

## D.T. Suzuki's "The Relation of Religion and the State"

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"The Relation of Religion and the State" is one of D.T. Suzuki's most frequently quoted essays, generally by authors attempting to show nationalistic tendencies on Suzuki's part. "The Relation of Religion and the State" is not an independent piece, but a chapter in Suzuki's first book, *Shin shukyo ron* 新宗教論 (A New Theory of Religion), published in 1896, when Suzuki was twenty-six years old.

A New Theory of Religion is, as the title suggests, Suzuki's attempt to rethink the significance of religion in the age of rapid modernization and change that followed Japan's abandonment of its isolationist policies at the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The essays that comprise it cover the entire range of issues relating to religion and its place in human existence, as reflected in the chapter titles:

- Chapter 1 Introduction
- Chapter 2 Religion
- Chapter 3 God
- Chapter 4 Faith
- Chapter 5 Ceremony, Ritual, and Prayer
- Chapter 6 The Founders of Religions
- Chapter 7 Humanity
- Chapter 8 No-Self (On the Fallacy of the Concept of a Substantial Self)
- Chapter 9 Non-Arising and Non-Perishing
- Chapter 10 The Relation of Religion and Philosophy
- Chapter 11 The Relation of Religion and Science
- Chapter 12 The Difference between Religion and Morality
- Chapter 13 The Relation of Religion and Education

Chapter 14 Religion and Social Problems

Chapter 15 The Relation of Religion and the State

Chapter 16 Religion and the Family

The essay in question, "The Relation of Religion and State," presents the young Suzuki's thought on an essential topic for discussion in any collection of this type: the relation between the inner life of the human spirit and the outer structure of the state, within which, in the present scheme of things, all human beings must live. Suzuki, at that time already an experienced Zen practitioner, maintains that, while on one level the concerns of religion (particularly religion as understood from the Buddhist perspective) transcend those of the state, on another level it can contribute to the state's practical needs.

As part of his consideration of this dynamic, Suzuki discusses the role of religion in situations of war. This question is one that any honest examination of the religion-state relationship must consider, given, as Suzuki points out, the historical inevitability of war in a world where each nation is concerned primarily with its own advantage. Suzuki argues for the legitimacy of defensive war and considers the attitude with which a nation's soldiers should fight when such wars do occur. Although sections of the essay on this topic are expressed in a rhetorical style with a certain nationalistic ring, Suzuki does not advocate, or defend, nationalistic wars of invasion. This holds true for the entire body of work he produced throughout his seventy-year career as a writer.

"The Relation of Religion and the State" appears in volume 23 of Suzuki's *Collected Works*, pp. 134–140.

### The Relation of Religion and the State

At first glance it might be thought that religion and the state would be in profound conflict, since the state is based upon differentiation while religion takes the position that everything is equal. Religion sees as its final purpose the realization of a universal ideal, while the state sees as its ultimate purpose the preservation of

its own existence. Religion seeks to unite the entire world into one, while states strive to survive as separate entities. Religion teaches that the whole world is a brotherhood and that all peoples are compatriots, while the state asserts its preeminence in the world. Religion preaches impartial benevolence and enjoins against making distinctions between self and other, while the state promotes the principles of loyalty and patriotism and exhorts its citizens to independence. Religion never hesitates to challenge the validity of history and the state, while the state always acts on the basis of its own self-centered interests. In this way, religion and the state seem virtually incompatible. It is difficult to know which outlook is correct, that of religion or that of the state.

Let us look at the actual situation among the world's nations today. Each establishes a country on a piece of this tiny earth, claiming that territory is its territory, that area's produce is its produce, and that area's people as its people. If conflicts arise between the interests of different countries, they immediately forsake peace and, taking up arms, kill people, halt commerce, and destroy the means of production, continuing at this until one side or the other is defeated. Owing perhaps to their ideals of civilized behavior, they prefer not to admit that self-interest is behind all of this, so they always use the concept of "justice" to excuse their behavior. "We attack them," they claim, "for the purpose of maintaining long-term peace in the East (or the West, or the World)." Or, "They ignored our rights, and so, in the name of justice, we cannot remain silent." Or, "We desire only to help that weak and impoverished nation attain independence and raise it to the status of a civilized state." All this talk sounds so reasonable, as if war were inevitable from the start. But the truth of the situation is ugly indeed. Such countries are simply pursuing their own self-interests and at the same time suppressing the power of the other country. And this is accepted, because regardless of what the truth of the matter might be, "justice" can always be invoked as an excuse.

And what of the weak and impoverished nations? No matter how much their rights are violated and their peace destroyed, no matter how much justice for them

is ignored, and no matter how much humiliation they are subjected to, they have no choice but to stifle their anger and hide their resentment as they keep silent and bide their time. It is they who are truly in a position to cry for justice, but because they lack the power to enforce it they cannot even invoke its name. International law exists in name only and is of no help to countries such as they. Those with the military power to do so call that which is wrong, right, and that which is evil, good, and in broad daylight rob and pillage as they please.

Even so, the age of barbarism is long gone. Nations are ever more clever in their stratagems, ever more subtle in their designs. No longer do they turn immediately to force when faced with a problem, as the barbarians did. Their first tactic is diplomacy, in which they attempt to negotiate a solution. These so-called "diplomatic" initiatives are nothing but grand deceptions, employing bluffs to intimidate or cajolery to deceive, forming alliances in secret while feigning antagonism in public, or begging for compassion in front while smiling scornfully in back. Although the approaches are infinite in variety, in the end all are nothing but conspiracy and intrigue. Only after they see that all their subterfuges have been tried and no more tricks remain do the nations send their iron warships out to sea and dispatch their cannons to the fields. This is done as a last resort, and therein, I believe, lies the real difference between barbarism and civilization. We might therefore characterize present-day international relations as: beginning in self-interest, continuing in abuse, and ending in exhaustion.

This is, unfortunately, a credible depiction of contemporary relations between the nations. One has to admit that it diverges sharply from the ideals of religion, and thus it is only natural to question whether the state and religion can ever coexist.

When viewed from one perspective, religion and the state are utterly incompatible. Religion regards the three realms [of desire, form, and the formless] as its very being, and sees all living things as its own children. Religion preaches not only the equality of all humankind, but also places on the same plane the mountains and rivers, the grasses and trees, the birds and beasts, and the insects

and fish. This is not an outlook that can be equated with one which stresses the independence and rights of nations.

Furthermore, maintenance of the state is not the purpose of our existence as human beings but is merely an expedient means—[our identification with a particular state is] nothing more than a single stage that humanity must pass through in the course of its development. Humanity exists for the sake of humanity, not for the sake of the state. If as society evolves it ever outgrows its need for the structure of the state, the state should be abandoned forthwith and a superior approach developed. This being the case, I believe that the state must be reformed when necessary in order that its existence does not hinder the realization of the hopes and ideals of religion, which is to say, of humanity,

Observing the relation between religion and the state from a wider perspective, however, we see that this view is rather one-sided. Argued in spacial terms, equality without distinction is false equality, while distinction without equality is false differentiation. Or rather, equality cannot exist apart from distinction, and distinction cannot exist apart from equality. To be distinct and yet equal, to be equal and yet distinct: this is the complete teaching.

The relation between religion and the state is similar to this. Only with the existence of the state, which is based on distinction, can one speak of religion, which is grounded in equality; only with the existence of religion, which strives for equality, can one understand the state, which is based on distinction. Thus there is a certain contradiction in wishing to speak of religion while rejecting the existence of the state, rather like affirming the existence of the "other" while negating that of the "self." I believe that the perfection of morality for the individual involves both the presence of self and the absence of self; it involves both self-benefit and other-benefit. The situation is much the same with regard to the state. Striving to help other nations without regard for one's own is to stress equality without accepting discrimination; concern only with the interests of one's own country without arguing for universal justice as well is to stress discrimination without accepting equality. Neither can be complete while the two

are separate. According to this principle, religion and the state can only attain completion when they support each other.

Argued in temporal terms, the formation of the state necessarily occurs at some point during the evolution of society, and must serve as a means to help humanity bring to realization the purpose of its existence. However, if seen as a stage that must be passed through as a means to realize our purpose, we have no other choice than to bear with it even if, for a time, it seems to be distancing us from that purpose. This is because that which exists as a necessary response to the demands of a particular time and place always partakes of the truth of that particular time and place. This known as relative truth. Moreover, if a relative truth appears in response to a natural necessity, how does it differ from an absolute truth? Insofar as both bear the nature of truth, we should act in accordance with them. Thus, although the state may be but a means, it comprises an intimation of truth. Religion too must to some extent vary in form according to time and place. That is, religion must, at the beginning, seek to support the existence of the state, and to accord itself with its history and cultural outlook.

We might compare this to the process of human biological evolution, in which humanity may be seen as originating in unicellular creatures something like amoebas. Although even then these creatures possessed the potential to develop into one of the most complex living organisms on the planet, at that stage they were confined to floating about in the mud, ingesting organic material for nourishment and assimilating it with their rudimentary digestive systems. Reproduction occurred through a splitting of the nucleus, since there was still no differentiation between the sexes. But at some point a dynamic arose toward independent existence. When from our present state as human beings we reflect back upon these unicellular predecessors of ours, we cannot claim that there is anything false or illogical about their simple functions—barely definable as biological in nature—that disqualifies them as our ancestors. Rather, we accept the fact that this level of function was most appropriate when they were at the unicellular stage of development. The human evolutionary line was destined not to

remain at the stage of its amoeba-like beginnings, but to gradually evolve into what it is now, a being with the potential to function in nearly miraculous ways. Although in the process [toward that goal] we may seem to have lost our way, we can only be what we are at that particular time.

The historical development of governmental systems is comparable. If, for example, one accepts feudalism as a necessary stage in the course of political development, one can acknowledge that, although feudalism as a system is far from perfect, when a country is in fact at that stage in its history the first principle of ethics is mutual affection between lord and vassal, given that the welfare of the land depends upon the soundness of that relationship. Affection between sovereign and subject is, of course, an admirable sentiment whatever the age, but it hardly constitutes the perfection of human morality. Furthermore, with the collapse of the feudal system and the establishment of political freedom and constitutional government, a corresponding shift in ethical ideals is to be expected. Still, during the feudal era itself, this virtue [affection between lord and vassal] was always emphasized.

In any event, although we do not know today what direction the future progress of society will take (and even if, as some scholars foretell, it merges into a single undifferentiated global entity), no one would agree that the present situation of international confrontation and rivalry constitutes the ideal state of things. Nevertheless, for the present we must act in accordance with the times. Therefore, as is clear from the discussion above, we must undertake all enterprises that contribute to the progress of the nation, while keeping in mind that the nation as it is today is still short of the final goal and that it is desirable always to seek to improve it. This [dynamic toward improvement] is truly the sphere of religion. Religion does not attempt to subvert the foundations of the state and replace them with something new; it simply strives for the state's progress and development in accordance with its history and makeup.

Thus the interests of religion and the state do not clash; rather, both sides can only hope for wholeness when they aid and support each other. Granted, the

present state of ethics governing the relations between nations reeks of the barbaric and is thus quite contrary to the ideals of religion, but the fact that justice and humanitarianism are even spoken about indicates the presence at the core [of those ethics] at least a grain of moral sensibility. It is from within this inner moral sensibility that we must germinate the seed of religion. How then, is this to happen?

The problem is easily resolved if one thinks of religion as an entity with the state as its body, and of the state as something that develops with religion as its spirit. In other words, religion and the state form a unity; if every action and movement of the state takes on a religious character and if every word and action of religion takes on a state character, then whatever is done for the sake of the state is done for religion, and whatever is done for the sake of religion is done for the state. The two are one, and one is the two; differentiation is equality, and equality is differentiation; perfectly fused, there is not a hair's width of separation between religion and the state.

If we look at this [unified relationship between religion and the state] from the point of view of international morality, we see that the purpose of maintaining soldiers and encouraging the military arts is not to conquer other countries and deprive them of their rights or freedom. Rather they are done only to preserve the existence of one's country and prevent it from being encroached upon by unruly heathens. The construction of heavy warships and the casting of cannon are not to increase personal gain and suppress the prosperity of others. Rather, they are done only to prevent the history of one's own country from disturbance by injustice and aggression. Conducting commerce and working to increase production are not for the purpose of building up material wealth in order to subdue other nations. Rather, they are done only in order to further expand human knowledge and bring about the perfection of morality.

Thus if an aggressive country comes and obstructs one's commerce or violates one's rights, this would truly interrupt the progress of all humanity. In the name of religion one's country could not submit to this. There would be no choice other

than to take up arms, not for the purpose of slaying the enemy, nor for the purpose of pillaging cities, let alone for the purpose of acquiring wealth. It would be, instead, simply to punish the people of the country representing injustice in order that justice might prevail. What could be self-seeking about this? In any event, this would constitute religious conduct. As long as the state takes care not to lose this moral sense, one can anticipate the step by step advancement of humanity and the fulfillment of universal ideals.

The morality of the individual toward the state is similar to this. In peacetime one works diligently, day and night, seeking to promote the advancement of [such endeavors as] agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, art and science, and technology, never forgetting that the purpose of these endeavors is the advancement of all humanity. This is what is called "peacetime religion." However, should hostilities commence with a foreign country, then sailors fight on sea and soldiers fight in the fields, swords flashing and cannon smoke belching, moving this way and that while "regarding their own lives as light as goose feathers and their duty is as heavy as Mount Taishan." Should they fall on the battlefield they have no regrets. This is what is called "religion during the time of a [national] emergency." Religion does not necessarily involve concepts like "Buddha" or "God." If one fulfills the demands of one's duties, what could be more religious than that?

In summary, the relation between religion and the state can be seen, from one point of view, as that between equality and differentiation, and, from another point of view, as that between means and end. The present state of morality among nations, which is somewhat similar to the relations between individuals during barbarian times, could not possibly accord with religion. Fortunately, we can discern a glimmer of moral light in the midst of all this, and it is from this glimmer that religion must emerge. The actions of the individual with regard to the state, insofar as they contribute in the least way to the progress of the state, that is, to the progress of humanity, are in harmony with the essence of religion. The principle of "benefitting oneself and benefitting others" is not a virtue to be observed between individuals only, but should inform the relations between nations as well.