

## LIFE AND WELL-BEING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

31ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## Being in God's image



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Today's readings: Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 5-10; Psalm 131:1, 2, 3; 1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13; Matthew 23:9b, 10b; Matthew 23:1-12

Reza Aslan's controversial *God: A Human History* (2017) explores the idea that humans throughout the ages fashioned God in their image, rather than the other way around as claimed by the Judeo-Christian tradition. The author, a Shi'ite convert to Evangelical Christianity who reverted back to Islam, is an Iranian-American professor of creative writing at the UC Riverside and scholar in sociology of religion.

Aslan dissects forms of religious beliefs to show that the gods of history are a mirror image of humans. Humanity in its pursuit to union with the

divine, projects its own image and amplifies it on one or more super beings. Aslan argues that the way forward for humanity is to adopt pantheism, where everything and everyone is divine, irrespective of belief or lack of it thereof. This will finally enable us to reach divine union and live in harmony even on an ecological and environmental level.

The book reflects perhaps the author's mystical sensibility as a Shi'ite journeying to and from Islam to Evangelical Christianity and back, grappling with divine ineffability and unknowability on the one hand, and Biblical and/or Quranic literalism on the other. Aslan himself discloses: "I have spent most of my spiritual life trying to bridge the chasm that I imagined exists between God and me, either through faith or scholarship or some combination of the two."

The history of religions is God's history as much as it is human, where one cannot fathom images and forms shaping the subjective impact of divine objectivity. Key to a balanced perspective – at

least from a Catholic stance – is to preserve the subjective and the objective altogether. The polarising 'either-or' humbly makes way to a 'both-and' approach. God is thus perceived as both transcendent and immanent. Images and forms are tools to be used in our religious and spiritual journeys towards human-divine union. Here, mystics come to our assistance with their experience and teachings, distancing us from psychologisms, sociologisms, biologisms and spiritualisms.

Today's liturgy faces us with images and concepts of a "great king", a caring "nursing mother", a "father", a "teacher", and a "master" in relation to God and religious authority. These convey something of God enabling us to tangibly connect with divine revelation. Jesus points out to instances where these images go terribly wrong, failing to be pointers towards transcendence, becoming instead self-referential and egocentric tools for the exploit and the control of others.

Distorted images of God are always abusive and cause irrepara-

ble damage to individual and collective humanity. Jesus advocates the virtue of humility where one, to use the Apostle's designations, shares the good news coming from God with caring gentleness, by sharing one's life with others through thick and thin for the good and benefit of all.

In acknowledging God as the 'Divine Other' drawing us to transcend ourselves in a personal encounter, we discover others as brothers and sisters, sharers of the one and the same humanity, journeying together the same path of life. They too impel us to go beyond ourselves and our egotistic tendencies and needs.

By acknowledging and appreciating what unites us – our common humanity – we can in hope move to a more harmonious co-existence and a holistic ecological sensitivity. The Christian Good News rests on the premise that human nature is fundamentally good and blessed and that the invisible God became visible assuming our humanity.

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## The logic of Cain



KLAUS VELLA BARDON

The horrendous news emanating from Gaza as people face an unbelievable human catastrophe of epic proportions, fills us with great sadness and feelings of helplessness.

As believers in a loving God, when one views the atrocities that human beings can inflict on each other, one cannot but cry out: "Where is God in all this?"

Atheists will be only too ready to remind us that belief in God and religion is at the root of this orgy of hatred and violence. They conveniently airbrush out of their memory the horrors of WWII unleashed by the ideologies of Nazism and its counterpart communism that were anything but theistic.

One indulges in hatred so easily. Very often, we do not bother to seek reconciliation with people we strongly detest and disagree with.

Some people seem blessed with apparent perfect equanimity and feel no ill feelings about anyone or anything. Yet, on closer examination, for the vast majority, such serenity is the result of total indifference of other people and events so long as these do not impinge on their apparent highly protected and secure life.

For those who claim to be Christian, such an attitude is anathema. We are called to be aware, concerned, and wherever possible, involved. To see injustice and suffering and walk away, lies at the core of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In no uncertain terms, indifference and egoism are condemned.

In the face of the tragedy of war, violence and hatred, we have to take a stand. We must appeal for outrageous injustices to be exposed, condemned and every effort should be made to address them.

Political expediency often demands public opinion to blindly take sides, or to conveniently avoid looking at the stark facts dispassionately. But when we look at the wounds inflicted over the centuries on so many communities in so many ways, we may ask ourselves: "Is there hope, is there a way out? Can we live together in harmony?" Logic answers us with a resounding 'No'.

Security is the logic that leads to the frightful arms race that drains the economies of so many nations, especially of those who can least afford it. Such resources should go towards education, health services and empowering the disadvantaged. Above all, we should seek out reconciliation and avoid the trap of the blame game and nurturing resentment which are so easily indulged in.

In the tragic drama unfolding in Gaza one must pray and hope for such a miracle. Contrary to what people think, this has happened. Desmond Tutu, the South African who championed the fight against the evil of



A bloody handprint inside a house at the Nir-Oz kibbutz near the Gaza Strip. PHOTO: GIL COHEN-MAGEN/AFP

apartheid, was exemplary in promoting and upholding reconciliation. His 'Lord Longford lecture' deserves being revisited.

In the case of the tragedy between Israelis and Palestinians we can access the heart-rending witness of the Gazan gynaecologist and obstetrician, Izzeldin Abuclaish, who lost three of his daughters in an Israeli bombing raid, and that of Judea Pearl, the father of the slain Jewish journalist Daniel.

In both cases these men sent us a powerful message that reconciliation is possible. They are not alone in peace building. Their courageous witness underscores that the logic of Cain is not the answer.

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## QUOTES &amp; NEWS

## Women deacons

In an interview with the National Catholic Reporter, Cardinal Robert McElroy answered a question about ordaining women deacons:

"I think [in the synod] was a lot of feeling that [the diaconate] should be focused not on liturgical things, as much as on serving the poor and the marginalised. So do we need to reimagine the diaconate as a whole?"

"The question looked much different to a lot of us after. Now, I'm in favour of having women as deacons as it is presently, but there may be a pathway here that would be very promising that would, I think, invigorate in many important ways the diaconate as a whole and perhaps provide a pathway."

## Cry of the world

Pope Francis concluded the first session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops with a mass in St Peter's Basilica last Sunday. The following is an extract from the homily:

"There can be no true religious experience that is deaf to the cry of the world. There is no love of God without care and concern for our neighbour; otherwise, we risk becoming pharisaic. We may have plenty of good ideas on how to reform the Church, but let us remember: to adore God and to love our brothers and sisters with his love, that is the great and perennial reform. To be a worshipping Church and a Church of service, washing the feet of wounded humanity, accompanying those who are frail, weak and cast aside, going out lovingly to encounter the poor."

## On non-violence

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo of Yangon in Myanmar, is advocating an attitude of "active non-violence" in pursuing peace. "Going against the current, by adopting a mission of active non-violence, is key for working toward a more peaceful world. Pope Francis's many documents, exhortations, statements and actions have been imbued with the spirit and dynamic of non-violence."

(Compiled by Fr Joe Borg)