Malhotra's "Going Beyond Religion"

By

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In light of the failure of the world's religion to achieve peace and human well-being in our world we must ask, "Must we now go beyond religion?" In a recent influential book, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*, the Dalai Lama, one of the most respected spiritual thinkers of our time, has answered this question with an emphatic "*YES.*" Though he is a religious man, indeed, a Buddhist monk, he argues that "our century needs an ethics that makes no recourse to religion and yet appeals to all faiths and those without any: *a secular ethics that will serve the inner needs of all humanity.*"

Inspired, in part, perhaps, by the Dalai Lama, Professor Malhotra has put together a very imaginative and interesting proposal for how proponents of established religions can deepen their understanding and practice, enabling them to go beyond religion. His paper, "Going Beyond Religion to Spiritual Dimension of Civilization," proposes ways of going beyond the teachings and practices of the major organized religions to a higher spirituality. Commitment to this higher, universal spirituality would make it possible to overcome the divisions and strife that have characterized the rivalries between religions, enabling human beings to live in peace and create a better world.

The main vehicle Malhotra proposes for this journey from religion to spirituality is interfaith dialog. Aware that conversations among the adherents of institutionalized religions, while they might lead to greater understanding and appreciation of other religions, are hardly likely to lead these adherents beyond religion to a universal ethical spirituality, Malhotra imagines them entering also into conversations with the founders of their religions. He also imagines the founders of the different religions entering into dialog with each other. Interesting as these imaginary dialogs are, they do not shed much light on why he and the Dalai Lama think it necessary to go beyond religion to achieve peace and a better world. What is it about religion that makes it necessary to go beyond?

Since Malhotra does not ask or answer the question, What is religion? let me propose a definition of what religion is, at its very core. What comparative study of the world's major religious traditions shows is that each has a concept of an ultimate sacred reality, a concept of a perfected life as the goal of religious activity, a concept

of a fundamental defectiveness, and a concept of special means, empowered by the ultimate sacred reality, for transforming defective into perfected life. In each tradition the religious person accepts that human life, as it is usually experienced, is defective in a fundamental way, but is convinced, usually through faith, that this defectiveness can be overcome and a perfect, or more perfect life can be achieved--either in this lifetime or in a future lifetime. The transformation of this defective life into a perfect life is made possible by means of sacred powers made available through a relationship with the ultimate sacred reality.

At the heart of every religion is the imperative to struggle to overcome the powerful forces that render this life and this world radically defective. It is in the struggle to overcome evil, often seen as the need to defeat and destroy the doers of evil, that religions become violent, sometimes intent on destroying each other. Indeed, frequently this struggle is cast in terms of cosmic warfare, providing a template for the religious wars that have killed many millions of people in the name of religion. Maybe this is why to achieve peace in the world it is necessary to go beyond religion. (For a fuller discussion, see my paper, "Religious Violence: A Philosophical Analysis," in Douglas Allen, ed., *Comparative Philosophy and Religion in Times of Terror.* Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006, pp. 1-18.)

And maybe it is necessary to go beyond religion to make the world a better place because in all of the religious traditions the various means of transforming defective into perfected existence are seen as empowered by being in the right personal relationship the ultimate sacred reality, making social well-being secondary.

Several things strike me about Malhotra's proposal. First, although his aim is to achieve an ethical spirituality that will guide peoples action, he begins with and emphasizes belief rather than conduct. Second, he takes the prophets to be founders of religions, even though these so-called founders, Krishna, Mahavira, Moses, Muhammad, Jesus, Laozi, and the Buddha, did not see themselves as founding new religious or spiritual movements. Indeed, they all saw themselves as continuing ancient spiritual traditions. Third, I am struck by the fact that everyone in these dialogs is male; there is no feminine voice to be heard. Perhaps a feminine voice would have seen action, rather than belief, to be of central concern to religion. If so, perhaps this imaginary dialog would have included conversations not only about violence and war, but about inequality and the oppression of the poor by the rich and powerful.

I also wonder if perhaps the conversations among these distinguished representatives of major religious traditions, the Hindu Shankaracharya, the Christian Pope, Jewish Rabbi, Muslim Ayatollah, Daoist Priest, would have taken a different

turn if representatives of other traditions, Indigenous, Atheist, Confucian, Shinto, Baha'i, etc., had been included and allowed to challenge the other major traditions.

I think that Malhotra's arguments for a "higher spirituality" that adherents of all the institutionalized religious traditions could accept would be strengthened by recognizing that the so-called founders did not see themselves as founding new religions but, rather, as continuing an older spiritual tradition. This would make it possible to look at how each of these great figures had interpreted and misinterpreted the tradition of which they were a part. They could then reflect on how they had revised and reformed their ancient spiritual tradition. These imaginary conversations between them could reveal the similarities and differences in their interpretations of the Eternal Way that each thought he was promulgating, thereby providing a basis for moving beyond these interpretations to a truly universal spirituality.

It is a bold and interesting move on Malhotra's part to call on religious thinkers to be more like scientific thinkers, open to evidence and non-dogmatic. But making Jesus an advocate of science is a problematic proposal. Since science is simply reason at work, this call to put science at the center of religion conflicts with the words Malhotra puts in the mouth of Krishna: "I want to convey to all of you that you have mistakenly given extraordinary emphasis to reason." Mistaken, no doubt, because all religions see faith and insight as accessing a deeper reality than reason. Yet how refreshing it would be if religious thinkers were to adopt the epistemological humility characteristic of the best scientific thinkers!