CHAPTER 14

By Way of Conclusion: The Present Crisis and the Religions of the Future

In his widely acclaimed books Sapiens and Homo Deus, the historian Yuval Harari invites us to consider humankind from the broader perspective of the universe, whose origins go back to over thirteen billion years, and the appearance of life to four billion years.1 Against this immensely large span of time and birth of life, human beings are latecomers in the universe and have a relatively short history. During this period, which scientists call “Anthropocene” (the age of humans) and which extends just about 70,000 years, humankind has developed from the ape and dominated the earth and exacted a heavy toll on its flora and fauna. In the words of Harari, “an insignificant ape became the ruler of the planet Earth.”2 The destruction of the biosphere caused by human beings has now come to threaten their own existence. To aggravate further the situation, some technologies—biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and so on—are turning into Frankenstein monsters.3 Today the crisis is such that we cannot take for granted the

1 Cf. Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind (London: Penguin Random House, 2015); Homo Deus, A Brief History of Tomorrow (London: Vintage, 2016).
2 Yuval Noah Harari, 21 Lessons for 21st Century (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018), ix.
3 Today, we live in an age of “Technopoly.” Cf. Neil Postman, Technopoly (New York: Knopf, 1992), in which technology is not merely a segment or dimension of life or having its own power, but something that has created a different way of being human. Life is taken over by technology as human minds are being mined and scanned to collect data and turned into raw materials for technological processes. Digital technology is widespread, surveillance
survival and future of us as a human species. In fact, the history of the earth shows that numerous species that once inhabited it no longer do. Are we going to be one such species moving toward extinction?

**Tracking the Roots of the Crisis**

The crisis that envelops humankind has multiple and interlocking aspects and dimensions. The source of destruction is not only from without but also from within. In nature, human beings are aggressive and fight with each other like wolves—*homo homini lupus*, so said Thomas Hobbes. Violence against each other could have caused the extermination of humanity. However, humankind found a way of survival by organizing themselves into societies with rights and duties. “Social Contract” became later the central organizing principle of human societies in political liberalism. Relations are governed, and shared goals are achieved thanks to this contract in its manifold expressions.

But we know that not all human relationships can be subsumed under contract, nor contracts are effective in most critical times. We have come to realize the limits of contractual thinking more than ever before. For example, how does social contract work with the threat of a nuclear war? Unlike in other conventional wars where, despite the loss of precious human lives, rearrangement of relationships is possible, in a nuclear war all of humankind is in danger of being obliterated from the earth. The outbreak of Covid-19, which caught like wildfire across the entire globe, nations and borders brought to our awareness how vulnerable the humans are and how we could come in no time to the brink of colossal unforeseen disasters. Such critical predicaments go beyond the parameters of societal life shaped by contractual thinking.

Despite unprecedented technological progress and ability to predict future developments, our world is wobbling, woefully insecure, vulnerable, and imbalanced to sustain itself and move ahead. The digital and communication technology is disrupting the structures of human coexistence, the most important of which is democracy. Democracy has become a technology (panopticon) is increasingly practiced, and artificial intelligence (AI) is being developed apace. All this has consequences in every field of life, including religions. It is no more the humans controlling technology, but technology determining the human.

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4 The idea of the social contract was initially proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau; see Victor Gourevitch, trans. and ed., *Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, originally published in 1762 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
victim of digital communication with global spread of lies and fake news, and manipulation of electoral processes, leading increasingly to the emergence of authoritarianism and populism all over the globe.

Another source of crisis for humanity is the negative consequences of advanced capitalism. It is growing and visible in every part of the world, causing unprecedented inequality of wealth and income. The economist Thomas Piketty draws our attention to how the concentration of wealth and its unequal distribution produce social unrest and economic imbalance and threaten democratic order and human coexistence. The disaffection with the market economy seems to be widespread in the Global North and the South. The exponential growth of economic inequality has left millions of people in disarray, with their dreams trampled upon and their aspirations shattered. Oxfam’s 2018 report stated that 82 per cent of the wealth created in the world the previous year had gone to one per cent of the human population. The bottom 50 per cent received nothing. When all doors are shut and a sense of nowhere to go pervades, “saviors” emerge for the folk. Gifted speakers and manipulators of symbols and media systems appear on the scene to exploit popular sentiments of fear and disempowerment and present themselves as alternatives to the prevailing situation.

No religion can be insensitive to these developments and the immense challenges of inequality embedded in economic, social, cultural, and political structures of our present times. Hence, the religion of the future will have its ears on the margins to hear the cry of the poor and its hands on the ground to feel the pulse of nature. The quality of religion will be tested by its commitment to shaping a different world of justice and peace, and its engagement to critically challenge any political and economic system and social mores that corrode human solidarity and togetherness.

**Perpetual Reminder**

From the broader perspective of the universe, human beings are today reduced to consuming animals that rely on money and market for anything to happen. Every human relationship is viewed from the viewpoint

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5 Cf. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge; Massachusetts; London; England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017); see also Heather Boushey et al., eds., *After Piketty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

6 [https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year-poorest-half-humanity](https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year-poorest-half-humanity) [accessed on March 3, 2020].
of the market, and the entire gamut of social life and interactions is judged by market reasoning and logic. There is nothing today which money cannot buy—acquiring citizenship, jumping queues, priority in boarding planes, priority appointment with doctors (concierge doctors), right to emit carbon, recruit mercenaries for war, buying kidneys, and getting surrogacy. However, in reality, not all human problems can be solved by money, nor can money buy everything. It is an experience of daily life which humanity tends to forget.

The religion of the future will remind humankind of values that go beyond commodity and market relations and point to another world of love, compassion, solidarity, and cooperation. It will nurture necessary ethical impulses for the flourishing of the human and of nature. The forgetfulness of humans about the essentials will require a perpetual reminder in the form of religion, which will point to the best that is forgotten and hidden. Could our present religions reimagine their roles for the future?

**COMING TO TERMS**

The scenarios of human extinction I mentioned are a wake-up call. Already now, radical measures and steps are to be taken. To start with, the foundation of the social contract on which human, intersocietal, and international relations are based is so thin that it is not able to hold any longer the increasing pressure of societal and interhuman problems and conflicts. Moreover, the social contract—the cornerstone of liberal philosophy—is highly individualistic and does not seem to give due importance to the community. In a true community, people feel bound together not simply because they are party to a contract, but because of another set of values like love, the search for common good, altruism, compassion, the spirit of cooperation, and solidarity. How could religions become nurseries where these values are nurtured?

At this juncture, we cannot but resist raising some critical questions about those disciplines concerned about the study of religion. Academically with what vision does the discipline of religious studies function? Are these studies immersed in fragments and lost in the minutiae of religious ethnography? What contributions do the scholars in this field think they could offer to a world and humanity in crisis? Are the kind of theologies

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7 Cf. Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy. The Moral Limits of Market* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).
pursued today with heavy baggage of tradition and doctrine able to come to terms with a world on fire? Some forms of theology are so cut off from the real world that they appear as “selling words” in the “bazaar of loquacity.”

We need to take stock of the fact that we live today in a world of networking which offers endless possibilities. There are many players involved in expanding this network to an unimaginable extent. Despite all this, we find more walls around than bridges. It is an irony that in an age that promises massive connectivity, there should be heavy loss of human connectedness and solidarity. Those involved in building networks as the big conglomerates seem to be least interested and are indifferent to what passes through these portals of connectivity. This kind of organized irresponsibility is in need of greater ethical concern and infusion of values that will promote all-round wellbeing of humanity and flourishing of nature. For, the future of the world is likely to be determined by this connectivity rather than by isolated nations and borders. It is no more a situation in which we try to assess what is the impact of globalization on religion. Religions are today an important factor and a force for globalization. They contribute to networking and global culture. As a player in the process of globalization, the religion of the future needs to bring greater ethical concerns and sensitivity to the lives of communities and in the international order. It will speak truth to power, without counting the cost.

**Religions of the Future**

One speaks of “return of religion.” This is quite ambiguous. There is no return of religion in the Global South because it never departed! It has remained an abiding element in the lives of the peoples of the South. That the ceaseless presence of religion should put the peoples of the South in a less-developed stage of human history is to invoke the Hegelian myth of “Philosophy of History”. The return of religion is often spoken about from the perspective of the history of the Global North, and its

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8 St Augustine, *Confessions*. A New Translation by Henry Chardwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Introduction p. xi.

9 Cf. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

10 Cf. Felix Wilfred, ed., “Social Media,” *Jeevadhara* 50, no. 295 (January 2020).
post-secular context, and in more recent times in relation to the tragic condition of human existence, the anomie, and the profound existential angst. It is too little if religion returns, after a failed interpretation of its seeming absence, only as a stopgap to a helpless human predicament.

Increasingly in the North as well as in the South, we need to speak about the religion of the future, rather than the future of religion. To speak of the future of religion would mean that religions are threatened of their survival and in need of defense. The religion of the future, on the other hand, will be one that will be concerned about the future of humanity and the future of creation. This religion will understand its beliefs, organization, values, morals, laws, practices, and worship as oriented to common good, wellbeing of humankind and flourishing of nature. As such, it will never worry about its own survival because it perceives its mission as a call to serve humanity and sustain nature.

**Facing Challenges**

Hitherto, religions have served as bricks and mortar to build up identities, and hence they (religions) became sources of conflict. Warmed-up versions of nationalism and populism, on their part, invoke religion and religious symbols for political ends and for creating a social and political order that excludes peoples and communities. We know from history that the ideology of nationalism, very much like that of religion, pits nations one against the other, and kills millions as happened in the two world wars. Today, numerous armed conflicts are waged by subnationalities in different parts of the world against centralizing and oppressive state powers. State violence gets legitimized by invoking the ideology of nationalism and national security. Warmongering and feigned national security take precedence over the real issues of the people and their human security vis-à-vis the fundamental needs of life. I am appalled at the sight of country after country parading their most lethal weapons on national days or republic days. Through these senseless and mad exhibitions of weapons a nation is showing how effectively it can kill others, and this sight is applauded and celebrated by millions in the name of nationalism. A culture of death becomes a showpiece and a badge of honor.

The perils inherent in the ideology of nationalism were sensed with much prescience by two great thinkers—one from the Global North and the other from the South. The one from the North was Immanuel Kant, who in his work *Perpetual Peace*, proposed an arrangement for the life of
humanity that goes beyond the division of nations. It was a vision like that of the astronauts who from space can see just one earth, and not able to identify the borders of nations which are zealously but senselessly guarded at the cost of a lot of human lives. The other thinker from the South was Rabindranath Tagore, who was very universalistic in his outlook. Even before the outbreak of World War I, in his lectures delivered in the USA and Japan, he warned about the danger of nationalism and stated that the reality of humans is above the imagined nation. If Kant maintained that “all politics must bend its knee before morality [right],” Tagore taught us that the human has primacy over the nation. The contributions of these thinkers from the North and the South are fundamental lessons for today.

What they said is equally applicable to religion. Religion, like nationalism—both often intertwined—is to be tamed and cured from its instinct to violence. It will have to shed much deadwood that has accumulated in the name of tradition. What nationalism is to a country, tradition is to religion. But the deadwood of tradition is so thick and it has so covered religion that it is benumbed and no more able to sense the burning issues of humanity. It remains narcissistic, concerned all the time about itself. It is like nationalism clouding the mind and heart and instilling aggression.

Like the instinct for violence, religions have an innate proclivity to taboos. Taboos around beliefs and rituals, and social shibboleths are things that defy reason. They are believed and performed with a magical consciousness. The religion of the future will critically interrogate its own belief system, rituals, and practices as to what they could really signify for the wellbeing of humankind and of nature. I am not advocating the abolition of all existing religions, instead suggesting that they renounce many things—like snake shedding its skin—to be able to renew itself and rise up as religions of the future with a different focus and orientation. Symbols, worship, and rituals of a religion will not serve only its adherents and followers but will be open-ended to the larger goal of the wellbeing of the entire human family. In other words,
what I am advocating is that every religion becomes cosmopolitan in its vision, spirit, beliefs, rituals, worship, and so on.\textsuperscript{14} This is what globalization should mean for religious identities.

**Public Significance of Religious Beliefs**

There are many efforts at re-presenting religion, trying to remove deadwood, to refurbish it, reform, and renew it. Some would think that the sources of this renewal can be found in the forgotten germaine tradition of the religions themselves, and that renewal would be envisaged as *ressourcement*—going back to the sources. This trend is there in all major religious traditions in their efforts to renew themselves and make themselves more meaningful. Surely these are laudable efforts. However, for a religion to reinvent itself as a religion of the future, much more needs to be done. It is crucial to bring out the *public significance* of what it believes and what it could contribute to the attainment of common good.

Certain radicality is inevitable if religions are to reinvent themselves and serve the future of humanity and nature. The ideal is not to create one single universal or planetary religion in the name of globalization. This will be only as successful as Esperanto—an experiment in a common language for humankind created artificially. I think such an ideal would do away with all the richness and plurality of the beautiful rainbow that religions really are. Humanity will be more impoverished with one single universal religion which cannot but also appear as utopian. What we need is that every single existing religion reimages and endows itself with the spirit of universality and open-endedness in such a way that everyone can feel at home and benefit from its riches. This vision of the future shape of religion calls for deploying the necessary means and measures now for the realization of the lofty goals it points to.

After all, religions are not ends in themselves but windows that open up to a new view of life and way of life. The religion of the future will have its feet on the “rough ground” of everyday life. It will help us see the reality around in a new light, with different eyes. It is not alienation, but an immersion into reality to dispel shadows as in the allegory of the cave of Plato. For the transforming vision and way of life to take place, there is the need to mold oneself and one’s community of faith in a new direction. The more an individual or a community thinks and acts in a

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Chap. 13.
noninstrumental manner, they will have a mystical experience—a “mysticism with open eyes”—that is fully aware of the reality all around.

ENGAGING NEW QUESTION

The dialectic between reason and religion has characterized the past. With rationality defined in a univocal manner by the dominant and held out as the measure of everything, religion was required to justify itself in the court of reason. It is too evident from history that reason goes to slumber and that we need other forces to awaken it. The tragic wars of the twentieth century and gruesome instances of genocide give us little room to trust reason beyond a point, and hold it as the ultimate. I think the whole discussion in the Global North about secularism and secularization is, at bottom, a part of this dialectic of reason and religion. The future of religions needs to be set—beyond the North and the South polarity—in the context of today’s stupendous and at the same time highly ambiguous developments which on the one hand condition human freedom as never before, and at the same time seem to offer immense and unprecedented opportunities and openings to reshape the destiny of humankind and nature.

15 Cf. Felix Wilfred, “Christian Faith and Socio-Cultural Rationalities: Reflections from Asia,” in Concilium 2017/1 (London: SCM Press, 2017), 101–110.