**REVISITING RELIGION AND HUMANITY: AN INSIGHT**

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| **ABSTRACT**  In a world that is besieged with problems – personal, social and natural, of abuses, injustices, abject poverty, violence and conflicts - surely religion and the religious ought to do their part to help resolve these. To do so, it is necessary to revisit the understanding of religion, to understand religion in its comprehensive perspective, in its intra-personal and inter-personal dimensions. It is only through this comprehensive understanding that religion can assist to nurture the individuals to become wholesome personalities and to develop a society and a world order that are wholesome too, giving due rights and upholding responsibilities towards one and all, the human and the non-human existences. This article addresses these matters. |

**Religion in Perspective**

The history of religion is as old as the history of humanity itself. Many religions believe that the first human and the first human couple were beings who were created directly by God and as such, they knew God their Creator instantaneously, and were aware of His Might and Majesty, and therefore they worshiped Him instantly. Thus, for these religions, God and the human identity were clear at the very beginning of humanity, and also religion and religious identity were established from the very start of human history[[1]](#endnote-1). Even those religions that do not believe in the existence of a Creator God, nevertheless, still do believe that all human beings possess an inherent spirituality and have inborn inclination towards spirituality; thus, humans are regarded as *homo religious*.

Throughout its history, religion has taken many shapes and colors and has multiplied in numbers, and is understood and practiced in different ways. Likewise, religion has also been structured in various ways, has been translated into many forms and symbols, and has produced varieties of worldviews and thought patterns, has developed numerous value systems and behavioral patterns, and has given birth to great civilizations - civilizations which extend into contemporary times - coloring and impacting contemporary thought, values and tastes. As such, religion has not only helped develop humanity but it has also built and sustained civilizations throughout the ages, and therewith expanded human history.

Even so, the history of religion has not always been happy stories - this is a fact that cannot be denied. That some very atrocious acts and very gruesome incidences had taken place in the name of religion throughout human history - these surely cannot be underrated. However, in due fairness and objectivity, it need to be borne in mind that most, if not all of these misdeeds had actually been carried out against the very teachings and spirit of the religion, and in fact, are the very acts that are emphatically prohibited and even downright condemned by the religion - a point that ought not to be overlooked in assessing these ugly events and their connection to religion. Moreover, it should be noted also that such atrocities and horrendous acts have also been, and are still being committed in names other than religion too - ideology, nationalism, ethnicity, to name a few. In truth, it is not religion, nor ideologies nor nationalism, nor ethnicity that is the cause of such atrocities and destructiveness, of such zestful aggression and viciousness, but human failings. Even with no religious ardor, no ideological fanaticism, no national snobbery, no ethnic bigotry, such vicious and misled people can be just as brutal and sadistic to others, even to their very own families and communities, and in fact can even be as destructive to their own selves too, destroying themselves for whatever courses and ideals[[2]](#endnote-2).

Religion, all religions without exception, understands this well enough and as such, religion gives serious attention to the person, to the individual, by helping to nurture the person to become a good person, a person who is sound, happy, kind and industrious, who will be meaningful and productive not only to himself and his family, but also to society, and to all else. When individuals, who are the units and the rubrics of society, behave properly and contribute meaningfully to society, than the society will be stable, productive and prosperous. Thus, the social maxim of all religions is entrenched in the Confucian maxim of “Good individuals make good society”, and that a comfortable and wholesome individual brings comfort to others too. Understanding the shortcomings of human beings, religion therefore provides guidelines and injunctions to nurture individuals to become good persons, and even to transform the bad to become good, so that society will not suffer from the misbehavior and the bad acts of the individuals.

Along this line, religion comes up with roles and functions, rights and responsibilities, rules and regulations, and codes of behavior and ethics, to help develop and promote a healthy, decent and meaningful social relationship. Some religions even instruct the setting up of particular social institutions to help ensure that the individuals and society serve and relate to each other well and that injustice is not committed to either, be it to the individuals nor to the society. Moreover, this relationship and the guidelines on relationship with others are extended even to relationship with the non-human world, the world of the animals, of nature, the universe and all other existences - the sentient and the non-sentient beings, the visible and the non-visible, the supernatural and celestial existences. Religion therefore connects and relates everybody, everything and every being with one another, and religion indicates that all existences are interdependent upon each other, needing and supporting one another. Accordingly, every existence has positions and status, roles and functions, rights and responsibilities, and these are to be duly acknowledged, respected and conferred. Hence, in the eyes of religion, all existences are part of the holistic “Cosmic Structure of Existence”, so to say, and that everybody, everything and every being are all fellow members of this wholesome cosmic family.

These guidelines and injunctions on relationships, together with the other teachings of the religion formed the worldview and the thought patterns of the individual adherents and the religious communities, cultivating their sensitivities and sentiments, listing their priorities and preferences, forming their likes and dislikes. These worldviews and thought patterns in turn shape the value systems and behavioral patterns of the adherents and the religious community, listing out what are right and wrong, the permissible and prohibited, the acceptable and unacceptable, the good and the bad. The worldviews and thought patterns, together with the value systems and behavioral patterns develop into the culture of the religious community, and this culture ultimately translates itself into a civilization[[3]](#endnote-3).

Since each religion has its own sets of teachings, each religion therefore has its own worldviews and thought patterns and therefore also its own value systems and behavioral pattern and likewise, its own culture and civilization. As such, each religious community is religious in its own ways, and has its own sensitivities and sentiments, its own priorities and preferences, which can be quite different from those of another religious community. Thus, a religion and a religious community is a wholesome entity on its own, with its own unique identity and character. This being the case, each religion and religious community should therefore be comprehended within the context of the religion and the community. To read others from the perspective of one’s own religion and one’s own values, tantamount to a misreading of the religion and to the misunderstanding about the community. Not only is such understanding misguided, but it is also often prejudiced, personalized and at times even reflects bigotry, and there were times when these misunderstandings developed into inter-religious conflicts.

**Religion and the Individual**

Even so, despite the uniqueness of every religion, all religions are especially concern with the nurturing of the individuals, to guide the person to become a good and wholesome person. To begin with, all religions give definitions of what a human being is. Most religions, though not all, define human being as a being with body, soul and mind[[4]](#endnote-4). By this definition, a person therefore possesses the physical, the spiritual and the intellectual faculties. Moreover, religion emphasizes that all these faculties need to be duly attended to and no one faculty should be overlooked completely[[5]](#endnote-5). This is true even if some religions do give more attention to one or two of the faculties, such as giving more attention to the spiritual than to the physical and the intellectual faculties. In this case, the physical and the intellectual faculties are often groomed to uplift and strengthen the spiritual faculty. This is because, for these religions, the ultimate aspiration is to achieve spiritual perfection, and indeed, these religions understand religion as “spirituality” rather than as “religion”, i.e., to achieve a state of spiritual perfection rather than to the observances of forms and structures. On the other hand, other religions aim at grooming the individuals to become a person committed to his personal, family and social responsibilities, promoting a comfortable harmonious existence for one and all.

In general, the physical and intellectual developments of a person today are well attended to but not so with the spiritual development. As a result, there are people who suffer from the symptoms of a spiritual void, that is, a feeling of emptiness or hollowness in their inner being which can develop into states of restlessness and depression. To fill up this void, such persons may resort to external stimuli such as consuming drugs or alcohol, and may even adopt a hedonistic life-style with wild entertainments and dangerous thrills - all to pacify the feeling of emptiness and restlessness in them. However, all these are external and are artificial stimuli and they wear off fast and easily, leaving behind an even deeper void, a more intense feeling of emptiness, of loneliness and even of despair. In modern understanding, these symptoms are regarded as mental health syndromes and are often given psychiatric treatment.

In religion, these symptoms are regarded as psycho-spiritual symptoms, i.e. symptoms of spiritual dislocation, and these are addressed through inner or psycho-spiritual treatments, through the rituals and the rites, and through spiritual techniques of the religions. Hence, for the people of religion and spirituality, the spiritual need is attended to by linking up with Divinity and by performing the rituals and the spiritual exercises. Communicating with the Divine and performing the rituals pacify the spirit, and thus the person feels spiritually fulfilled as well as psychologically pacified. Rituals, rites and spiritual exercises of religions are therefore not mere mechanical actions and nor are they mere religious technicalities but they are actually the means through which the psycho-spiritual faculty of the person is developed and strengthened[[6]](#endnote-6). As such these rituals and spiritual activities need to be performed regularly, just like the physical[[7]](#endnote-7)and the intellectual [[8]](#endnote-8)activities of the person. When a person is spiritually fulfilled, psychologically balanced and physically comfortable, the person becomes a wholesome person. A wholesome person is comfortable with himself and with all others too, with the human as well as the non-human, and others are also comfortable with him.

All religions also regard human beings as possessing both positive and negative traits. The negative traits are not negative *per se* because these can be turned into positive traits which can produce positive results. Religion guides a person to turn the negative traits into positive traits, and some religions even guide a person to eradicate the negative traits altogether. Thus, for instance, the negative trait of anger can be transformed into positive energy, such as into passion to promote good courses and to fight injustice. If uncontrolled, anger is potentially destructive, to the person and to others too. Hence, in the ultimate, religion not only works to nurture a person to be a good person but also to assist a bad person, or a potentially bad person, to transform himself into a good person. The person will thus be at peace with himself and he will not be a menace or a threat to others. On the contrary, the person will be contributory and productive to himself, his family and to society, duly performing duties and responsibilities accordingly - personal duties as well as social responsibilities. In so doing, the person will be respected by others, and will gain place of dignity in the society.

**Religion and the Family**

So concern is religion with social life that some religions even make sure that certain social institutions which are fundamental to society be set up, and some religions even give precise directives and guidance on how these institutions should function. Among the most important social institutions is the family institution. This is because the family is a bridge between the individual and society, and also as an institution where family members get their training for their roles in society. Through the family, the individual is nurtured to be good and to be responsible, inculcated with commitments and values, groomed to be productive and contributory to society. Thus, if the family does its job well with the individual, society can get the best out of the person, but if the family fails to nurture the person to be good and responsible, then society will suffer through the person’s bad conduct and misbehavior. As such, the family is the determinative factor in molding the person to be who the person is, and what the person is.

In fact, the family institution is also profoundly important for the religion and for its civilization too because it is through the family institution that the religion is perpetuated and the religious community sustained. This is because, it is the family that nurtures faith and religion into the individuals, teaching them the religion, inculcating them with religious values, and training them on the rituals and rites, therewith developing their commitment towards the religion. Indeed, when the family institution collapses, the society will also collapse, and it will not be too long before the nation and the civilization too will collapse. This is because, as stated, the families are the units of the society, and if there is no order in the units of society, then there will be no order in the society as well. Without order, there can be no progress and advancement in the society, and thus no progress and advancement in the nation too. The same is true with a civilization; a civilization that does not advance and progress is a static civilization, on its way to become a dead civilization. Indeed, so important is the family institution in all religions that all religions make the family institution sacrosanct.

The importance of the family for the individual starts with the fact that the family is the platform through which a person comes into this world, and the family is therefore the person’s first friends and first teachers. On top of that, the person gets genuine love and sincere affection from the family, as well as unconditional care and support, and it is also the family that helps the person along in life and motives the person in his and her aspirations and ambitions. Indeed, a stable, healthy, and harmonious family life makes a person strong, comfortable, confident and happy, therewith enabling the person to grow and develop wholesomely and to lead a wholesome and fulfilling life too. However, all these are only possible if the family is in good order, cohesive, healthy and sound. But if the family is in a state of chaos, of betrayals and misconduct, then the family will be in turmoil and becomes a problem and a pain rather than a comfort and a support, breeding hatred and vindictiveness between family members rather than cultivating love and affection. Thus, it is the family that makes and unmakes a person.

Hence, all religions therefore condemn in the strongest terms all forms of extra-marital activities and all forms of immoral behavior which will disrupt and jeopardize family life. These condemned sexual misbehaviors often led to complications in family life and normally result in unhappy and even tragic endings. Families are broken up because of such misconducts and when family life is broken up, the children are displaced and become disoriented. They will therefore not get the proper care and upbringing which are necessary for them to become successful and productive individuals, contributing to society. Thus, such misconducts by spouses not only destroy the family and the lives of the children but also create problems for society. Even worse, such immoral acts have also resulted in the begetting of children outside wedlock who are usually either aborted, or adopted, or are even abandoned. Often these abandoned children become street children and the plight of these children is heartrending, to say the least about them[[9]](#endnote-9). As such, religion cut off all possibilities leading to such a situation by strictly and emphatically prohibiting and condemning all sexual misconduct and other forms of immoralities, of adultery and fornication, of extra-marital relationship.

Such is the importance of family life and the family institution that almost all religions specify rights, roles and responsibilities of each family member as well as give precise guidelines on how they should relate and behave towards one another – husband-wife, parents-children, brothers-sisters, grandparents, in-laws, etc. Likewise, religion also balances up roles and responsibilities for social life, distributing and complementing the roles and responsibilities between man and woman. Thus, religion makes the men more responsible for society and the women more responsible for the family. However, this is only a general rule and when it is possible to be so. Religion in no way prohibits women from being active in social life, nor disallows men from undertaking domestic works. Indeed, all prophets and founders of religion, though men they all were, were also doing household chores, and likewise, some of the female members of their households were also actively involved in social works and activities, even holding professional and leadership positions.

The family institution starts with the marriage, and marriage is as much a personal and family matter as it is also a society matter. To start with, all religions lay out procedures for formalizing marriages, and some religions also include betrothal or engagement as part of the marriage procedures. The fact that all religions insist on the presence of family members and other witnesses in the formalizing of the marriage, enhances the fact that marriage is as much a personal and a family matter as it is also a society’s affair. The marriage is not only an endorsement of the couple’s status as man and wife, and their position in the family but it is also an acknowledgement and acceptance by society of their relationship. Even more profound, the marriage warrants commitment from the man to look after and be responsible for his family, otherwise he may leave them and the woman will have to take of everything. The marriage certificate also acts as security to both partners should things go amiss, such as in the event of the death of one partner, or of divorces. The marriage certificate ensures that the bereaved partner got what are duly his or hers. Thus, all divorces, like marriages, must also be formal and all parties are to be given their due rights accordingly.

Interestingly, almost all religions make the husband as the head of the family and the main provider for the family. This is to give responsibilities and commitments to the man of the house and to make him accountable for looking after the whole family; in brief, to tie him to the family, so to speak. This is very important because whereas the relationship between the mother and the children is obvious, the relationship between the father and the children is not so obvious, i.e., the mother carries the child in her womb whereas the father’s connection with what he begot is not naturally obvious. Without legally sanctioning the man in marriage to the wife and to the children, he could easily walk away from them[[10]](#endnote-10).As for the man, the marriage contract ensures him of his position and part in the family and that he can feel assured of their love and affection, their care, attention and support for him. Thus, when religion makes the husband and father as the head and the main provider of the family, religion also gives him a place of respect in the family and so he feels appreciated and cherished, and feels that he belongs to the family, and thus takes pride and joy in the wellbeing and development of the family.

The most important family responsibility is the care and support of the children. When an infant is born into this world, the infant is born helpless, weak and dependent on other people for everything. This situation continues throughout childhood. When the child becomes a teenager, the needs may change but the care and support are still as necessary. Without such attention, care and support, it is very difficult for a child to survive in this world, let alone live a normal life. It is also in the context of such need for attention, care and support, of love and affection, that all religions encourage their adherents to give due care, attention and support to orphans who have lost their parents and thus also lost their means of care and support, and religions promise that kindness to orphans will receive great merits.

All religions also make the family responsible for their elderly members, particularly their parents and grandparents - to love, care, cherish, honor and appreciate them dearly. Indeed, everybody is what their parents and elders have made them to be, parents and elders who have many times sacrificed their own personal needs and may have also forgone their own dreams to give priority to the needs of their loved ones who they cherish more than their very own selves. The least the children can do is to return that love and care to their elderly parents and their aging elders. Thus, all religions, all religions without exception, mandate upon their adherents to care and cherish their parents and elders as they do for their children. As everyone has been young, so will all be old too; and indeed, age is a certainty where none can escape. Thus, the essence of family life is love, care, concern, support, sharing, kindness and even sacrifices whenever required. And these are given and received with sincerity and without any condition. Indeed, a happy home makes a person as an unhappy home unmakes a person. Thus, good family makes good individuals and good individuals make a good society.

**Religion and Society**

Thus the individual, the family and society are all interwoven together, each affecting and influencing the other. As religion protects society from bad, misbehaving individuals and irresponsible families, religion also protects the individuals and the families from an unjust, oppressive, or overbearing society. All religions therefore give injunctions, rules and guidelines on social conduct, on how people should behave and relate to one another. These injunctions, rules and guidelines specify what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and unacceptable, proper and improper conduct. Some religions also classify these acts into righteous and moral acts, and sinful and immoral acts. Some of these injunctions are also incorporated into the laws of the country, and with that, people are also made legally responsible and accountable for their acts and behavior. In the form of laws, legal measures can be taken on those who commit the wrongful and unacceptable social acts, and those who create problems for others. As for the religious sanctions, these come in the forms of retributions, in this world as well as in the Afterlife. Thus, the doctrine of retributions of religions, where good conduct will be rewarded and bad conduct will be penalized, be this in the form of Paradise and Hell or of Rebirths, are therefore religious mechanism to ensure proper behavior.

It is enlightening to see that certain injunctions are common across all the religions and this is despite the differences in faith matters. Among the universally condemned acts across all the religions are murder, adultery, theft, cheating, and slandering. Moreover, these acts are not only wrong and therefore are sinful acts in the eyes of religion, but these acts are also universally classified as unlawful acts by all civilized nations with punishments and penalties duly imposed on those who commit them. These acts not only hurt the victimized person, but they are also very problematic for the society as a whole. Some religions, in particular Islam, Buddhism and Sikhism, also prohibit the consuming of intoxicants, such as alcohol and drugs. The effects of intoxication and addiction upon the individual, the family and society are too well known to need elaboration here.

Regarding social life as a whole, religion is generally on the side of the weak and the less fortunate and takes measures to protect such people from the cruel, the evil, the vicious, the opportunist, and the irresponsible members of the human species. Thus, religion makes all forms of abuses, oppressions and victimizations wrong and sinful. Even so, religion also warns the good and the innocent not to tempt and provoke the worst in human nature. Because once provoked, a person may lose control of him or herself and may end up by doing horrible things, even perhaps against his or her intention. In other words, everyone has the responsibility to behave properly and to act decently. With regard to the less fortunate in society, the disabled, the needy and the poor, again all religions encourage their adherents to help them out. Indeed, all religions give very high regard for kindness and charity works. In fact, in some religions, helping out the poor and the less fortunate is made obligatory upon every adherent through a formal institution, based on the principle that in the wealth of the rich there is the rights of the poor[[11]](#endnote-11). As it is obligatory upon the individual adherents to help the needy and the less fortunate, so also it is also necessary upon the community, and likewise, upon the government to help these unfortunate people out too. Religion considers people not only as mere individuals but also as part of a team, a group or as a holistic community, making members of the group or community look after each other. Thus, all religions teach compassion and insist upon kindness to one another, and therewith endear and bind members of the community to each together. With that, the less fortunate are assisted, the rich becomes more humble, more caring and sharing, and the society become more harmonious and becomes more stable.

This interdependency is also profound in the performances of many of the rites and rituals. Rites are religious performances which are generally a one-time performance or a non-repetitive performance and many of these require the involvement of other people - family, friends, the community – such as in birth, initiation and funeral rites. Rites make the individuals dependent upon others and thus building a bond between the individuals and others. Rituals, on the other hand, are repetitive performances and are usually performed individually such as prayers and meditation. Even so, there are also rituals that are communal in nature where the whole community observes or celebrates them, such as the religious festivals and the holy days which are observed annually. The religious festivals bring joy and fun into a religion; therewith making religion not only all seriousness and austerity but also lively and merry. Moreover, the festivals and celebrations also reflect the socio-cultural identity of the religion. This is because during the festivities, other than the special prayers and offerings, the religious and traditional clothes are put on and the special festive cuisines are served. As such, these religious festivals bring the religious community together, cementing up solidarity among them, bonding them up and so they identify together as one unit. Therefore, although religious festivals are part of the rituals of the religion and are festive and celebrative in nature, they also serve socio-political purposes, inculcating the community with a spirit of togetherness, and binding the adherents into an identity of their own.

As the individual is dependent upon society to fulfill his and her life and religion, the society is likewise dependent upon the individuals in order for it to become a stable, healthy, harmonious and prosperous society. As such, religion entrusted upon the individual adherents to do their own personal bit for society. In fact, in some religions, religious life is social life and social life is religious life, and a person is not considered religious or righteous if the person neglects his or her duties towards society[[12]](#endnote-12). Even in those religion that focuses on spiritual purity and personal salvation where social duties are not the main concern, nevertheless the adherents also do care for others under their concepts of compassion and helping other people[[13]](#endnote-13).

For those religions that are as concern about society as it does about the individuals, the issues of rights and justice are given a serious attention. For these religions, justice is regarded as a Divine Mandate and as such, it ought to be applied universally, not selectively and not randomly, and justice cannot be personalized nor communalized nor nationalized. This is because God is the God of one and all and therefore justice should be applied equally to one and all of His creatures too. To be unjust to someone or to some creatures, tantamount to being unjust to the creatures of God; and in the final analysis, this is an injustice and disrespect to what are His, and as such to Him too. Moreover, injustice will lead to retaliations and revenges, and retaliations and revenges are often unjust too. This is because retaliations and revenges, being carried out in anger and rage, are often carried out randomly and indiscriminately, not particularly targeting those who had committed the wrong; and the result is often the hurting of other innocent people. This leads to another act of victimization and another group of victims. These new victimized people will also respond with further retaliations and thus more injustices will be committed, and eventually a vicious cycle of retaliations develops. This, indeed, is the unhappy scenario across the globe today, a vicious cycle of inter-personal, inter-communal and international retaliations and revenges; and all mainly because injustice has been committed and also because justice is not commonly and universally applied, but is carried out selectively, often in favor of favored groups or powerful nations[[14]](#endnote-14).

Moreover, all wrongs should not only be addressed but that they should also be addressed fast, before the affected parties despair and resort to retaliations and revenges. As stated, when retaliations and revenges have spiraled out of control, the situation develops into a vicious cycle of insane hatred and horrible violence which never seems to end. In such a complex situation, and to end the vicious cycles of retaliations, revenges and violence, religion advises and entreats upon the injured parties to forgive, and religion promises great reward to the forgiving party. Justice, reparations and forgiveness are therefore the ways of religion to stop on-going violence and retaliations. Forgiveness in particular is a closure to pain, anger, bitterness and hatred, and as such, forgiveness not only ends the chain of retaliations but forgiveness also ends the on-going suffering of the victimized.

Moreover, justice should not be regarded as an inter-personal matter only, in that it only relates to relationship between people. In truth, justice is also an intra-personal matter because a person can also be unjust to himself or to herself. This intra-personal injustice happens when the person does not give due attention to all his or her needs as highlighted earlier, namely the person’s physical, spiritual and intellectual needs, and this may result in a state of psycho-spiritual imbalance. As illustrated earlier, this imbalance can lead to a state of disorientation and depression, and the related syndromes. If the depression becomes very severe, the person may even resort to acts of self-annihilation, such as self-mortification and suicide. Moreover, a disoriented and depressed person may even commit acts of aggression, hurting or even killing others, as seen in the rampages and random killings that have taken place in some societies. Thus intra-personal injustice may lead to inter-personal injustice, and that a person who is hurting may also hurt others unwittingly. Hence, injustice can be intra-personal as well as inter-personal, and religion gives guidelines on how to prevent both. Religion therefore stresses on comprehensive wellbeing and holistic living – a balanced and wholesome individual, a loving and supportive family, and a just and stable society. Likewise, as rights and dignity are important in religion, so also are duties and responsibilities – duties and responsibilities to oneself, to the family, to society and also to all other existences, therewith ensuring that the Cosmic Structure of Existence is duly maintained so that existence for all can go on healthily.

**Religion and Other Existences**

The Cosmic Structure of Existence, as discussed earlier, embraces all there is of existences – humans, animals, nature, earth, the universe, the supernatural, the celestial, the sentient and the non-sentient, the visible and the non-visible - linking all these up in a state of natural interconnectedness and harmonious interdependency. In this Cosmic Structure, everybody, everything and every being have their own ordained positions and status, their roles and functions, and their rights and responsibilities which are innate and natural to them[[15]](#endnote-15). Moreover, these positions and status, roles and functions, rights and responsibilities, cannot be juxtaposed among the existences.

Thus, the moon, for example, is set in her own ordained position, orbiting in her own orbit, encircling the earth and reflecting the light of the sun to earth at night. The moon cannot exchange position with the sun or with earth, for instance, and likewise cannot function as the sun or as the earth; hence her position and status, and her roles, functions and responsibilities are set and are exclusively hers; so also are her rights too, namely, her rights to be as she is, and these should not therefore be exploited and damaged by human curiosity and greed[[16]](#endnote-16). If her position is tampered with, she will not be able to function as she should and this will have serious repercussions on human life and that of the other existences too, as what is happening today on earth with the world of nature and the eco-system. The same is true with regard to the other existences too. Hence humans can only live and function as human beings and cannot live and function like any other species, for instance. Even the seasons are set with each season functioning and contributing as only that season can and should.

Sadly, the rights of the non-human existences on earth are often disregarded. In fact, that nature too has rights seems laughable to many today. This is partly because, unlike their positions, status, roles and functions which are expounded by the sciences, their rights however are not so obvious and as such is not properly acknowledged, let alone respected and sustained. Thus, it is not surprising therefore that nature’s rights have been ignored and she is exploited so extensively, so much so that the eco-system has now become so badly damaged. As a result, nature today cannot perform her roles properly and cannot function as she used to before; and this is resulting in the unnatural natural disasters that are abound today. As pointed earlier, when rights are deprived, it becomes an injustice, and all injustices lead to retaliations and revenges. And now the world of nature is retaliating against humans for their irresponsible and destructive acts upon her.

Also, in general, humans too are not quite well aware of their kinship with nature and with all the other non-human existences. In fact, the general tendency is that humans think themselves above the world of nature rather than as part of it. It is true that most religions regard human beings as the crown of creations i.e., as the best of the existences. What makes humans the best of creations is their ability to think and through this thinking faculty they can create and develop. Thus, although humans are not the strongest of animals, they can control the animals, although they have no wings, they can take to the air, and although they have no gills and no fins, they can stay in water. This status of being the best of creations is however, both a privilege as well as a responsibility. Religion understands that the ability of humans to create includes also their ability to destroy. Hence, as elaborated earlier, religion aims at promoting the best in humans and curbing their worst, that humans should be a benefit to all existences and not a curse. In the case of relationship with the other creatures and nature, religion makes humans their custodians and administrators, and mandates upon humans to befriend them, not to extinguish them. As such, although humans can use the animals and nature for their purposes, this however, should be a usage with care and respect, with responsibility and accountability[[17]](#endnote-17).

Human beings, as the crown of creation, are indeed able to do so much, able to even exploit whatever and whoever for their interests and purposes. Coupled with this ability, humans are also given freewill, to wit, the freedom to choose what to do and what to be. Even so, although humans have the ability to do whatever and have the freedom to do whatever, they however, do not have the right to do whatever. This is because if humans do wrong, they are made accountable for that wrong act and will be penalized accordingly in their next life, be this in the form of the Hereafter or as a rebirth. The religious concept of retributions therefore is a check upon the misuse of freedom and all kinds of misbehavior. As such, the religious concept of freewill means that although human beings have the ability to do whatever and have the freedom to choose to do whatever, they however, do not have the right to do wrong. Because of this, all religions make life and living a responsibility, and thus all human beings are accountable for the way they live and for the choices they make. Sadly today, the emphasis is mostly on rights but not as much attention and concern is given to responsibilities.

**Religion, Life and Death**

For those religions that believe in God as the Creator of all existences, the relationship and the interconnectedness of the existences go even further, i.e. to God also. For these religions, God is at the centre of this Cosmic Structure of Existence and that every existence, as they are interconnected and interdependent upon each other, each is also connected and dependent on God, their Creator[[18]](#endnote-18). Moreover, for these religions, not only is God the Creator and is the centre of all existences, He is also the Creator and the centre of all there ever was and all that ever will be - past, present and future; as all has come from Him, so will all return to Him – human as well as the non-human existences. As such, these religions are therefore as concern with the past and future lives as they are concern with the present one.

The life before is presented as the Here-before, and the life after as the Hereafter. Because the lives and the realms of the Here-before and the Hereafter are not visible to the human eyes, these are accordingly explained by the religions[[19]](#endnote-19).With regard to the Here-before, of particular importance is the creation of humans, namely how and why they were created because these explanations give their identity and nature, and also their positions and status, their roles and functions, their rights and responsibilities – all of which are necessary for humans to know in order to live, to behave and to function appropriately. With regard to the Hereafter, this is usually explained in the context of retributions, with humans either ending in Paradise, the realms of all goodness and happiness, or in Hell, the realm of punishments and suffering, as they rightly deserve according to how they had lived on earth. In fact, even those religions that do not believe in the concept of the Creator God do also believe in the interconnectedness between this life and the next life. Thus, for these religions, death is also as real as life is, and life after death is as real as this life too[[20]](#endnote-20).

Indeed, death is a reality too real to ignore; in fact, death is a certainty. Because of this, death therefore needs to be understood. Without religion, how is death to be understood? Is death the end of life and the end of living - an extinction of all that ever exists and will ever exist? If death means the end of life and the end of living, it means therefore that with death, everything will expire into nothingness. Thus this life, in the ultimate, will amount to nothing more than just a matter of much ado about nothing - meaningless. If this is so, then what is the point of all the hard work, of aspiring to reach somewhere and to become somebody, or of acquiring so much wealth, etc., if in the end nothing remains? In fact, when life is going and death is approaching, a person may well ask– what now?

If, however, death is not the end of life and not the end of living, then this life will not be meaningless; this life in fact will be meaningful, very meaningful indeed. If death means the extension of this life and the beginning of another form of living, it therefore means that all that have been acquired in this life will be extended into the next life in one form or another; thus nothing is wasted at all. This, in fact, is how religion explains life and death – that death is not the end of life but is the extension of this life and the beginning of another form of life and another way of living. As such, this life should not be wasted but should be lived properly so that life after death will be good. In other words, this life prepares the person for his next life; and when religion talks about death, it is actually giving meaning to this life.

Not only does religion explains what life and death are all about, and the connection between the two, but religion also gives portrayals of what life and living after death is like.[[21]](#endnote-21) These portrayals are necessary if a person is to understand where he is heading to. The more the place is known, the more assured the person is about going there, namely Paradise or Hell, or, in the case of rebirth, a better rebirth or a lower rebirth. The person will also want to know how to get to that place, to make the proper preparations and to make the appropriate choices[[22]](#endnote-22). Basically, upholding the teachings of the religion will bring the person to the better place and going against the teachings of the religion will lead the person to the worse place, as explained in the doctrines of retributions of the religions.

The doctrines of retributions specifies that the state of the person’s next life depends on how the person lives in this present life, i.e., the person will reap in the next life whatever he has sown in this present one, so to speak. In this context, a person can therefore determine where and how he wants to be in his next life. The doctrine of retributions therefore keeps the person always conscious of his conduct and activities, understanding that these have bearings on his next life. As such, the doctrine of retributions is also a religious mechanism for discipline – for personal and social discipline.

**Religion Today**

Despite the fact that the modern world seems to have marginalized religion, to many, especially in the East, religion is as serious a matter today as it was in the past, and is as relevant to everyday living as it was before. In fact, even in the post-modern world of the West today, religion is making a serious come back, even if many of the religious and spiritual-minded prefer to be selective in the practice of their religion, or even convert into another religion which they can better relate to. Some of these people even combine the teachings of the various religions, coming up with new religions that they feel are more contemporary and relevant to their own needs and moods. However, for religion to be really functional and effective in contemporary life, it needs to be comprehended and applied in its comprehensive context.

To begin with, religion is not just beliefs and rituals, not just theologies and doctrines. It needs to be understood that religion has the faith dimension and the social dimension, the intra-personal dimension as well as the inter-personal dimension. Religion therefore nurtures both the individual as well as the society. Amidst the mounting social problems worldwide, it is only appropriate that religion be given a chance to help do its bit to resolve these humanitarian crises. Religion stands a good chance to do so because religion is not restricted by borders and boundaries; on the contrary, all religions transcend all borders be this national, ideological, political, racial, cultural, linguistic, geographical, and whatever else that humanity has developed to divide against each other. Indeed, in the face of all these social problems, more than ever before, all people of faith and conscience should come forward and center-stage to do their bit to help resolve these crises for indeed, it is their religious duty to do so, their calling. In truth, the problems and sufferings across the globe today do not so much as reflect the success and triumph of the bad and evil but are more so the testimonies of the failures of the good and the conscientious to affect goodness into society. A review of attitude is certainly needed, and in fact is urgently needed to be undertaken by all, by the religious as well as by the non-religious – for the sake of humanity and in the name of all that is humane.

1. This is the view of religion. Sociology however sees religion as an evolutionary process developed out of human fear of the forces of nature. Sociology believes that to pacify and to lessen the effect of wrathful nature on humans, these humans started to worship the elements of nature and subsequently to the worship of the powers behind these elements, which ultimately are called “gods”. The worship of the numerous gods of nature, evolved into the worship of the one God who is supreme among these gods. In the sociological perception of religion, ultimately the belief will be that there is no God whatsoever , i.e., when the fear and the need for God are no longer felt. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The suicide bombers, for instance [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In brief: Religion sets the faith items which produce the worldviews and thought patterns, which develop the value systems and behavioral patterns ,which are translated into culture and this culture is ultimately built into civilization. (Religion -> faith items -> worldviews and thought patterns -> value systems and behavioral patterns -> culture -> civilization) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Buddhism does not believe in the body, soul and mind components but believes that a human being is made up of 5 Aggregates (*skandhas*). Also, Buddhism does not believe in existence of the soul (*anatta*). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Some religions consider the soul and mind, or the spiritual and intellectual as one entity, thus a human being is composed of body and spirit, or the physical and the spiritual [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Thus, rituals and spiritual exercises are not for God but are for human beings; human beings need the rituals and the spiritual exercises for their psycho-spiritual strength and stability, whereas God has no need for anything; whether God is worshipped or not, God is still God. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Physical activities for physical needs such as eating, drinking, sleeping, etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Intellectual activities such as thinking, learning, talking, etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See the documentary film on “Our Children in the Streets of Cotabato” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Unfortunately, this in fact is what is happening in some societies where marriage and the family institution are no longer cherished and seriously upheld. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In Islam it is the *zakat* institution and in Sikhism, it is the *sewa*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For example, Islam and Sikhism [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For example Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The United Nations is reflective of this practice as also the double standards of the superpowers. When the superpowers kill innocent civilians in wars these victims are written off as “collateral damages”. However, the families of these victims do not regard these as “collateral damages” but as the brutal killing of their loved ones, and so some of them take to revenges and retaliations, and some bring these across the globe; thus the chaos and violence worldwide today. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In modern science these are referred to as the law of physics, law of chemistry, the biological laws etc. In religion, these are called as the laws of God or the laws of nature [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Human interference with the universe is already underway and human-made objects are already floating in the universe. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Such is the close association between humans and nature through the eyes of religion that many temples, monasteries and retreats are set in the wilderness amidst virgin forests and natural landscapes. Thus, humans not only get their physical sustenance from nature but they also get spiritual sustenance and comfort from nature too. It is not surprising that earth is often referred to as “Mother Earth”. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. However, God is not dependent on anybody, or on anything, or on any being. This is because God is the one who created all these and as such is above all of them. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Some religions explain this briefly whereas some others give elaborations. The life and the world before the present one is presented in the narratives of creation, whereas the life and the world after this are portrayed in the descriptions of the Hereafter, of Paradise and Hell. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Many of these religions believe in the doctrine of Rebirths. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Some religions give vivid and elaborate portrayals whereas others are very brief and some even with no elaboration except living in a different form. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This is true in this life too, i.e., a person will want to know about a new place he is going to and how to get there. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)