2. On Religion
June, 27 2005

From: Observer 3A10Z
Re: 3rd Planet, Star B6W739E2, Cluster D51M6F, Arm 4, Galaxy C2NGI05L825G
Date: Sixty-six billion local stellar axial rotations
To: Planetary Lifeforms Archivist, Mothership 6M3K2X

Subject: Religion

Most members of this planet's dominant lifeform, termed Earthlings, operate under a system of beliefs and behavioral dictates they call 'religion'. Even those among them who disavow allegiance to any such system seem troubled by their denial. It's as though the species were neurologically wired for a form of mental and emotional dependence despite a few who wish to be free of it.

What is 'religion'? In general, Earthlings' intellectual acuity and sense of personal responsibility are not sufficiently developed for them to accept individual answerability for their own thoughts, feelings and deeds. Rather they seem to need to attribute them to some outside influence, which they tend to personify in the body, person or guise of another more, if not all, powerful entity, sometimes Earthly in appearance, sometimes un-earthly. This entity is termed 'god', or if multiple, 'gods', who may be supposed malign, benign or even beneficent. Religion is the avowal of adherence to the expectations, dictates, rituals and requirements of a particular god or set of gods. It is to be distinguished from an ethical or moral framework for personal thought, feeling and deeds, which does not require allegiance or attribution to a god or gods.

In principle each Earthling might have its own religion based on that individual's personal god or gods; indeed, it is certainly plausible that the first religions, so defined, were individual. But their societal impact is most clearly seen where groups of individuals unite under a common religion. Commonality of religious practice has two effects: working for the common welfare of the group; and identifying and excluding non-practitioners from the benefits of the group's co-operative efforts. Such exclusion of 'others' can be passive, active or aggressive.

Among small groups, exclusivity of religious practices undoubtedly confers competitive advantage on those with numerical and disciplinary superiority over excluded individuals or other, less populous or less disciplined, groups. However, it also legitimates and canonizes discrimination, hostility and antagonism among what is genetically one single species. Treating a group's members relatively benignly or beneficially ensures cohesion and cooperativity among the members against opposing influences that threaten the group's welfare, including even members of the group that failed to conform to the orthodoxy. A cohesive group is generally better able to respond to threat or adversity, external or internal.

However, group exclusivity, suspicion and hostility are conducive to and supportive of conflict between disparate groups. When population densities on this planet were low, conflict and its resolution through violent engagement with injury and death among all parties was considered an acceptable price for maintaining the cohesion of threatened groups, despite those groups' identity being based principally on their common
allegiance to a belief system that had little or nothing to do with physical, demonstrable reality. Over and over again groups, large and small, are seen to have fought to one's, or sometimes mutual, annihilation in defense of demonstrably false principles.

As population densities rise, the frequency of conflict between interacting groups increases. As technology develops, more and more of this planet's limited store of accessible resources is devoted to increasing the intensity of violent conflict. Simultaneously, the political organization that provides 'leaders' for those individuals requiring or accepting mental and emotional dependence flourishes. First 'kingdoms', now latterly 'nations', supplant small groups as the foci of conflict initiation, promotion and propagation. The distinction between local street gangs and contending nations is merely one of degree, not kind.

Initially the political organization of nations was intimately associated with the nation's prevailing religious orthodoxy. Presently either nationalism or religion may be dominate in selecting and directing the focus of conflict between nations or they may co-operate the better to insure that in cohesion of the national will prevails.

It is pathetically ironic that systems, whether political or religious, that might be capable of inducing cooperative concern and action in defense of both the species' and the planetary environment's welfare have failed utterly to evolve beyond divisive, hostility-promoting, inward-looking, group-focused agencies that trade in defensive exclusivity rather than promoting inclusiveness and the common well-being of all.

The prospects for the viability of this planet under Earthlings' stewardship are grim indeed.

Knowledgeably aware,
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