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## P E R S P E C T I V E S

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# ***CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS***

WILLIAM H. PEMBERTON\*

**N**OW SEEMS a good time, here seems a good place, to talk about religion. And yet to do so seems to raise the ire of just about everyone, since everyone on planet Earth *believes* in one kind or another or none. And what's a belief? Let's start with a college dictionary range of definitions: "Something believed; an opinion or conviction; confidence in the truth or existence of something not immediately susceptible to rigorous proof; confidence, faith or trust; a religious tenet or tenets." That seems broad enough — like most of our words, many meanings, making discussion difficult.

\* A pioneer in the application of semantics in counseling, clinical psychologist Dr. William Pemberton maintains a practice in Mill Valley, California. Adapted from an article appearing in the Organizational Development Institute Annual Meeting Newsletter, April 1996.

I wonder if anyone has estimated the percentage of our beliefs coming from our own experiences and worked through our own intellectual processing, and what percentage comes from the experiences of others written or told to us. Frequently, I find that many of our beliefs have been accepted by us "as so." And they have become part of our store of what I call *unawared assumptions*: beliefs influencing our lives, our behavior, our thinking, our valuing, yet our not knowing why or how. Many of these came to us when we were too young to remember. Do you believe in God? Not believe in God? And how do you feel about those who believe in something shockingly different from your own beliefs? Do you consider yourself to be a monotheist, polytheist, atheist, agnostic, something else?

For sure, we need to talk about the range in intensity of believing and beliefs; some beliefs held lightly as tentative, some held as *absolutely so*. When it comes to the consequences of believing, the more certain, the more effective they seem to be. Yet my old mentor and friend, Alfred Korzybski, neurosemanticist who bowed out in 1950, pushed the notion that the difference between the sane and insane was the difference between saying "it is so, comma" (meaning that there is 'more'), and saying "it is so, period." I recall the bumper sticker on the pickup truck ahead of us in the Sacramento Valley fog: "God said it, I believe it, and that's that!" In religions, the "so, period" predominates.

Whatever, the universal finding is that we are 'identified' with our beliefs; that is, we generally accept them as true, as accurate, as being 'so.' Also, we are universally vulnerable to having someone *invalidate* our beliefs. A case of "love me, love my think!"

A study of psychopathology can be the study of how much invalidation it takes or has taken to drive one insane and/or violent. But now let's talk about world religions. (I contend that talk is only *about*.) As I view major world religions, they are based on revelations by a prophet who made translations *about* the cosmos. Followers wrote down the wisdom, reified it, deified it, made it into an *exclusivity* doctrine; that is, that only *that* prophet

had *the truth*. Followers accepted the doctrine as the truth (believed). Subsequent prophets went through a similar process. And to make it meaningful, to make it effective, *The Doctrine of Exclusivity* was continued, had to be believed *absolutely*.

And therein lies the tragedy of humans — as the symbolic class of life over planet Earth — one religion's 'truth' invalidates another religion's 'truth.' It was not until recent years that we have learned how to get out of this seeming paradox — that to be effective, a belief must be *certain*, yet that very certainty was interpreted as an attack on another's *certainly*.

The breakthrough occurred from the notion that each prophet's translation/interpretation, that each person's translation/interpretation of the cosmos, is/was *about* the cosmos, since I maintain that *abouts* are all we have as a living/symbolic system. What we perceive is *about* what goes on, inside/outside the skin. When we put that into words (symbols), that's *about* what has been perceived, *not what* is perceived. I venture to say that this is a universal characteristic of humans' evaluative processing over the world.

As we further study human evaluative processing, we find new processes that each brain/mind is capable of accomplishing. Let us review, for instance, the intuitive wisdom of St. Augustine, who, around 400 A.D., allegedly said, "Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe." That fits what we now know about the human brain/mind; namely, almost any human brain/mind has the ability to create, with a strong belief in it, a perceptual reality. With hypnosis and other altered states this can be demonstrated with predictable regularity. Cults interminably have been built on such brain/mind happenings, a cult being based on, again, a charismatic person who demands and gets acceptance of an *exclusivity* (to be believed) translation/interpretation of a now understandable neuro-psychological event, or historic one. What we used to think of as a 'miracle' is now understood to be a verifiable phenomenon.

The task of anyone pushing one faith or another is to make certain that it is *believed*, or accepted on *faith*. The mischief that turns into religious warfare grows from that very *accepted as certain view* as being *absolutely true*! Again, "it is so, period!"

In a presentation for a Rotary Club in Hawaii a few years ago, I talked on "Religious Fundamentalism: The Good News, The Bad News." The good news is that if your *beliefs* are accepted as *absolutely true*, you become calm, relaxed, comfortable, and confident with your prophet's interpretation of the cosmos, and the many messages of faith, hope, and being loved; in addition, having an ethical and moral code of behavior increases the meaningfulness of life to individuals and groups.

Being loved seems to be the so-called bottom line of most religions. "God loves you and so do I" repeatedly speaks a popular televangelist. Love continues as the theme, since we were once cared-for as an infant (or may not have been cared-for), and the need to be valued, to be loved, remains a constant until we get to the end of the line. Doubts and anxieties disappear. The bad news is that you will be unable to talk with anyone living with certainty and faith in *another belief system*!

This is why, I reckon, religion has become such a taboo subject anywhere, anytime. Just to belong to another system poses a threat to some. And note what happens when we ask "how do we feel about someone with another belief system?" Generally recommended: "Be tolerant!" (Old definition: "Tolerance is putting up with someone until they learn more!") I used to say that there is not a ritual on planet Earth sacred to one group that doesn't disgust another group. And that appears to be universal. Let us also consider the role of rituals. I see them as a behavioral reinforcement of what you *believe in*.

It is easy to label/designate fundamentalists as 'the enemy,' and indeed it is common in human affairs to attempt to influence negatively by putting down the opposition, using such labels as "negative campaigning" to "war making." And it appears obvious that there are numerous fundamentalists in all major world

religions. We find that under accelerating changes, regression prevails over progression in human affairs.

Perhaps better to give fundamentalists an invitation to investigate “new information” to help them survive without violence; namely, making it possible for them to make *another* translation/interpretation! From “so, period,” to “so, comma.”

May the reader consider these paragraphs as an attempt to break the ice on ‘open’ and ‘closed’ ways of thinking *about* religions. Just as the discovery that the world is a sphere orbiting around the sun, which slowly changed the total cosmic translation/interpretation, so we must change with new information of how the brain/mind creates, maintains, and distorts realities. That the brain/mind may produce perceptual validity of beliefs — as well as influence human organismal processes, including by means of prayer — necessitates a new translation/interpretation of religions. The new translation makes tolerance obsolete, replaced by *understanding*. And we may and can develop a respect, even a reverence, for one another’s *beliefs*.

The challenge here is merely to question the *absolutivity* of any translation/interpretation of the cosmos, of ourselves, of the world in which we do our life span. To repeat what Alfred Korzybski said, “Etc: there is more!”

One final addendum: I contend that whatever the events in our lives, whatever our personal history, with its accumulation of values, preferences, biases, beliefs, sentiments, etc., (our biosoftware, if you please), we discover for each of us a predictable reflex — that is, our *first* reaction/translation/interpretation of any happening. And then, since we are beginning to know *about* what *that is about*, we can make a *second* translation *about* it. If our history has had many negative happenings and negative translations, the *second* translation may be a more positive one. Then with a *third* translation, we realize we are free to translate as we please! Thus can we realize the human potential for non-violent conflict resolution. And a reminder for ourselves is that even with the overwhelming information explosion, *information* is still limited to *abouts*!

In conclusion, let us realize that we can find reconciliation by an old initiative: To become a friend, we must find similarities in our differences, including similarities in our beliefs. To maintain a friendship we must find and understand differences in our similarities. *Understanding* is a meaningful word that transcends *tolerance*.

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