

WILL MAN STILL NEED GOD IN THE 21st CENTURY?

Siroj Cyril Viriyasirimongkol, f.s.g., Ph.D.

Vice-President for Academic Affairs

Assumption University

This question assumes that Man needed God up to the 21st century. But there is a doubt as to whether he will need God in the 21st. Therefore, to answer the question, we have to understand the reasons why man needed God so far. Then we can decide whether these same reasons will be operative in the 21st. If they are, we will conclude that man still needs God. If they are not, can we immediately conclude that man does not need God in the 21st century? Or do we have to examine the altered conditions of the 21st century thoroughly to find out why? Or do we have to question the concept of God prevalent up to the 21st century and then see whether this concept is applicable to the 21st century? Or do we have to examine our concept of man up to the 21st century and see if this concept of man is suitable in the altered conditions of the 21st century? Does the question imply that the 21st century will not be the same as the centuries that preceded it? Or is 21st century merely the one that follows the 20th? And if so, will the 21st be much the same as the 20th and so what was valid in the 20th will be equally valid in the 21st? Such questions will take us afar. And they pose formidable problems.

The questions are raised to make all aware of the complexity of the problem raised. And to assure the readers that the writer is aware of the problems, and to suggest to the readers a line of inquiry that will be beneficial.

To understand if man needs God and if he does, why he does, we need to understand the nature of man and the nature of God and see why the nature of man is such that he needs a being called God. I believe the right place to start the enquiry is in the garden of Eden.

The old Catholic catechism began with the question: who created man and why he (that being) created man and answered it: God created man to know him serve him love him and to be happy with him in heaven. The question and answer assumed too many things without any scientific proof. It assumed that there is a God, this God created man and he created him for the reasons given in the answer.

We can have a clear picture of the problem we dealing with only if we look at it from these different angles. We have to look into the past to see how men thought about God and their

relationship to God. It will involve us in a searching look at the ways in which we think about God and our relationship to him in the light of our greater insights into human nature and the workings of the universe and the achievements of modern science and technology. It will involve us in a searching look into our future relationship with God. The topic of our discussion focuses on this.

And enquiry like this can only be exciting. It will show us that "God" exercised, exercises and will continue to exercise enormous influence on our lives. God is always a question of passionate interest and debate among men.

We are living in an age of inquiry and questioning, and this spirit of inquiry has revolutionized our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. It has demythologized God and religion. But this has not been accomplished without pain or protest. This bold spirit of enquiry has taken man to the very throne of God. He would know if there is a God, and if there is who he is. He would use his intelligence as the tool of this enquiry. He knows that his intelligence is a reliable tool for the acquisition of knowledge. He does not do this in a spirit of arrogance. He knows that true knowledge is the only effective means of protecting himself against false gods, false terrors and unholy superstitions.

MODERN MAN'S DIFFICULTY

Harvey Cox, in his "Secular City" says that the collapse of traditional religion is the hallmark of our era. He attributes this to scientific and technological progress and the resulting secularism that is creeping up all over. Man, he continues, experiences the universe as the city of man; it is a field for human exploitation and endeavour; the world has become man's task and man's responsibility. The gods have fled from it.

According to C.A. Van Peursen, secularisation is the deliverance of man "first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language".

To Bonhoeffer, secularisation is "man's coming of age".

"Secularisation has accomplished," Mr. Cox goes on to say "what fire and chain could not. It has convinced the believer that he could be wrong, and persuaded the devotee that there are more important things than dying for the faith. The gods of the traditional religions live on as private fetishes or the patrons of congenial groups, but they play no role whatever in the public life of the secular metropolis".

Michael Novak in *Belief and Unbelief* says, "thinking people find how irrelevant religion can be in the

daily struggles of men for compassion and justice. Many who bore the brunt of racial struggle, giving of their blood and their integrity of life and limb had no need of religious inspiration. He adds, "we are what we are and we do what we do. It is not at all certain that it makes any difference to our identity whether there is a God, a heaven, and all the useless paraphernalia of a Church. Without these some men do as well as others who have them".

According to Sydney Hook, "The Language of religion carries with it a mood of acceptance and resignation to the world as we find it, which tends to dissipate the mood for social change".

Ludwig Feuerbach announced that his aim was to convert

"The friends of God into the friends of man, believers into thinkers, worshippers into workers, candidates for the other world into students of this world, Christians, who are, on their own confession, half-animal and half-angel, into men--whole men".

Chardin says that the great objection brought against Christianity is the suspicion that it makes its followers inhuman.

Man's disenchantment with religion cannot be presented in more poignant or heart-rending words. The problem becomes all the more complicated and inscrutable by the presence of evil in the world. If an evil and ma-

levolent God were posited, man would understand. But when a "Good God" is posited, it baffles him altogether; for this "Good God" does not, in any sense, correspond to man's idea of goodness and justice.

The problem is complicated in other ways too. See what a thinker like Chardin has to say: "At first, I did not recognize myself in the gospel". And the reason for his difficulty: the road to God has no connection with the earth. And Chardin is a child of the earth. Christianity exalts the spirit. It looks upon the soul as the transient guest in the cosmos and the prisoner of matter. The operation of salvation, reduced to being no more than a matter of personal success, develops without any reference to cosmic evolution. Christianity gives the impression of not believing in human progress. It has never developed the sense of the earth, or else it has allowed that sense to be dormant in it. People, like Chardin, feel that their adherence to the theology and morality of Christianity is forced and conventional. Faith in Christ takes away the only spring-board from which they could rise up to the expectations of divine immortality: it robs them of their faith in the world.

THE CAUSES OF THE DIFFICULTY

Faith Against Intelligence

To most believers, God and religion come too easily, that is, they

believe because their parents believe. It never enters their minds to question what their parents or their priests tell them. Besides, this kind of questioning is not only not encouraged, but is, positively, frowned upon. Questionings make parents and priests uncomfortable and nervous. One result of this is that people grow up believing what they are told, without any solid intellectual basis for their belief. A time comes, when they have to give sound and convincing reasons for their belief, say, for example, when their religious faith is attacked, and they find, to their dismay, they cannot defend it. And so they become disillusioned. And thus they move from religion to enlightenment!

Naturally, such a sorry state of affairs will not come about, if, from the beginning, solid grounds for belief are given. And the most beautiful thing about this is that, such solid grounds for belief do exist, and no thinking man need be apologetic about his belief in religion. He can, very well, walk among his peers with his head held high!

It is always a mistake to replace intelligence with faith, for as Mr. Novak says:

If a man without religious faith is thought to be unable to discover at least that there is a God, religious faith itself suffers two defeats. When philosophy and

religion are allowed to go their separate ways, there is a defeat for the person of religious faith, because then he is in fact divided against himself, even if (under the shield of a "religious" culture) he does not notice the division. And there is a defeat for the community of religious faith, since such a faith cannot endure through cultural change without a philosophical, nonimaginative understanding of its own language and beliefs.

And this is, exactly, what has happened. So Novak concludes: "In the short run, faith without philosophy suffices. But for the community, and in the long run, intelligence will have its due."

GOD AGAINST THE WORLD

The Church teaches, following St. Paul, that the whole of human life, down to its most natural zones, must become a life in common with the life of Christ. In this way, the church tries to ennoble, dignify and transfigure the common duties of man's everyday life. But this very insistence tends to shatter the distribution and balance of man's activities. Teilhard poses the problem in the following way:

How can the man who believes in heaven and the cross continue to believe sensibly in the value of worldly occupation? How can the believer

carry out his duty as man to the fullest extent and feel sure that he is on the direct road to God?

The Christian believes in a hereafter of eternal happiness or eternal misery. And he knows that life here on earth is temporary. Being a good businessman, he concentrates all his attention on winning eternal happiness. He is told often, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and then suffer the loss of his soul?" This robs man of his enthusiasm for the world. Moreover, this world is presented as a fallen world and an enemy of God. Priests never tire of repeating: "perfection consists in detachment from the world: the world is vanity and ashes." So man decides to give up the world to find God.

But a sure instinct warns him that there is something wrong with this method of looking for God. His instinct tells him that, somehow, his salvation is bound up with the salvation of the world. But, then, he gets cold feet. He fears that the time given to, what he considers, "worldly" matters, is time taken from God. This creates a tension in him. On the one hand, he is attracted to the world. On the other hand, he is told to detach himself from the world, and attach himself entirely to God. To whom should he give his loyalty, attachment and love?

Some preachers, following this line of thought, insists that, in the matter of salvation, all initiative comes from God (which is true) but forget to add that man's free cooperation is necessary. Without this free cooperation on man's part, all God's initiative would be defeated! Others preach an all-sufficient God who has no need of man. They forget to add that God has elected to enter into a love-relationship with man; that this being a love-relationship, man is free to give or refuse his love, and this refusal on man's part can create a corresponding poverty in God--for God has willed it so. In short, God has decided to need man's love.

This line of enquiry has started bearing fruit, in the sense that man's growing understanding of himself and his place in the universe serve to dispel so many false ideas about God and to demythologize religion. But the process is extremely painful and so we hear the moans and groans of people who have to give up their cherished ideas and beliefs. We have to go on courageously along our chosen path if we are to arrive at a clearer and clearer understanding of God and religion. And in this quest, man's intelligence, his passion to know, his drive to understand will be his best guide. For according to Novak, a religion based on the drive to understand does not pit God against man. It insists that fidelity to God is through and only through fidelity to oneself. To seek one is to seek the other. Man is naturally religious.

We see then that our critical intelligence is our only defence against false gods. The God we have thus discovered is not the enemy of science or knowledge or progress. He is not afraid of science. Only he refuses to take his abode in any temple built by man. We need not then be afraid to question-- question everything; established religion, established dogmas, established anything; for God is not established, provided we are faithful and honest to our drive to understand.

From the above, we see that the "God" who presents himself to our acceptance, love and worship is a God nowhere defined. Now we understand how the concept of God, always a potent influence in the lives of men, was, in some way, responsible for the ills of our society, even for the evils we find there. This does not mean that God--The Other-- was responsible for it but "god" was; that is, our false concepts of God or, in other words, our false gods. And we need not wonder. All manner of evil comes into the world when man worships false gods as the history of Israel so amply proves.

Idolatry harms God and Man; for it deprives man of his dignity and what deprives man of his dignity is an insult to God. And whatever injures man, and in consequence God, is false religion. True religion is built on the

notion that man is the child of God. And as Paul says, "If son, then heir". If "son and heir" then man's duty is to co-operate with the Father and thus bring creation to its fulfillment so that God may be all in all.

SCIENCE AND GOD

In his Pulitzer Prize winner: *On Human Nature*, Edward O. Wilson says that the predisposition to religious belief is the most powerful force in the human mind. He asserts that, in all probability, this predisposition to religious belief is an ineradicable part of human nature. Human beings are naturally religious. "Men, it appears, would rather believe than know". Says Nietzsche, "they (men) would rather have void as purpose than be void of purpose". Newton advised us all to read nature and scripture. We took to heart his advice to read nature and, as a result, science has advanced relentlessly, resulting in the disappearance of God from our daily affairs. But this very disappearance of God from our daily affairs gave birth to "process theology". Process theology does not view God as an extraneous force who creates miracles and presides over metaphysical verities. It conceives Him as present continuously and ubiquitously in the world, covertly guiding the emergence of molecules from atoms, living organisms from molecules and mind from matter. Process is reality and reality process

and the hand of God is manifest in the laws of science. From this it follows that religious and scientific pursuits are intrinsically compatible and all well meaning scientists can follow their calling in a state of mental peace.

Why is there then conflict between scientific understanding of reality and religious faith? We need scientific knowledge to progress. But we also need religious beliefs to survive the vicissitudes of life. And yet scientific knowledge seems to erode our religious faith. How can we explain this paradox?

Edward O. Wilson suggests that the paradox can be eventually resolved if we pay attention to the sociobiology of religion. He believes that religious practices can be explained by genetic advantage and evolutionary change. But even he admits that science cannot fully explain religion for two reasons, though there is a materialist basis for the religious process. In the first place because religion is one of the major categories of behavior undeniably unique to the human species. So the principles of behavioral evolution drawn from existing population biology and experimental studies on lower animals are unlikely to apply in any direct fashion to religion. In the second place, the genetic motivations for religious beliefs are probably hidden from the conscious mind because religion is above all the process by which individuals are persuaded to subordinate their immediate self-

interest to the interest of the group.

Though science cannot fully explain religious beliefs, we must admit that science has met some of Jehova's challenges. The physical basis of life is known; we understand approximately how and when it started on earth. New species have been created in the laboratory and evolution has been traced at the molecular level. Genes can be spliced from one kind of organism into another. Molecular biologists have most of the knowledge needed to create elementary forms of life. Could the Old Testament writers have conceived of such activity? And still the process of great scientific discoveries gathers momentum. And as science proceeds to dismantle the ancient mythic stories one by one, theology will retreat to its final redoubt from which it can never be driven out. This is the idea of God in the creation myth: God, as Will, the cause of existence and the agent who generated all of the energy in the original fireball and set the natural laws by which the universe evolved. God thus remains a viable hypothesis as the prime mover, however undefinable and untestable the concept may be. The rituals of religion, especially the rites of passage and the sanctification of nationhood, are deeply entrenched and incorporate some of the most significant elements of existing cultures. They will certainly continue to be practised long after their etiology has been disclosed. The anguish of death alone will be enough to keep them alive. It would be arrogant to

suggest that a belief in a personal, moral, God will disappear. Without such a God, man will have only blind hopes, as we learn from Aeschylean Prometheus:

Chorus: Did you perhaps go further than you have told us?

Prometheus: I caused mortals to cease foreseeing doom.

Chorus: What cure did you provide them with against that sickness?

Prometheus: I placed in them blind hopes.

The true Promethean spirit of science liberates man by giving him knowledge and some measure of dominion over the physical environment. But scientific materialism can only offer blind hopes. In contrast, religion offers immortality to the individual, resurrection of the body and life everlasting. It also offers divine privilege to human society.

Man is not yet ready to forgo such privileges. And so he will cling to God but his faith in God will be more and more purified. It will be a faith based on his intelligence.

A FAITH BASED ON INTELLIGENCE

Man's first need is to understand himself. Man arrives at self-knowledge through the activities of awareness, insight, reflective judgment and the

drive to understand. These tell him that he is an intelligent subject endowed with an insatiable desire to know, a subject whose personal development depends upon faithfulness to the drive to understand and whose ultimate horizon is all that is to be understood. And so, according to Novak, if a man relentlessly follows his drive to understand with an open and critical mind, without, at the same time, in any way, minimizing the difficulties on his way; that is, if he gives full recognition to the surds and irrationalities he comes across, then, he will come to the conclusion that there is a BEING who is the source and term of his relentless drive to understand, though he may not be able to conceptualize who this BEING is. He may call him God or more simply: THE OTHER. He finds that he cannot define him. He is happy at this discovery. For he understands that a God that human intelligence could define would be a poor and limited God. And a limited God would be a defeat to the drive to understand. From here he needs faith.

"What is man that thou should be mindful of him?" asked the psalmist, and I think that is where any fruitful enquiry about God should begin. All modern thinkers seem to be agreed on this: man as a clue to the understanding of God. In the question of the psalmist, we find in one sentence the mystery and the grandeur of religion. But precisely here, where we have an inkling into our solution, we are once more baffled by our own question:

what is man?

"If there is any science man really needs it is the one I teach, of how to occupy properly that place in creation that is assigned to man, and how to learn from it what one must be in order to be a man."

Immanuel Kant

The basic fact about man, as revealed in the myth of creation, is his helplessness or creatureliness. And his real temptation is to deny this helplessness or creatureliness. His temptation is to be God. Man is the desire to be God. This shows that what man wants is his own self-expansion and glorification.

Evolution tells us that with the birth of consciousness and the consequent loss of sure animal instincts man has become helpless because the sure instincts are replaced by fallible reason. And from now on man has no automatic guarantee that he can deal with reality adequately. And therefore birth of consciousness is also the birth of anxiety and fear. Consciousness makes man exposed to the terrors of life and death without any adequate defense.

Consciousness makes him a trembling animal. Man then needs to maximize his powers to face the world without fear and trembling.

The question then is: what maximizes human powers? Or, this question can be rephrased as: what makes man free? Man is free when he enjoys a rich participation in a broad panorama of life experiences, when he lives in an expansive present that responds to his energies. But insufficient participation and reflection of one's powers in the world leads to a feeling that life is overwhelming, precarious and even unfair. Because he participates insufficiently in life, because he cannot make his energies felt in the world, man thinks of death and suicide. What else can he do, since he feels, powerless to participate in life under the aegis of his own energies? Suicide is his last resort to unify esthetically his failed life. In this sense, suicide offers a potential for meaningful self-realization, even if only as a saving grace, a desperate artistic effort. What it means is that even self-destruction is motivated by a desperate effort at self-enhancement, a desperate effort to validate one's existence, to give it some meaning, to feel that one has some value.

Man is in a world. In this world, he finds, besides himself, other people and other things. The business of life consists in his dealing with these realities. In this, he is sometimes successful. At other times he fails. When he succeeds he feels happy and good about himself. When he fails he feels unhappy and bad about himself. His success gives him the assurance that he can deal with reality; his failure makes

him feel that he is incompetent to deal with it. And this failure makes him anxious and afraid. Slowly he becomes frightened of reality and tries to run away from it.

The real enemy of the human spirit is man's own stupidity with regard to his social arrangements: the way he has arranged to get self-esteem. Culture fails in its universal role when it does not give the organism what it needs most: a sentiment of self-value. And culture fails precisely because its standardized symbol systems and the actions they generate cannot produce self-value, because it asks for conformity not confrontation, and in this way blocks rather than liberates action potential. But what man needs is to frame problems in ever-more explicit cognitive terms because this alone unblocks action. By doing this, one can convert a situation in which there is no choice to one in which there are new choices. This is the way to create indeterminacy and freedom. Ethics is a problem of self-liberating choice possibilities. And the strength to be ethical is really the strength to design alternatives and follow them out.

Man needs to be himself, if he is to preserve and develop his unique individuality. He can be himself only on condition that he thinks his own thoughts and lives his own life; that is if he is faithful to his consciousness of reality. For this he needs strength.

Strength, however, can never by

an individual problem, because man in the only animal in nature with a self, and self can be developed only in transacting with others. The individual must, then, be sustained by others, in the original creation of his meaning.

But to be fully himself man also needs others. According to Martin Buber:

"There is no I taken in itself, but only the I of the primary word I-Thou and the I of the primary word I-It.

Again

The fundamental fact of human existence is man with man."

It is fitting that man should address himself to another man to achieve this because it is in him that the life of the cosmos is in nearest and closest affinity to his. Man finds the really real in the dialogue of the selves; personality elicits personality and gives birth to a greater degree of spirit, interwoven with the world of organisms. And if man is born in the dialogue with his fellows, then he is truly the unknowable.

He can feel good about himself only when he succeeds in establishing himself as a person within a community of person. But unfortunately, there is no straightforward way to accomplish this because becoming person involves a dual process which, in practice, tends to cancel each other out. These

are processes of self-assertion and self-surrender.

Man needs to assert himself to satisfy his urge for self-expansion. He strives to achieve this by developing his unique gifts and making his distinctive contribution to the world. Self-expansion involves thrusting oneself forward and sticking out. Man also needs to be one with others. To achieve complete merger and total identification with others, he has to surrender himself.

But he can do these only at a terrible cost: If he chooses to expand his uniqueness, he risks cutting himself off from natural dependency; if he surrenders to his desire for merger and union, he risks failing to develop himself.

Man has thus the absolute tension of dualism. Individualism means that he has to oppose himself to the rest of creation. Merger means that he has to sacrifice his individuality. The one creates an isolation that he cannot stand, yet, needs, to develop uniquely; while the other brings about a union that destroys individuality that he needs to achieve merger. The one creates a pitiful individual and the other destroys even this pitiful individual.

Man can never be known in himself but only in his relationship. It is precisely in the wholeness of his relationships that man is infinite--infinite in terms of the possibility of unfolding and becoming. It means that man needs an infinite other to guarantee his infinite unfolding, the OTHER without the limitations of the human other. The human other, being finite, can at best guarantee only limited expansion. Also in relating to the human other, there is the ever present threat that the human other, being, limited like himself, may use him, for his own self-enhancement! Man then needs an OTHER that does not need him for its own self-enhancement; that is to say, man needs an OTHER that guarantees his full expansion without any strings attached! Such an OTHER is what people usually understand as God. It is then only in union with God that man can achieve the full maximization of his powers.

Self-creation is integrating the need to be oneself with the need to unite with the other. But the human other is limited like him. So he needs an **infinite OTHER**. This is the truth about man. If he can accept this truth, it will make him free, free to give up all his pretensions to self sufficiency, to being god. Then he will see that his glory is to be human, fully human, and for this he needs God. As St. Augustine said long ago, "our hearts are made for Thee, and They are restless until they rest in Thee."