “musical” (as Max Weber confessed he was not) is to possess a distinctive sensibility that I shall call the “religious sense.” It has four parts that lock together into a single whole.

1. The religious sense recognizes instinctively that the ultimate questions human beings ask—What is the meaning of existence? Why are there pain and death? Why, in the end, is life worth living? What does reality consist of and what is its object?—are the defining essence of our humanity. They are not just speculative imponderables that certain people of inquisitive bent get around to asking after they have attended to the serious business of working out strategies for survival. They are the determining substance of what makes human beings human. This religious definition of human beings delves deeper than Aristotle’s definition of man as a rational animal. In the religious definition, man is the animal whose rationality leads him to ask ultimate questions of the sort just mentioned. It is the intrusion of these questions into our consciousness that tells us most precisely and definitively the kind of creature we are. Our humanness flourishes to the extent that we steep ourselves in these questions—ponder them, circle them, obsess over them, and in the end allow the obsession to consume us.

2. Following on the heels of the above, the religious sense is visited by a desperate, at times frightening, realization of the distance between these questions and their answers. As the urgency of the questions increases, we see with alarming finality that our finitude precludes all possibility of our answering them.

3. The conviction that the questions *have* answers never wavers, however, and this keeps us from giving up on them. Though final answers are unattainable, we can advance toward them as we advance toward horizons that recede with our every step. In our faltering steps toward the horizon we need all the help we can get, so we school ourselves to the myriad of seekers who have pondered the ultimate questions before us. You scientists learn from your precursors too; Isaac Newton expressed this nobly when he said that the reason he saw further than his predecessors was because he stood on their shoulders. But it is easier in science to see what should be retained and what retired, for scientific truths

are cumulative whereas religious truth is not. This requires that we keep dialoguing with our past as seriously as this book has tried to do, while also dialoguing expectantly with our present (as this book has also tried to do.) Karl Barth used to say that he faced each day with the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other.

4. Finally, we conduct our search together—collectively, in congregations as you do in your laboratories and professional societies. Emile Durckheim, the nineteenth century sociologist, thought religion was entirely a social affair, a reification of the shared values of the tribe. Today our individualistic society comes close to assuming the opposite, that religion is altogether an individual affair. (Charles Taylor criticizes William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* on this count.) As usual the Buddha walked the middle path. "Be ye lamps unto yourselves," for sure; but do not forget that the *sangha* (the monastic community, and by extension the company of the holy) is one of the Three Jewels of Buddhism.

As I try to describe the religious sense, my mind goes back to a night when I felt it working in me with exceptional force: My wife and I were spending a week in the dead of winter in Death Valley, California, and on the full-moon night that we were there I awoke around two A.M. to a call that seemed to come from the night itself, a call so compelling that it was almost audible. Hurrying into some clothes, I answered it. Stepping out of doors, I found that not a breath of air was stirring. The sky held no clouds to conceal the panoply of stars ascending from the circling horizon. It was one of those totally magical nights and moments.

For half an hour or so I walked the road, without (as I remember the epiphany) a thought in my head. It may have been as close as I have ever come to the empty mind that Buddhists work toward for years.

There my powers of description shut down, so I was happy a year or two later to come upon this poem by Giacomo Leopardi which, on reading, I recognized as giving words to the night in question. In that poem, a nomadic shepherd in Asia is posing questions to a moon that seems to dominate the infinity of earth and heaven—questions whose horizons are themselves infinite:

*And when I gaze upon you,  
Who mutely stand above the desert plains  
Which heaven with its far circle but confines,  
Or often, when I see you  
Following step by step my flock and me,  
Or watch the stars that shine there in the sky,  
Musing, I say within me:  
"Wherefore those many lights,  
That boundless atmosphere,  
And infinite calm sky? And what the meaning  
Of this vast solitude? And what am I?"*

## WHY RELIGION MATTERS

THE FATE OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT  
IN AN AGE OF DISBELIEF

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