

Turnips and Cauliflowers

I was from Cornwall. My wife was from Bedfordshire. We spoke with different accents and came from different social backgrounds. When we married, words could be a problem. I called it a turnip; she called it a swede. I said broccoli; she said cauliflower. Happily, the differences became a joke between us; but I see many examples of words dangerously dividing people from one another.

Imagine two people talking about trees. One thinks of a pine tree, whilst the other thinks of an oak. 'Trees stay green all year round', says the pine tree person. 'No they don't', says the oak tree person, 'they have leaves that fall off in the autumn'. 'Leaves'? says the pine tree person, 'Since when have trees had leaves? Surely it's needles?' I hope that I've made my point: unless we understand and agree what words mean, then discussions are at best a waste of time, or at worst, destructive.

Take the word 'religion'. Whenever I hear this word used as the reason for all the conflicts in this world, I would say: 'Well, if you also include such things as politics, patriotism, animal rights, attitudes to sexual orientation and other emotional commitments as religions; then I would agree'.

By this definition, the critics of religion are right. If we use the word religion to describe those beliefs and commitments which are more important to us, as individual human beings, than anything else; if religion represents those things that we are willing to unselfishly promote, witness to, work for, or even die for; then yes, religion is what drives everything that the human race does; whether for good or for evil. From this viewpoint, religion is more than belief or disbelief in God, Holy Books, ethics, diet, lifestyle, or anything else. Instead, it is anything that any individual person thinks as the most important thing in their life.

As the atheist Sigmund Freud said: 'If you wish to expel religion from our European civilization, you can only do it through another system of doctrines; and from the outset, this would take over all the psychological characteristics of religion.' And in that context, the real source of the evils attributed to religion is we humans; and not the label 'religion' that we use as an excuse.

Father Michael Harry
www.orthodoxlouth.co.uk
www.orthodoxgrimsby.co.uk