

Preface

WHAT HAVE I LEARNED from my lifelong study of religion in three continents? Is there a lesson that is relevant beyond my own field of study or outside academia? More specifically, if religion is a cause of global problems, operating at considerable human cost, can it also help solve these problems and limit the human cost?

My main argument is easily stated: soon after a religion is founded power mechanisms distort its original potential. Playfulness, in my view, is often closer to the religious founders' intentions. Play is religions' principal asset in their contribution to a sustainable world. Unfortunately, religious leaders are rarely aware of this. Someone needs to tell them. That is why I wrote this book.

Playfulness is also the crucial ingredient in my approach. In my writings so far I have followed standard academic norms, addressing my colleagues as readers; I now move beyond what might be termed scholarly style, adding personal experiences together with fiction and poetry. The book ends with a personal letter to the reader—not a common feature of academic work.

Moreover, this book is unlike others in that it is a practical application of the study of religion, a relatively new field. I want to recover what is best in religion, for the good of global society. In order to do this, I show how power interests have ignored the playful origins of religions, thereby subverting the latter from their primary goals. The consequences are frequently tragic.

I am thus very critical of the track record of religions. And yet this is not another atheist book. It addresses believers but also atheists of the Dawkins and Hitchens variety. I unashamedly call on them to look for what they have in common with believers, rather than reiterating the usual litany of contrasts.

RELIGION AT PLAY

I wrote this book with a wide readership in mind. It is intended more as a long essay, or a book-length manifesto, than as a strictly scholarly study of power and play in religion. That can be found in my other publications.

Please enroll in my course in religious playfulness!

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