

## Chapter 2

### *The Contemporary Age*

In Buddhist terminology, the word “mappo” (in Japanese) is used to describe periods of turmoil and upheaval in society and personal life. It specifically refers to the decline of Buddhism after Shakyamuni. As Buddhism became more and more embroiled and entangled in worldly matters, there developed competing factions and interpretations. Mappo, which means the last age of the Dharma, symbolizes the lack of spiritual depth and vitality in Buddhism, as well as the world at large, despite the abundance of religious activity.

As existential concept, mappo portrays our inner spiritual condition which is reflected in the outer world. The essential meaning of this concept is that religion and the age becomes corrupt because the people within it have not maintained high spiritual values and goals. In terms of such an essential and existential definition, the reality of mappo in our time is evidenced in the absurdity, the ambiguity, the alienation, the anxiety, and the aloneness that plagues modern society.

The absurdity of our mappo world is reflected in the immorality of war and of racism, both of which have paraded as being morally right. Absurdity is expressed in the easy resort to violence as a means to solve problems. It is reflected in politicians calling for peace but not cultivating the means and methods to achieve peace. It is observable in the wide range of deceptions practiced all through society and particularly so in government. As social thinker Jacques Ellul has stated, “everything is under suspicion.”

Contemporary awareness of absurdity and ambiguity and of our mappo condition is expressed in the aimlessness of youth, in the difficulty they have in discovering clear values on which to base their lives. Patriotism has been degraded and exploited. History no longer appears to give direction. In a world technologically linked by commerce and communication, ideals have been used as cover-ups for exploitation. The problem of values and ethics relative to issues of abortion or ecology highlight the ambiguities of modern life. The resulting sense of powerlessness and inner oppression in both the West and the East has stimulated many religious movements and quasi-religious movements, all of which have as their aim the provision of meaning and personal significance.

Alienation, another powerful hallmark of mappo, has been eloquently expressed between social and economic classes, between generations, between sexes and races. This feature of

alienation is probably the most clear and understood of the many features of our age. However, the deepest alienation, and the most powerful, is that from one's true self. This is the agonizing sense of alienation that is the result of failing to penetrate and appreciate the mystery and depth of one's own existence.

Our age attempts to prevent such insight through the blandishment of lures of material success. Such lures give a false sense of meaning based on the externals of possessions and distract our attention from the realities of ourselves, robbing our lives of a sense of inner worth.

Despair becomes our companion and for the overwhelming majority of us, our age can easily be described as an age of anxiety, personal and social. We have lived each day under the constant threat of warfare of the most ultimate sort. Indeed, we have lived in such constant apprehension through decades of social division and threats of violence. Generations of racism, together with technological advances, have created an underclass which threatens the stability of society through violence or the varied consequences of economic deprivation and poverty. These conditions cause us either to feel guilty about our own economic well-being or to become anxious about our security in society. We are constantly confronted with the loss of personal meaning in a mass society.

Aloneness even in the midst of company becomes a common experience for hosts of people. There appears a hollowness in life. Deep relations and commitments are often avoided, though we yearn for them. Apathy is widespread. Closure into a small intimate group is frequently chosen as a way of dealing with our loneliness, but even that proves a detour on the existential path of coming to terms with the reality of ourselves.

All of us have had some familiarity with these traits. We all experience these marks of mappo: alienation, anxiety and aloneness at some point in our existence as we raise questions concerning the viability and integrity of our own lives. The ambiguity of our age is anguishingly visible as we look at the problem of religion which, though it flourishes, gives rise to the question as to whether it is part of the cause, rather than the cure, for the troubles of contemporary men and women.

What is the problem of religion today? There are many ways to look at it. It is an intellectual problem. It is a social problem. It is a spiritual problem. It is another basic indicator, along with alienation, anxiety, and absurdity, of our times as mappo. The intellectual problem of religion has deep roots in the development of western culture. In a variety of ways, the intellectual

grounds of religious belief, the unity of faith and reason from which Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition rose, have been eroded. There have been a variety of forces which have led to the secularization of life and the undermining of the meaning of religion.

Five hundred years ago, while Pure Land Buddhism spread among the people of all classes in Japan, Copernicus and Galileo reoriented western man from a geocentric perspective to a heliocentric. Man was no longer the center of the universe, and perhaps no longer the focus of God's concern as scripture had taught. Western man's world view thus had to change. Luther, the great Protestant reformer, dramatized and further contributed to the fragmentation of the western spiritual community. From Luther onward, the authority of the Pope never totally recovered from his challenge. Religion became a more individual and private or subjective affair. Next, Rousseau and the Romantics challenged the exaltation of civilization and rationality. The happy savage became the ideal. This view further undermined the spiritual disciplines of the West.

In the 19th century, Darwin dealt a strong blow to the sense of the sacredness of man, the individual created in the image of God, by confronting that image with scientifically demonstrable evidence of the theories of evolution and natural selection. Marx with his social theories showed religion as an exploitive force in the hands of the ruling class. Materialistic determinism replaced the will of God. And in this same chaotic age of new theories challenging old ideals, Freud showed that our hopes and dreams, our beliefs and faiths are all illusions resulting from our relations to our fathers. Religion, now viewed from the Freudian perspective, was a form of neurosis.

In the 20th century with Einstein, everything became relative to time, place, and perspective. In one brief century, one long lifespan, all the traditional supports for faith were weakened and washed away. The successive wars and struggles left individuals with little to hold on to as a basis for their lives, except the struggle somehow to survive and be happy for themselves alone. Yet they we survive in a world of interdependence and interrelatedness, our lives affected by and affecting the lives of others whose faces we may never see, names we may never know. Whatever our view of religion, and regardless of the contemporary erosion of its traditional supports, we are every day confronting the spiritual reality of issues and problems which are shaping our existential reality and the destiny of mankind. Our dilemma is, how can we retain our humanity against the many assaults on our spirits coming from modern society?

Spiritual reality runs in a deep fragile vein within our consciousness and has hidden roots still deeper in our subconscious. Nevertheless, the secularization and technological developments

of our age have led to the dehumanization and depersonalization we also sense in the depth of our beings. Religious faith itself, appears to many people to be obsolete. However, Harvey Cox, a Christian theologian surveying his own experiences in these terms has commented:

“..... ritual and religion are not going to wither away, and that the real issue now is whether they will be used for man’s liberation or to keep him in bondage.” [1]

Cox also points out that, in regard to ritual, which is the expression of spiritual awareness and the experiential dimension of religion:

“Man never ‘outgrows’ rituals, although he certainly uses them for vastly different purposes and relates to them in ever-changing ways.” [2]

I myself believe that it is possible to view the variety of religious movements in these last decades of the 20th century as the vehicle of man’s search for a new self which can transcend the emptiness of existence felt as a result of the conflicting forces of our mappo era. Robert Assagioli, a psychotherapist, notes in this connection:

“One major reason why the Self is coming back into currency is the tremendous search for self identity. Formerly an individual took himself so to speak for granted. He accepted himself as he was, or, more frequently, he identified himself with the group to which he belonged p family, tribe, clan, class, or nation or, if he was religious, with some great Being or God. But in our time, which may well be a time of total crisis, all these identifications fall away and the individual is thrown back on himself. This baffles him, he does not know who he is and this is the chief reason for the widespread ‘existential anguish’. [3]

In the effort to get beyond themselves to find the true self, youth particularly have resorted to a variety of means from the use of drugs to a return to religion and the occult. They have tried to experience a ‘cosmic consciousness.’ Assagioli notes:

“For these people, the awareness, first of the personal self and then of the Transpersonal Self as living realities, provides a needed structure that permits a steady gradual ascent. From such awareness also comes an understanding of the nature of spontaneous or induced experiences, leading to their assimilation into other parts of the personality.” [4]

From this standpoint, true Self-awareness can serve to direct and integrate human energies for positive, constructive human ends. If the contemporary spiritual protest represents in its deepest dimensions the apprehension of cosmic self-awareness, it may contribute to a

deepening spiritual understanding by contemporary men and women, despite the variety of their belief and methods.

Existential anguish may well be the condition for breakthrough to a fresh apprehension of spiritual reality and its root in our lives. Because of the great diversity and character of religious movements today, we may be prone to dismiss them as temporary expressions of the imbalance of the age. However, it is possible that things of great importance may come from unexpected places. In this connection, I think of the thunder-egg rocks of Oregon in which the central core is the most beautiful agate, though from the exterior one might think to cast it away. It is a viable possibility that even the most bizarre religious group may possess a hint of deeper meaning.

However, the fact that there may be positive meaning in any such religious perspectives should not make us uncritical in assessing their overall importance as true alternatives for dealing with the wide range of contemporary problems, for seeing our mappo condition with clear eyes. The great upsurge of religious involvement today is clearly a protest against the dehumanization of life which we all experience, and a search for the deeper meaning in life which is our common hunger. Religious truth, and how it is to be determined among the multiplicity of visions, claims and experiences, remains the primary problem.

If one listens carefully to many discussions of religion among thoughtful people, one may observe that the selection of a religion is frequently a matter of taste rather than truth. Individuals seek groups that already suit their preformed religious sensibilities. There is also the question as to whether the significance of a religion is fulfilled solely through one's feeling of satisfaction and happiness, or when the life of the persons around him are concretely enhanced through a deeper concern and struggle for justice in human relations. In other words, is religion a purely individual matter, seeking one's own good or is its primary focus the attainment of good for all, even perhaps at one's own sacrifice?

Mahayana Buddhism placed the emphasis on the latter, though not ignoring the former entirely. Relating to the issue of the good of others, which is the dominant spiritual principle in Mahayana Buddhism, we may ask whether it is a direct or indirect benefit to mankind. Is the good of others believed to come about purely through a religious practice which is not involved with the lives of those who are needy, or is it brought about through identity with the sufferings of humanity in relation to its immediate needs? Is religion fulfilled within society or beyond it? For a great many people today, the ultimate goal of religion in some form or other is to bring happiness to the individual themselves. However, when we define the goal of religion

as happiness, success, peace of mind or contentment, individuals are tempted to trade their true selves and freedom for a spurious freedom which relieves them of the need to make decisions or to involve themselves in human affairs. It is a subtle problem, but the old saying, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," remains a basic issue in religion today.

The problem of existence is always that of freedom versus security. Many modern groups offer a freedom by way of submission to a master who assures one of the rightness of his choice and assumes all the ambiguities of existence for the devotee. There is relief, but not true freedom, as witness the way in which persons become closed in, split between their minds and their feelings, accepting dogmatism and uncritical in reflecting on their experience. The diversity of religious expression makes the problem of truth very difficult. Most would give it up. However, it is an essential consideration which must be explored if there is to be firm and real commitment. Commitment implies the truthfulness of that to which we yield ourselves, and we must reflect on that truthfulness.

Since plurality can blunt the quest for truth, usually as a defensive measure, there is a tendency to discount and put aside other truth claims as merely interesting. Our age is much like the period at the end of the Hellenistic Age. Cults of all types then flooded the Roman Empire, so much so that when the Apostle Paul in the early Christian church preached at Mars Hill in Athens, where many itinerant religionists discussed their particular cults, he met people who brushed things off because they were dulled by repetitious novelty.

By contrast, search rather than religious novelty or cultism has characterized the history of religion in India. From its beginnings there, more than 2,500 years ago, Buddhism has been a search for truth. It was Gautama's goal to break through the veil of delusion that blinded humanity to things as they really are. Buddhism is a religion of enlightenment. It is not capitulation to taste or conformity to mere custom. In its more than two millennia of tradition, its basic search for truth has provided for a constant renewal and refreshment of that tradition.

Shinran's departure from the tradition of his day was such a force of renewal and refreshment. Moreover, his contribution to religious insight as he carried out his own search for truth 800 years ago in Japan is still fresh and clear in its illumination of existential meaning and spiritual reality in this mappo world of our twentieth century.

Religion today has become completely voluntary, losing the many social sanctions of society and family that enforced adherence. There is no reason to belong to, or support, a movement

where one does not see the essential truth which that faith offers to humanity. To grasp the depth and relevance of Shinshu today, the place of Shinran's teachings in Buddhism, and the religious roots of Buddhism itself, must be clearly understood, in the perspective of history and the development of Mahayana.

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### **Notes**

[1] "On Coming of Age in Malvern," *Christian Century*, August 1, 1973, XC-28, p. 778

[2] Ibid

[3] Robert Assagioli, "The Rebirth of the Soul," an interview by Stuart Miller, *Intellectual Digest*, August, 1973, p. 10

[4] Ibid