

Religion and Democracy
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Human beings, "homo sapiens," are thinking creatures. Unlike animals, who live in the moment and are guided by instinct, human beings think about the past and speculate about the future. When something happens that we cannot explain factually, we spin stories to explain causes. T

The volcano erupts, and we do not know why, therefore we imagine that there are angry super-beings, gods, who are angry. We also imagine defenses against such frightening events: throw a virgin maiden into the volcano and the gods will be pacified. The volcano ends its eruption, thus the remedy worked.

Religion has always been with us because we cannot fathom why dreadful things happen to us: deformed babies, death, famines, plagues, earthquakes, floods, fires, and other horrors that do not seem to stem from human behavior. Why do good people get cancer? Where do dead people go after dying?

All of these things are the realm of religion. Religion attempts to imagine divine power and targets human behavior deserving divine punishment. It also proposes a remedy: obedience to a code of laws supposedly mandated by god (or gods), and submission to authorities who promote this code. This obedience began to fray when human beings sought answers based on facts.

The Scientific Revolution was a series of events that marked the emergence of modern science during the early modern period, when developments in mathematics, physics, astronomy, biology and chemistry transformed the views of society about nature. It began in Europe in 1543, when the telescope was invented. The planets could be clearly seen, eliminating the need for imagining divine beings. The earth was no longer seen as flat. Modern sciences had their beginnings then, and knowledge collected until in 1687, the "age of Enlightenment" began.

Enlightenment did not eliminate religion, however, which continued to wield power and damage, resulting in religious wars, violent retributions such as Inquisitions, forced conversions, and several centuries of chaos and human misery.

Religion itself is divided into two sorts of practice: Conservative, which attempts to keep power unchanging, and Reform, which values community, compassion, and acceptance of science replacing mythology. Out of such reform in Christianity (Protest) came the roots of democracy: communities governed by their members, including women, and leadership no longer monopolized by men.

A British colony in North America revolted against England and won its independence as the United States. A group of Enlightenment educated men organized to create a new kind of nation, a republic governed under rule of law. Gone were the traditional ruling powers: hereditary monarchies or powerful religious authorities, in this new world.

Public schools were opened to provide an educated electorate that would select their own power-limited authorities. Regular elections would see to that, and term limits would protect against abusers of power, except for certain judges who would have life tenure. (The wisdom of this is being questioned today.)

Religion was not included in governance, but the continued belief in God provided the provision that virtue could be assured by taking an oath to speak truth in court and guarantee obedience to duty and honor in governing.

Democracy obviously depends on reformed, liberal religion. The traditional, orthodox religions are now pushing back. They have joined forces with those political systems that defy democracy by returning to authoritarianism.

Modern dictatorships promote male power, as do conservative religions. They join forces to deprive women from equality, promote conspiracy theories, and find scapegoats to blame for all imagined offences. "Rule of law" is replaced by "divide and conquer." Even modern democracies are not exempt from the chaos of these revisionist challenges.

Even the Vatican, governed by a moderately reforming pope, is in an incipient revolt by the old guard male establishment. In the Protestant world, reformist sects that recognize women leaders are challenged by fundamentalist "White Supremacists," men

willing to kill for their beliefs.

Israel, founded by liberal Judaism, is facing challenges to their democracy by an autocratic leader, Netanyahu, and ultraorthodox religious cults. Unimaginable civil conflict is a reality.

But there is hope. Fundamentalist religion, the enemy of both women and democracy, is losing adherents. Revolt is global and growing.

685 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That? Contact her at Lfarhat102@gmail.com or www.globalthink.net.