

ly precious for social life. In this respect, human beings are different from the animals. Whereas the animals are completely subjected to their instincts, human beings have the capacity of shaping their behaviors on the ground of the results of their rational investigation of reality. In other words, they also have the capacity of throwing off the yoke of nature, whereas all animals are always and wholly subjected to it. We can therefore distinguish in human beings a lower, material nature, which they have in common with animals, i.e. their bodies and instincts, and a higher, specifically human nature, which distinguishes them from the animals, i.e. their power of rational perception.

Through their power of rational perception, human beings become conscious of a third aspect of their nature. Initially, this consciousness may be perceived as a love of exaltation, a desire to reach a greater world than the world in which one is, and to mount to a higher sphere than that in which one is. This love of exaltation, which seems not to exist in the animals, is the simplest expression of that which may be defined as the divine or spiritual nature of human beings. Yet while human beings begin to perceive this love of exaltation, they continue to be pressed by their instincts and thus to perceive natural emotions typical of their material nature. Their natural emotions drive them toward the satisfaction of their instincts and, therefore, toward self-centered behaviors, basically connected with the plane of physical existence and conducive to inevitable conflicts with other human beings. The love for exaltation, on the contrary, leads them to long, albeit obscurely, for an inner harmony with themselves and the outer world, a harmony which requires reverse qualities like detachment from the self and the material world.

Therefore a tension arises in them between their emotions, born from their material nature, and the love of exaltation, born from their divine or spiritual nature. This tension is often perceived as a feeling of inner disharmony, discontent, loneliness, and vanity. At the same time their material nature dictates self-centered behaviors conducive to conflicts with other human beings, which aggravate that feeling. This condition of inner and outer conflict is so unpleasant, in itself and in its consequences, that human beings want to escape from it.

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Human beings pursue this goal in different ways, according to their individualities and the ideas they have acquired through their educational process and from their experiences. In the personal sphere, often the path of amusement, in its archaic meaning of 'diversion of the attention (as from the truth or one's real intent)' (Webster, 74), is instinctively chosen. Human beings try to divert their attention from that inner feeling of discomfort and to occupy themselves with other activities: not only play activities in the exact meaning of the word, but also certain kinds of active works and even certain philosophical thoughts, in which a refuge is, more or less unconsciously, sought. However, amusements, whatever they are, do not solve conflicts; they only conceal and postpone them. In the social sphere, sometimes human beings look for meeting points, sharing of ideas, centers of aggregation—such as family, nation, political ideals—that may help in overcoming conflicts. However, such efforts invariably prove themselves to be conducive to limited results and not to satisfactory solutions of those problems.

The humanistic philosophies prevailing in the contemporary world maintain that the development of the power of rational perception, i.e. intellectual development, is the highest stage of maturity which human beings can attain and that this growth is all they have and need so that they may gradually solve any problem. However, history demonstrates that the power of rational perception is not able to formulate comprehensive views of reality, to elaborate standards of values, to discover and understand metaphysical or spiritual reality, to find effective motivations for human struggle against natural emotions, to bestow upon human beings the required forces and energies so that they may conquer in themselves the binding power of nature and manifest their potential divine or spiritual nature, or to conceive and create a society functioning according to the reality of that divine nature. So much so, that contemporary societies are characterized on the one hand by a great development of the power of rational perception and on the other by widespread feelings of anxiety and restlessness, by strong tensions between individuals and peoples who seem to be confronted with enormous difficulties in

their relations and communications. Savater, the Spanish philosopher, writes in this regard: "...the only thing we agree about is that we do not all agree" (*Etica per un figlio*, 6). In view of these facts, how can we believe intellectual maturity to be the last stage in human development and thus in the whole evolution? Will such a fascinating and rich adventure end in this disturbing condition of disharmony and conflict or, at best, in the apathy of skepticism, in the *carpe diem* of epicurism, in the ataraxy of cynicism? Will all these disquieting inner and outer tensions remain unsolved or ignored? Religions are unanimous in their answer to these questions. Beyond their development on the material and intellectual level, human beings can go through a further transformation: the attainment of spirituality, something that draws them closer and closer to a longed-for inner and outer harmony. Spirituality may be defined as the consciousness of the Divine, which human beings can attain with the assistance of the Divine itself. It may be also defined as a deliberate and conscious process whereby a human being becomes conscious, through the instrumentality of his rational perception, of the divine qualities with which he is endowed by birth (for example: equity and honesty; charity and selflessness; courtesy and patience; chastity and holiness; faithfulness and loyalty; joy and radiance, etc.), qualities which constitute his divine or spiritual nature. The acquisition of this consciousness, i.e. spiritual growth, implies a passage from an inferior to a superior plane of existence. Human beings are born from the world of creation: it is their first or material birth. Through their spiritual growth, they learn how to actualize on the physical plane of their existence the potential qualities of their divine or spiritual nature, which do not belong to this world but to the worlds of Spirit. Therefore, in the Gospels, man's spiritual transformation is often defined as second birth (cf. John 3:1–8). Such a transformation cannot occur through mere human powers; an external contribution is required from the superior worlds of Spirit, just as the transformation of a seed into a tree requires the energies emanating from the sun, the mineral substances absorbed from the air and soil, and the care of a farmer. All religions explain that man receives this assistance from God Himself

through the guidance of His Revelation. God proposes a very important and meaningful Covenant to humankind: If you want to be assisted in your efforts toward the solution of your inner and outer, personal and collective conflicts, learn how to know and love the guidance of Revelation which God Himself sends to you from the worlds

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of Spirit. At the same time, put in practice its counsels, following the guidance of this knowledge and using the power of your own love. In this way you will become aware of your potential spiritual qualities by practical experience. You will learn how to live in the world of matter, according to the laws of the worlds of Spirit and thus you will learn how to solve your own conflicts. Divine revelation is sent through spiritual Leaders who manifest to humankind as much of their Creator as people can understand. History has handed down a record of some of them. They are the founders of the world revealed religions: Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. These spiritual Masters guide human beings in their spiritual progress in two ways. On the one hand, they reveal the laws of the worlds of Spirit, whose knowledge is required so that a person may live according to the laws of those worlds. On the other, they bestow upon us the required spiritual forces so that the instruments of our material nature may be bent to the purposes of our divine or spiritual nature. This concept will be more easily understood through a metaphor. The worlds of Spirit can be compared to the world of matter and spiritual laws to the physical ones. We must know the reality and the laws of the material universe so that we may properly employ our bodies. Matter is weighty—left by itself, it falls down. Water does not permit breathing. Fire burns. Walking blindly is dangerous; and so on. If a person were deprived of these simple notions, he could not survive. In the worlds of Spirit it is just the same. Spirit is love. Any soul who is not able to love experiences pain. Envy and jealousy deprive the soul of the forces of Spirit. Lying burns as a fire. A spiritually blind man, i.e. a man who ignores spiritual reality and laws, cannot advance in the worlds of Spirit. The Founders of religions reveal to

humankind this reality and these laws in a comprehensible way. The language used by the Founders of the past religions, while accomplishing their task of assisting a still infant humankind in its difficult spiritual journey, has been interpreted throughout the centuries in such a way that today it is sometimes an obstacle in some people's understanding of the spiritual verities. Those spiritual laws were presented as codes, whose disobedience—"sin"—involved the torments of hell. Today we can understand that such words have a metaphorical meaning and, therefore, the idea that the Founders of the world religions revealed oppressive codes is a misinterpretation of their intentions. They have been careful parents willing to guide us along our difficult journey toward the attainment of that conscious maturity that they wish for us and for which we have been created. In fact, our final and most important transformation, the spiritual one, is much easier if we let ourselves be guided by the light of our awareness of the reality and the laws of Spirit as revealed by them. As to the forces required to bend the capacities and qualities of our material nature toward the superior purposes of our spiritual nature, an analogy will be useful. Life is possible upon the earth because of the energies released by the sun and used by the creatures of the earth for their survival. In the spiritual worlds the Founders of religions are like a sun. Spiritual forces emanate from them, of which anyone can partake by exposing himself to their influence. The awareness of the great gift vouchsafed upon humankind by those Masters binds human hearts to them in a feeling of gratitude and love, often called faith. This feeling is in itself a force of priceless value in the struggle to overcome material nature and attain spiritual growth. Thus human life is a school. The teacher is the spiritual Master, the text is the revealed book, the pupil is each human being, the lessons are the facts themselves from which each human being can learn how to discover in himself the qualities required to meet those lessons according to spiritual laws. Very often pain is the feeling of inadequacy a human being experiences when confronted by a situation that he has not yet learned how to meet spiritually. Further consequences of spiritual immaturity are interpersonal conflicts, since human beings that have not yet learned how to overcome

selfishness through selflessness are likely to come into conflict with one another. Religions may thus be considered as the instruments through which God bestows upon humankind this precious guidance: concepts through whose knowledge and enforcement human beings are enabled to overcome many of their limitations. Therefore, ethical teachings are a fundamental part of all religions. And in this respect religiousness can be defined as obedience to God's commandments.

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If we study the spiritual and ethical teachings of all religions, we may discover a gradual improvement of ethical standards in the succeeding religions and a simultaneous widening of the spheres within which men are required to abide by those standards. Let us consider, for instance, that group of religions that flourished in the so-called Near and Middle East. The story of Adam and Eve can be seen as referring to the first time when human beings began to understand the difference between good and evil, right and wrong. Moreover, the figure of Adam-Eve could be seen as a primal human psycho-physical unity, whereby Adam symbolizes the spirit and Eve the soul. The soul is bound to the material world, whereof it is conscious, and ignores the spirit, wherefrom it comes, although at the beginning it is unaware of it. The world, in the form of a devil-snake, tempts her through the fruits of its tree and incites her to infringe the (psychological-spiritual) space her Creator has forbidden, exploiting her curiosity and ignorance. Thus soul-Eve enslaves spirit-Adam to the material world. The unhappy condition of exile and remoteness from a heavenly (spiritual) world, wherefrom Eve comes, in which she finds herself after her transgression, teaches her the difficult consequences of breaking the law and indirectly encourages her not to break the law in the future. The story of Noah teaches that when a society fails to act on the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, it must face great difficulties. It also may suggest the idea that the remedy to such a plight and the method whereby a balance may be restored and preserved within society is to obey to a covenant whose contents is typically ethical. The Noachid Covenant has been defined by Küng as "an ethic for humankind" and

described “as a minimum basic order of reverence for life: not to murder” (‘since God has made human beings in his image’ [Genesis 9:6]) and not to eat the flesh of animals who are still living in general prohibitions against theft, fornication, idolatry and blasphemy and the commandment to observe the law (to set up courts). (Judaism, p. 33) According to Küng, Abraham is understood by the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) as a model respectively of “loyal obedience to the law...unshakable faithfulness...unconditional submission (= Islam)” (Judaism, p. 14), which he showed through his willingness to sacrifice his son, on the altar of God. These virtues may be considered as the kernel of the ethics of Abraham’s religion and the foundation of the ethics taught by all the religions of this group.

The same Küng describes the Decalogue as the divine “guidance for a truly human life which was made possible and demanded by God.” (Judaism, p. 42) In the meantime, independently from Judaism, Zoroastrianism flourished in a not very distant land. Campbell describes it as a “potent mythical formula for the reorientation of the human spirit...summoning man to an assumption of autonomous responsibility for the renovation of the universe in God’s name....” (Occidental Mythology, p. 190) This renewal implies the establishment of peace, order and justice in the world through human action. Jesus may be considered as the founder of the highest ethics of personal sanctification of the whole world history.

Jesus Himself synthesizes His own ethical teachings thus: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37–40) Muhammad stressed the concepts of each human being’s responsibility for his own actions, and the equality of all before God. A list of prescriptions and prohibitions very similar to the Decalogue may be easily identified in the Qur’án, in Surah 17 (Children of Israel):

Set not up another god with God, lest thou sit thee down disgraced, helpless. Thy Lord hath ordained that ye worship none but him; and, kindness to your parents, whether one or both of them attain to old age with thee: ...

And to him who is of kin render his due, and also to the poor and to the wayfarer; yet waste not wastefully,
And let not thy hand be tied up to thy neck; nor yet open it with all openness, lest thou sit thee down in rebuke, in beggary. ...
Kill not your children for fear of want: for them and for you will we provide. Verily, the kill in g them is a great wickedness.
Have nought to do with adultery; for it is a foul thing and an evil way: Neither slay any one whom God hath forbidden you to slay, unless for a just cause: ...
And touch not the substance of the orphan, unless in an upright way, till he attain his age of

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strength: And perform your covenant; verily the covenant shall be enquired of: And give full measure when you measure, and weigh with just balance. ...
And follow not that of which thou hast no knowledge; because the hearing and the sight and the heart, —each of these shall be enquired of:
And walk not proudly on the earth, for thou canst not cleave the earth, neither shalt thou reach to the mountains in height:
All this is evil; odious to thy Lord. (17:23–39)
Thus Küng's ideas may be agreed upon, when he concludes that “we can speak of a common basic ethic of the three prophetic religions.” (Judaism, pp. 43–44)
In this succession of religions a number of levels of widening circles wherein spiritual laws, which may be summarized in the law of love, are expected to be enforced may be identified. Adam gave the laws of the individual; Noah the laws of the tribe; Abraham the laws of the group; Moses the laws of a people.
Muhammad gave a law whereby the mere racial bonds of the Chosen people are substituted by the membership in a common supra-racial nation, the ummah or community of brothers, whereas any other local or tribal bond is broken off.
A study of all the world religions will demonstrate that the same “common basic ethic” and the same progress toward a universal enforcement of the spiritual law is also evident in their teachings and history. This advancement toward a deeper understanding of the reality, and of the universal enforcement, of the spiritual law of love is the essence of spiritual evolution. Our age, the age of the global village,

seems ripe for a great step forward in human spiritual evolution, i.e., the adherence to a religious teaching which may unite all the peoples of the world in the same understanding and practice of the law of love: to love means to serve all humankind.

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