

THE RETURN OF THE SACRED: THE ARGUMENT  
ABOUT THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

by Daniel Bell

From the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century almost every Enlightenment thinker expected religion to disappear in the twentieth century. The belief was based on the power of reason. Religion was associated with superstition, fetishism, unprovable beliefs, a form of fear which was used as protection against other fears—a form of security one might associate with the behavior of children—and which they believed in fact had arisen in the “childhood” of the human race.

Religion, in this view, arose out of the fears of nature, both the physical terrors of the environment and the dangers lurking in the inner psyche which were released at night or conjured up by special diviners. The more rational answer—we owe the start of course to the Greeks—was philosophy, whose task was to uncover *physis* or the hidden order of nature. The *leitmotiv* was the phrase which occurs first in Aristotle and is resurrected later by Hegel and Marx, “the realization of philosophy.” For Aristotle nature had a *telos*, and within it man would realize his perfected form. For Hegel this *telos* lay in History, in

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the *marche générale* of human consciousness which was wiping away the fogs of illusion and allowing men to see the world more clearly. "The criticism of religion," Marx said, "ends with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

### DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION

The end of history would come in the "leap" from "the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom." The end of history would be the unbinding of Prometheus and man stepping onto the mountain-top to take his place with him among the Titans. As Percy Bysshe Shelley proclaimed:

The painted veil . . . is torn aside;  
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains  
Scepterless, free, uncircumscribed, but man  
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,  
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king  
Over himself. . . .<sup>2</sup>

From the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century almost every sociological thinker—I exempt Max Scheler and a few others—expected religion to disappear by the onset of the twenty-first century. If the belief no longer lay in reason (though in Émile Durkheim there remained a lingering hope, and in a book he expected to write after *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, but never did, he planned to sketch the forms of a new universalism that he thought might arise by the end of the century),<sup>3</sup> it now lay in the idea of rationalization. Reason is the uncovering—the underlying structure—of the natural order. Rationalization is the substitution of a technical order for a natural order—in the rhythms of work, in the functional adaptation of means to ends, in the criteria for use of objects, the principal criterion being efficiency. And since, as most sociologists believe, men are shaped largely by the institutions in which they live, the world has become, in Max Weber's terrifying phrase, "an iron cage." As summed up by Weber, "with the progress of science and technology, man has stopped believing in magic powers, in spirits and demons; he has lost his sense of prophecy and, above all, his sense of the sacred. Reality has become dreary, flat and utilitarian, leaving a great void in the souls of men which they seek to fill by furious activity and through various devices and substitutes."<sup>4</sup>

This is the view, I daresay, of most sociologists today, though much of the poignancy has been drained away and replaced if not by jargon then by bare utilitarian prose, as if the language itself has become proof of the proposition.

The sociological term for this process is secularization. Yet I find the term to be a muddle, for it mixes two very different kinds of phenomena, the social and the cultural, and two very different processes of change that are not congruent with each other. Changes in social structure are determinate, and there is a clear principle of change. If something is cheaper, better, more efficient, we use it as a substitute for the previous process. If an institution becomes too large, it differentiates and sets up specialized parts. But changes in culture follow no such trajectories. Pierre Boulez does not replace Bach or Jackson Pollock "succeed" Raphael. Changes in culture are syncretistic and, at best, enlarge the moral repertoire of mankind; at worst, as in the meditative mingling of consciousness, East and West, syncretism trivializes culture.

Since I sort out the different processes of institutional change from cultural change, I would break apart the concept of secularization and divide the meanings. The word "secularization" has an original meaning that I would like to restore. It originally was employed, in the wake of the wars of religion, to denote the removal of territory or property from the control of ecclesiastical authorities. In this sense secularization means the disengagement of religion from political life—the classic instance is the separation of church and state—and the sundering of religion from the aesthetic so that art need no longer bend to moral norms but can follow its own impulses, wherever they lead. In short, it is the shrinkage of institutional authority over the spheres of public life, the retreat to a private world where religions have authority only over their followers and not over any other section of the polity or society.

But when such secularization has taken place, as clearly has been the case in the last two hundred years, there is no necessary, determinate shrinkage in the character and extent of beliefs. In fact all through this "progressive" secularization of religious institutions we find extraordinary revivals in religious enthusiasm among masses of people, as in the burned-over districts and camp-fire evangelicism in the United States, the Methodist revivals in England, and, in the culture, the powerful replies of a Friedrich Schleiermacher to the cultured despisers, the conversion of a John Henry Newman, the existential faith of a Søren Kierkegaard, the powerful religiosity of a Vladimir Soloviev, the personalism of an Emmanuel Mounier, the neoorthodoxy of a Karl Barth or Paul Tillich, the agony of a Simone Weil, and other renewed wellsprings of faith that have not ceased to come forth again and again in that period.

There has been of course in the culture of the last two hundred years the more dominant trend of disbelief. This is the idea that the

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world has lost its mystery, that men not gods can rule the world, or that beyond there is nothing, just the void, the underlying thread of modernism which is nihilism. This is what Weber has called *Entzauberung*, the disenchantment—or, more clumsily, the demagification—of the world. Yet this tendency, which indeed has been very powerful, has very different roots from the process of rationalization (whose sources are technological and economic; I do leave aside science not only because of its early affiliations with Puritanism but because it has been only one strand of science that has supported rationalization—the Baconian influence) or the process of secularization (whose roots were primarily political, in the diminution of ecclesiastical power). The sources of disenchantment lie, I believe, in somewhat autonomous tendencies in Western culture, and it is those tendencies that have to be the starting point, I believe, for an understanding of the future of religion in the contemporary world.

There is thus a double process at work. One is secularization, the differentiation of institutional authority in the world, which is reinforced by the processes of rationalization. The second, in the realm of beliefs and culture, is disenchantment, or what I would prefer to call, for the parallelism of the term, profanation. Thus the sacred and secular become my paired terms for processes at work within institutions and social systems, the sacred and the profane for the processes within culture.

The thread I wish to pursue is the changes within culture. Here too there is a double level, for changes in culture arise in reaction to changes in institutional life (to justify or to attack), and changes in culture relate to the changes in moral temper and sensibility, to expressive styles and modes of symbolization, to the destruction of old symbols and the creation of new ones. Since changes in the character of religion, not institutional authority, begin primarily at this second level, it is there that I want to develop my story.

I come now to the fulcrum of my argument, the definition of culture. By culture I mean less than the anthropological notion of the artifacts and patterned ways of life of a bounded group and more than the “genteel” notions of a Matthew Arnold as the cultivation of taste and judgment. I would define culture as the modalities of response by sentient men to the core questions that confront all human groups in the consciousness of existence: how one meets death, the meaning of tragedy, the nature of obligation, the character of love—these recurrent questions which are, I believe, cultural universals; they are asked in all societies where men have become conscious of the finiteness of existence.

Culture thus is always a *ricorso*. Men may expand their technical

powers. Nature may be mastered by scientific knowledge. There may be progress in the instrumental realms. But the existential questions remain. The answers may vary—and do. This is the history of human culture, the variations in myth, philosophy, symbols, and styles. But the questions always recur. The starting point in understanding culture is not human nature (as in Greek thought) or human history (as in Hegel and Marx) but the human predicament: the fact that man is “thrown” into the world (who asked to be born?) and in the growing knowledge of that situation becomes aware of some answers—the received residues of culture—and gropes his way back to the questions to test the meanings for himself.

All cultures thus “understand” one another because they arise in response to the common predicaments. Cultures are expressed in different languages, each of which, having its own sounds and references, thus assumes idiosyncratic and historical character. Yet, as Walter Benjamin once observed, “languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express.”<sup>5</sup> If I follow the sense of Benjamin’s remarks, translation reproduces meaning not by literalness or even context but by the relatedness of the response to the existential questions to which the original meaning was addressed. Translation cannot reproduce the “color” of culture—the exact syntax, the resourcefulness of its phonology, the particular metaphors or the structure of associations and juxtapositions that the original tongue provides. What it can render is its significant meanings. In that sense the color is the *parole*, and meanings the *langue* of culture.

Within this purview religion is a set of coherent answers to the core existential questions that confront every human group, the codification of these answers into a creedal form that has significance for its adherents, the celebration of rites which provide an emotional bond for those who participate, and the establishment of an institutional body to bring into congregation those who share the creed and celebration and provide for the continuity of these rites from generation to generation.

The attenuation or the breakdown of a religion can be along any of these dimensions—institutions, rites, creed, or answers. The most crucial of all are the answers, for these go back most piercingly to the human predicaments that gave rise to the responses in the first instances.

#### CHANGE IN MORAL TEMPER

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century there occurred a change in moral temper, in the relation of the individual to the existential questions of culture, which undermined the cultural founda-

tions of the Western religious answers that had given men a coherent view of their world.

Identifying modal changes in culture is a very difficult undertaking. Political changes, like revolutions, announce themselves with the sound of a thunderclap. Socioeconomic changes, such as industrialization, are visible in the material structures that are created. But changes in culture and moral temper—until the twentieth century at least—came in more subtle and diffuse ways, and it is difficult to locate them in specific time and place. At best one can single out some representative figures to symbolize such changes.

In his essays Lionel Trilling remarks that “historians of European culture are in substantial agreement that, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, something like a mutation in human nature took place. Frances Yates speaks of the inner deep-seated changes in the psyche during the early seventeenth century: ‘. . . One way of giving a synopsis of the whole complex psycho-historical occurrence is to say that the idea of society, much as we now conceive it, had come into being.’”<sup>6</sup>

In the context of his essays Trilling was concerned to show that in this period, “if one spoke publicly on great matters as an individual, one’s only authority was the truth of one’s experience,” and it is for this reason that the idea of sincerity began to matter.<sup>7</sup> One can broaden the argument to say that, at this time, experience not revelation or tradition or authority or even reason became the touchstone of judgment, and the emphasis on experience became the emerging cultural norm.

In the story that I am pursuing there were three changes that, woven together, make up this change in moral temper. These were: (1) the growth of the idea of a radical individualism in the economy and the polity and of an unrestrained self in culture, (2) the crossover from religion to the expressive arts (literature, poetry, music, and painting) in the problem of dealing with restraints on impulse, particularly the demonic, and (3) the decline of the belief in heaven and hell and the rise in the fear of nothingness, or the void, in the realm beyond life, the coming to consciousness, in short, of nihilism.

The interrelatedness (but not integration) of these three we call modernity—the turning away from the authority of the past, the shrinking of the realm of the sacred, and the Faustian quest for total knowledge which sets man spinning into the vortex of the *Wissendrang* from which there is no surcease. To take these up seriatim:

1. “The impulse to write autobiography may be taken as virtually definitive of the psychological changes to which the historians point,” writes Trilling.<sup>8</sup> The clearest case in point is Jean Jacques Rousseau’s

*Confessions*. What scandalized Rousseau's contemporaries were not his scatological remarks such as "breaking wind" but the very first word in the book and the very tone of that first paragraph. Rousseau begins:

I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself.

Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different. Whether Nature has acted rightly or wrongly in destroying the mould in which she cast me, can only be decided after I have been read.<sup>9</sup>

(Nature may have destroyed the mould, but the culture re-created it and the imitators unfortunately have been endless advertisements for themselves.)

It is not just Rousseau's claim to uniqueness that is central; that is merely a matter of psychology. It is a deeper change in the nature of culture and character structure. In the polity the claim of individualism was for liberty—to be free of all ascriptive ties. But in the culture the claim was for liberation—to be free of all constraints, moral and psychological, to reach out for any experience that would enhance the self.

2. Always religion has lived, dealing as it does with the most basic human impulses, in the dialectical tension of release and restraint. The great historic religions—Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, and Christianity—all have been religions of restraint. Underneath have been the subterranean impulses—the Dionysian frenzies, the Manichaean dualities, the gnostic assaults on the exoteric doctrines, the idea of the holiness of sin—that have beat against the great walls of religious taboos.

The crossover from religion to the expressive arts has meant not only that restraint has gone slack but also that the demonic impulses in men (once channeled into religion, once used by particular religions against others) now have become polymorph perverse and pervade all dimensions of modernist culture. If experience is the touchstone of the self, then there can be no boundaries; nothing is unattainable or at least unutterable; there are no sacred groves that cannot be trespassed upon and even trampled down.

That movement, which we call modernism, was of course a great source of energy and vitality, and the century from 1850 to 1950 (and its peaks, from 1890 to 1920) probably can be seen—in painting, literature, poetry, and music—as one of the great surges of creativity in human culture.

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But there was a price: the fact that the aesthetic was no longer subject to moral norms. Men's true metaphysical destiny, Nietzsche declared, lay not in morality (a paltry, dispirited ethic of slaves) but in art. In the modernist imagination, all is permitted—murder, lust, sodomy, incest, degradation—in order to nourish the rich fantasies of the unconscious and to express the diffuse primary process, which is polymorph perverse. Passion is no longer the identification with religious suffering and sacrifice but carnal sensuality which carries one beyond the self. Murder is no longer the mark of Cain but man's uncontrollable excitement with his secret impulses. In the great works of imagination—a Karamazov or André Gide's *Vatican Caves*—these transmutations are contained by the constraining forms of art.

But when the distinctions between art and life begin to break down, when some proclaim that their life itself is a work of art, when there is the democratization of Dionysius in the acting out of one's impulses, then the demonic spills over all bounds and suffers a double fate. At one extreme violence becomes the aesthetic of politics (no longer of art), as in the calls to a cleansing of the polluted selves by a Georges Sorel, a Marinetti, a Jean-Paul Sartre, or a Frantz Fanon; at the other the demonic becomes trivialized in the masochistic exorcisms of the cultural mass.

3. The fear of nothingness—the nihilism that now suffuses the culture—has given rise to new forms of aggression and denomination. The great divide is the understanding of death. The source of conscience, said Hobbes, is the fear of death; the source of law, the fear of violent death. Yet within a religious culture death still could be viewed—though feared—as the prelude to something beyond. But what if there was nothing beyond?

The implication of this new view of consciousness is spelled out powerfully by Hegel in his Kafka-like parable, that of *Herr und Knecht*, Lord and Bondsman in the *Phenomenology*. In that parable the *ur-*encounter between two men is a duel, in which one risks his life for freedom or submits to the will of the more powerful one. If this is the fundamental paradigm of human relations, one can ask: Why should the two engage in a duel? Why should they not, as Christianity enjoins, love each other like brothers and live in peace? Or why, as the emerging rationality of a Locke or Adam Smith suggests, should they not cooperate and thus increase their yields?

But each man knows—and this is the secret of Hegel's parable—that whatever his striving, no matter how much he can master nature or even expand his own powers, there is, *au fond*, the nagging sense of mortality, the realization of negation, the annihilation of what is his



greatest achievement as man, his self-consciousness, his *self*. Some few men can and do live in that stoic realization, but fewer modern men, because their very character is their striving, their claim to freedom or liberation, the impulse to burst all bonds, strike off all constraints. The sense of death is too heavy a burden, and what we—all of us—do is to blot it out of consciousness, beginning as children with solipsistic fantasies: It will never happen to me; when I turn around the world does not exist; *I* can imagine myself dead, but it is *I* that stands outside all that. In short, the fundamental defense against death is a fantasy of omnipotence. But what happens when two omnipotences meet? They cannot occupy the same psychic space at the same time. And so there is a duel—to the death or submission.

Is it an accident that the modern world, having delimited the authority of religion in the public sphere, has been the first to create “total power” in the political realm—the fusion of beliefs and institutions into a monolithic entity that claims the power of a new faith? With the “Oriental despot,” to use Hegel’s language, “one was free.” Today, in the régimes of total faith, “all are bound.” And the mode of rule is absolute terror—the mode that Hegel discerned in the first of the political religions, the French Revolution.<sup>10</sup>

#### ALTERNATIVES TO RELIGION

These are broad brushstrokes. They lack shade and nuance, detail and qualification. I would hope that in the larger work, of which this talk is a précis, these elements will be filled in. But within this limited time I can continue the argument only as a sketch.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the culture, freer now from traditional restraints, no longer tied in intellectual and expressive areas to the modalities of the religious beliefs, began to take the lead, so to speak, in exploring the alternatives to the religious answers. There have been in that time in the West five alternative responses to the disenchantment with traditional religions. These have been—and to some extent still are—rationalism, aestheticism, existentialism, civil religions and political religions. In this talk I would like to deal, very briefly, with two of them, aestheticism and political religions, as illustrations of the power of these alternatives. It is also, I would argue, the failure of these particular two which has opened up the beginnings of various searches for new, religious answers. I cannot do justice here to the very complex histories of each theme, but I shall call attention, in each instance, to a single motif.

Aristotle said that if a man were not a citizen of the *polis* he would seek to be either a beast or God. This is the secret of nineteenth-

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century aestheticism: It rejects society and man and seeks to be both beast and God.

Aestheticism began to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century when men of letters sensed the opening of a void: If the secure meanings of religion no longer could provide either certitude or a road to the divine, where was the way? If God is no longer "there," how does man satisfy the desire for "the unattainable" and his dream of the infinite?

In his essays, *Le Triangle Noir*, André Malraux locates this first awareness in the work of the French novelist Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya, and the French revolutionary Louis de Saint-Just.<sup>11</sup> For Laclos, who is our thread, if God no longer bars the way, men can pursue the infinite along the paths of eroticism, cruelty, and terror. The freeing of the erotic from the religious—one of the earliest and most intertwined of the orgiastic couplings of religion and sexuality or, making a religion of the erotic, free of all other norms of morality and rational conduct—was the foundation of aestheticism and its later bastard offspring, the decadent movements of the end of the nineteenth century.

It is in Charles Baudelaire that the poet as the man cursed by this vision of *le curiosité du mal* receives his fullest expression. Baudelaire stands as *homo duplex*, or in his own words *l'homme dieu*, seeking to invoke God and embracing the devil. Divided between the desire for "thrones and dominations" and the compulsion to taste the vices of sin, he puts forth the motto at the end of his *Voyages*, "To the depths of the unknown to find the new."

As Pierre Emmanuel has written in his book *Baudelaire: The Paradox of Redemptive Satanism*, "[Baudelaire] recognizes in [Laclos] the rigorous logic of an eroticism which, out of hatred for nature, pushes the natural to an excess; a movement which, in him, reaches the extremes of bestiality only to bring him toward another extreme, an angelic one."<sup>12</sup>

For Baudelaire, sexuality is separated from love and must be explored for the sensations it can provide. He experiments with opium (*cette drogue enivrante et maudite*) and seeks release through drink (*cette autre vie que l'on trouve au fond des breuvages*). And, as he writes in his *Aesthetic Curiosities*, "the beautiful is what is bizarre." In *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the poems which brought him to trial in 1857 for outraging the morals of the public, he seeks to distill flowers from evil. The poems are lascivious and blasphemous and extraordinarily beautiful.

Yet beauty and the bizarre are evanescent. One can only tarry with these. Earth—boredom—is hell, and one must go below it. In the

morning life one wears a cold mask. At night one explores the subterranean rivers, the unconscious beliefs, the dreams and unsatisfied aspirations that feed the wellsprings of appetite. But Baudelaire finds that man is only *in tenebris*. The world stands in the last days of Holy Week, and the candles are being extinguished progressively. Yet it is not Christ who is coming but Satan. And in his extremity of spirit there is left only the "furious and desperate appetite for death," the final darkness.

In the aesthetic movement, poetry, not religion, is sacred. The poet is a seer, or *voyant*, replacing the priest or, rather, becoming the new prophet in the historic tension of prophet and priest. In the beginning was the word; but the word now belonged to the poet. The "prophetic tribe" of poets, in Baudelaire's phrase, had extralucid powers, a belief that led, in Rimbaud's incantations, to the idea that the poet possesses the "alchemy of the word."

But the word is neither *logos* nor Law. The Way becomes the wayward; Halakha becomes apocrypha. The impulse replaces the idea; the sense—the sensations that tantalize—overpowers the mind. In the aesthetic mode, will and passion are the primary coordinates of the paths of action.

The foundation of a political religion is a messianism which makes the eschatological promise of the leap to the kingdom of freedom—the release from all necessity—on earth. The vision of Marxism is such a speaking of tongues. In Marx's earliest essays, such as the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, one finds this prophetic language. The idea of the "leap" itself—a term that was central to Kierkegaard—is a metaphor with religious connotations.

Yet the development of Marxism itself—the effort of the "mature" Marx to be scientific (e.g., the Newtonian language such as "the laws of motion" in *Capital*) and the rise of mass social-democratic parties that became integrated, even negatively, into the life of their societies—gradually smothered the messianic tone in favor of the language of progress and inevitability. Sorel might say that "it is to violence that Socialism owes those high ethical values by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world." But few listened to this syndicalist appeal.

The political religion which transformed Marxism came out of the crucible of World War I and the Russian Revolution. After so long a period of progress and economic growth the War suddenly seemed to be an apocalyptic shock, the more so because of the senseless mass slaughter which led a generation of poets and writers to proclaim that the nihilism only a few had discerned was covering the world now like

thick mud. The October Revolution brought with it an orgiastic chiliasm, the heady feeling that the eschatological opening of history was at hand. And added to these was a third necessary element, a charismatic agency that would bring purification through terror, the Party.

Two men became the formulators, at the deepest gnostic level, of this creed. One was Georg Lukács, the other Bertolt Brecht.<sup>13</sup> For the "new Left" Lukács was the man who brought back to Marxism the ideas of alienation and historical consciousness. But for the smaller, initial group of apostles Lukács provided the "theory of two truths," the "noble lie," the inner formula which is the binding cement of faith for the initiated. It is a story he never admitted publicly.

The starting point in understanding Lukács is the final page of his most interesting book, *The Theory of the Novel*, written in 1914–15. We live, he said, following the phrase of Johann Fichte, in the epoch of absolute sinfulness. It is in the words of Dostoevski that one can glimpse what may lie beyond. "It will be the task of historico-philosophical interpretation to decide whether we are really about to leave the age of absolute sinfulness or whether the new has no herald but our hopes. . . ."<sup>14</sup> (*Theory*, it should be pointed out, was dedicated to Yelena Grabenko, Lukács's first wife, who had served a term in a Tsarist prison because of her association with the terrorist wing of the Social-Revolutionary Party and who herself, according to Lukács's closest friend, Bela Balazs, "was a wondrous example of a Dostoevski character.")

In 1915 a small group of Hungarian intellectuals began to meet with Lukács and Balazs every Sunday afternoon for discussion, meetings patterned after the group (which Lukács had attended regularly) that used to meet at the home of Weber. Among those who came were Karl Mannheim, Arnold Hauser, Frederick Antal, and Michael Polanyi. As Lee Congdon, the young historian to whom I am indebted for this reconstruction of the period of Lukács's life, remarks: "The subject for discussion was always chosen by Lukács and it invariably centered on some ethical problem or question suggested by the writings of Dostoevski and Kierkegaard. Politics and social problems were never discussed."<sup>15</sup>

The Hungarian Communist Party was organized on November 24, 1918. Lukács joined the Party in December, along with Grabenko and Balazs, and became one of the editors of *Vörös Ujság* (*Red Gazette*). Most of the members of the Sunday discussion circle were stunned. They had heard Lukács speak of Dostoevski and Kierkegaard but had never heard him speak of Marx. One member, Anna Leszani, re-

membered that “Lukács’s emergence as a communist occurred in the interval between two Sundays: Saul became Paul.” A proletarian writer, Lajos Kassak, in his autobiography, recalled: “I was a little surprised [at Lukács’s presence], he who a few days earlier had published an article in *Szabadgondolat* (Free Thought) in which he wrote with philosophical emphasis that the communist movement had no ethical base and was therefore inadequate for the creation of a new world. The day before yesterday he wrote this, but today he sits at the table of *Vörös Ujság* editorial staff.”

In that article, “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem,” Lukács had asked why the victory of the proletariat, the reversal of oppressors and oppressed, would bring all class oppression to an end rather than simply bring in a different kind of oppression. Any answer, said Lukács, would have to rest on faith. People would have to believe that good (the classless society) could issue from evil (dictatorship and terror). And this was an instance of *credo quia absurdum est*, which he could not accept.

Yet within that fateful week he had taken the leap of faith. In an essay he wrote in 1919, “Tactics and Ethics,” he sought to resolve the moral dilemma. It had become his conviction that there was no escape for men who wished to preserve their moral purity in the “age of absolute sinfulness.” “All men, he believed, were caught in the tragic dilemma of having to choose between the purposeful and ephemeral violence of the revolution and the meaningless and never-ceasing violence of the old corrupt world,” as Congdon puts it. One had to sign the devil’s pact.

In this remarkable essay he cited the novels of Boris Savinkov, the Russian socialist-revolutionary who was one of the assassins of Minister of Interior von Plehve: “Murder is not permitted; murder is an unconditional and unforgivable sin. Yet it is inescapably necessary; it is not permitted, but it must be done. And in a different place in his fiction, Savinkov sees not the justification of his act (that is impossible), but its deepest moral root in that he sacrifices not only his life, but also his purity, morality, even his soul for his brothers.”

The corruption of political religions is not just the ebbing away of revolutionary fervor and the establishment of a new bureaucratic class in office. It is, to use theological language, the victory of the devil in seducing anguished men to sign that pact which makes them surrender their souls. And if the thought of Savinkov could induce Lukács to make that leap of faith over the *credo absurdum*, what is one to say of Lukács’s silence when, in 1924, the Bolsheviks murdered Savinkov, by throwing him out of a window, for his continued opposition to the

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Bolshevik regime? But Lukács already had sold his soul. As Theodor Adorno said of Lukács: “[He] tugs vainly at his chains and imagines their clanking to be the forward march of *das Weltgeistes*.”

I believe that the “ground impulses” behind aestheticism and political religions are exhausted. These were the impulses to abolish God and assume that Man could take over the powers he had ascribed to God and now sought to claim for himself. This is the common bond between Marx and Nietzsche and the link between the aesthetic and political movements of modernity.

The phrase “God is dead” clearly has no denotative meaning. Nor do I think Nietzsche meant it so. It is a form of religious pornography, and I have to explain my restricted meaning of the term.<sup>16</sup> The *Froliche Wissenschaft* (translated variously as *The Gay Science* or *The Joyful Wisdom*) is a form of pornography in the sense that Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is a kind of political pornography, and de Sade’s *Justine* sexual pornography—not so much for their content as for the intention to shock people in a highly specific way. We cannot believe that when Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* people did not know of the actual practices of the Borgias, but one simply did not talk about it. Similarly, if one looks at the libertinism of eighteenth-century France, only a child might not know of the perverse games played in the Deer Park. But again one did not talk of such things in polite society. What Nietzsche was seeking to do was to utter the unutterable. In every religion there is a sacred circle which engirdles the name that cannot be named. What Nietzsche was saying was that people knew the religious facts of life but persisted in the polite hypocrisy of refusing to utter what should not be mentioned. What Nietzsche was saying—and to that extent he was repeating Kierkegaard—is that without God there is only the void of nihilism. Kierkegaard made the leap over that void, which he called the absurd, to religious faith. Nietzsche felt that such a leap was no longer possible.

Man was a rope dancer over the abyss, with the beast or *Knecht* at one end and the *Herr* or superman at the other. In his growing obsession with this dilemma Nietzsche believed one no longer could accept the submission which every religion requires of its believers. Having challenged God on the mountain, he believed that his *Zarathustra* was the Fifth Gospel, the gospel to obliterate the preceding four.

Nietzsche, hating modernity, carried out its logic to its end, or trans-end, which is to explode all limits, to dare all, and to be all. In the end his brain itself exploded and he passed into the autistic realm of a oneness turned back on itself, the oneness of silence.

The exhaustion of political religions follows a double trajectory.

One was laid out quite directly by Weber, in his "Politics as a Vocation": ". . . the materialist interpretation of history is no cab to be taken at will; it does not stop short of the promoters of revolution. Emotional revolutionism is followed by the traditionalist routine of everyday life; the crusading leader and the faith itself fade away, or, what is even more effective, the faith becomes part of the conventional phraseology of political Philistines and *banusic* technicians."<sup>17</sup>

Each Great Profanation, in its own dialectic, has its small negation. The profanation of Modernism is that the great works which were created by wrestling with the demonic (as Jacob wrestled with the angel and became Israel) become trivialized by the *culturati*; what has been art becomes trendy life-style, and what has been incorporation (as in transubstantiation) becomes consumption. And the profanation of Marxism is the debasement of socialism not just in the great political religions but in the grotesque totemic forms of African socialism, Arab socialism, Baath socialism, and the hundred different socialisms that have erupted like weeds in the wastelands of Marxism.

#### NEW RELIGIOUS FORMS

On the double level of social structure and culture, the world has been secularized and profaned. The secularization derives from the rationalization of life, the profanation from the imperious self of modernity. Religion is no longer the "collective conscience" of society, as Durkheim believed was its elementary form, because society is radically disjointed, its different realms of the technoeconomic sphere with its principle of functional rationality, the polity and its surge for equality, and the culture with its demands for self-fulfillment creating increasingly intolerable strains. And if religion was once the opium of the people, that place has been taken by *pornotopia*, where the straight and narrow have become the kinky and the twisted.

Hobbes once said that Hell is truth seen too late. Hell is the Faustian bargain, the pact which compels man to strive endlessly, for if he acknowledges any point as final he loses his soul. But if there are no limits or boundaries, life becomes intolerable. The ceaseless search for experience is like being on a merry-go-round which at first is exhilarating but then becomes frightening when one realizes that it will not stop. As Don Giovanni discovered, endless pleasure is endless torment, precisely because it is endless. And today we have the democratization of the erotic.

Will there be a return of the sacred, the rise of new religious modes? Of that I have no doubt. Religion is not an ideology or a regulative or integrative feature of society—though in its institutional

forms it has functioned at different times in those ways. It is a constitutive aspect of human experience because it is a response to the existential predicaments which are the *ricorsi* of human culture. That complex German writer Benjamin maintained that "the concrete totality of experience is religion," and he gave to this form of authentic experience the word "aura."

However, religions, unlike technologies or social policies, cannot be manufactured or designed. The multiplicity of exotic consciousness-raising movements (the Zen, yoga, tantra, I Ching, and Swami movements), which have spread so quickly among the *culturati*, is itself an illustration of that fact. These are not religions. They are an illustration of the confusions of authenticity, the search in this multiple, discordant world for the authentic "I." America in the midseventies, writes the counterculture historian Theodore Roszak, is launched on "the biggest introspective binge any society in history has undergone." He may well be right. The "authentic I," having become a bore to others, now has become even more of a bore to itself.

When religions fail, cults appear. When the institutional framework of religions begins to break up, the search for direct experience which people can feel to be "religious" facilitates the rise of cults. A cult differs from a formal religion in many significant ways. It is in the nature of a cult to claim some esoteric knowledge which had been submerged (or repressed by orthodoxy) but which now suddenly is illuminated. There is often some heterodox or esoteric figure who functions as a guru to present these new teachings. The rites that are practiced permit, or more often prompt, an individual to act out impulses that hitherto had been restrained or repressed, so that there is a sense of *ex-stasis* or some transfiguring moment.

But the deception—and the undoing—of such experience, however "sincere" and anguished like so much of "enthusiastic" quest, occurs because the search rests basically on some idea of a magical moment and on the power of magic. Like some headache remedy, it gives you fast, fast, fast belief, if not relief. And it is no accident that the half-life of these movements is so short and that the heteroclitics move on ceaselessly, to a new nostrum.

When we think of the possibility of new religions, we turn, naturally, to Weber who more than anyone else has given us the comprehensive picture of the way religions arise. But if we are looking in the direction he pointed, we may be looking in the wrong direction. For him new religions arose with prophecy and with the charismatic figure who had the power within him to shatter the bonds of tradition and to tear down the walls of the old institutions. But what is there to shatter or to tear down today? Who, in the culture, defends tradition?



And where are the institutional walls? We live in a culture which is almost entirely antiinstitutional and antinomian. How could it be otherwise when the radical self is taken as the touchstone of judgment?

If there are to be new religions—and I think they will arise—they, contrary to previous experience, will return to the past, to seek tradition and to search for those threads which can give a person a set of ties that place him in the continuity of the dead and the living and those still to be born. Unlike romanticism, it will not be a turn to nature, and, unlike modernity, it will not be the involuted self; it will be the resurrection of memory.

I do not know how these will arise, but I have some dim perception of the forms they may take. I would be bold enough to say that in the West they would be of three kinds.

The first I would call moralizing religion. Its roots and strength are in a fundamentalist faith, evangelical and scourging, emphasizing sin and the turning away from the Whore of Babylon. In the United States, in recent years, the largest-growing voluntary associations have been the fundamentalist churches. To some extent this is an aggressive reaction on the part of the “silent majority,” so to speak, against the carry-over of modernist impulses into politics—especially the claims of complete personal freedom in sexual areas (e.g., gay rights), morals, abortion, and the like. But that is too simple an explanation. I think, given the history of Western culture, that a large substratum of society always has felt the need for simple pieties, direct homilies, reassurances against their own secret impulses (such as in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s powerful story “Young Goodman Brown”) but that until recently these people have been derided by the predominantly liberal culture (not society) and, more importantly, abandoned by the clergy, who, coming from the educated classes and subject to the conformist pressures of the liberal culture, had lost their own nerve and often as well their belief in God. The exhaustion of modernism and the emptiness of contemporary culture mitigate that social pressure, and fundamentalist ministers can step forward with less fear of derision from their cultured despisers. These groups, traditionally, have been farmers, lower middle-class, small-town artisans, and the like. In the long-run occupational sense, they are in the decline. Yet in the more immediate future they may be the strongest element in a religious revival.

The second—which I think will find its adherents in the intellectual and professional classes—I would call redemptive and derives, I think, from two sources. One is the retreat from the excesses of modernity. One can face death, perhaps, not by seeking to be self-

infiniteizing but by looking back. Human culture is a construction by men to maintain continuity, to maintain the "un-animal life." Animals seeing one another die do not imagine it of themselves; men alone know their fate and create rituals not just to ward off mortality (the pretty stories of heaven and hell) but to maintain a "consciousness of kind," which is a mediation of fate. In this sense religion is the awareness of a space of transcendence, the passage out of the past from which one has come, and to which one is bound, to a new conception of the self as a moral agent, freely accepting one's past (rather than just being shaped by it) and stepping back into tradition in order to maintain the continuity of moral meanings. It is a redemptive process (in Kenelm Burridge's terms), whereby individuals seek to discharge their obligations—and if one claims rights at some point there has to be recognition of obligations as well—to the moral imperatives of the community: the debts in being nurtured, the debts to the institutions that maintain moral awareness. Religion then begins, as it must, in the mutual redemption of fathers and sons. It involves, in Yeats's phrase, becoming "the blessed who can bless," the laying on of hands.

There is a second, more direct sociological source of the redemptive. This is in the growth, as I believe it will come, of what Peter Berger has called "mediating institutions." In the reaction against central government, against large-scale bureaucracy and the mega-structures of organization there is a desire to reinstate a private sphere—of family, church, neighborhood, and voluntary association—to take back the function which it has lost of caring: of caring for the afflicted and the ill, of caring for welfare, of caring for each other.

The mediating institutions, centered as they will be on the idea of caring, resurrect the idea of *caritas*, one of the oldest sources of human attachments, a form of love that has been crushed between rationalized *eros* and profaned *agape* and superseded by the welfare state. Whether the mediating institutions that I think will arise become the cenacles of a new religion remains to be seen.

The third religion, more diffuse, will be a return to some mythic and mystical modes of thought. The world has become too scientific and drab. Men want a sense of wonder and mystery. There is a persistent need to overcome the dualisms that prize apart the tendrils of self which yearn for unification of being. There is also the temptation to walk along the knife-edge of the abyss. As Rainer Maria Rilke began his *Duino Elegies*, "For Beauty's nothing but the beginning of Terror. . . ." Yet myth tames the terror and allows us to look at the Medusa's head without turning to stone. Myth returns us to what Goethe called the *Urphänomene*, the *ricorsi* of the existential predicaments.

Such mythic modes cannot take the form of primitive animism or shamanistic magic, for such invocation is simply the substitution of meaningless Castenadas for abstract cause-and effect relationships. A mythic mode, since it will come from our past, will derive from the prescientific and preconceptual roots and transform them.

A mythic mode, if it comes, probably will be closer to what Marcel Granet calls *emblème*, the sign which evokes the totality of things.<sup>18</sup> One such emblem, classic to Chinese thought, is the Tao, a mode which emphasizes the singular rather than the general, the sign rather than the concept, the resemblance rather than the identity, the precursive image rather than the efficacious cause. It is a world of symbolism in which contrasts are not contradictions but intimate interdependencies. Its purpose is not to discover sequences but to uncover solidarities, not cause and effect but the common root of phenomena in which pictorial images can be substituted for one another as symbolic images that unite the event and the world.

Is any of this possible—in the West? The West, as Weber has pointed out, had created a unique civilizational pattern of institutionalized rationality, one that, through the power of technology, has permeated all parts of the world. Yet if East has to come West, would Weber have trouble in admitting that at some future time, beginning in the present, the West in some new fashion could find itself looking to the East? What is striking—in the serious realm of philosophers, poets, physicists and artists—is that the journey now is being undertaken.

I began with the Enlightenment, but I find that its conception of religion was misleading. It regarded religion as primitive and fetishist in origin, to disappear by the cold light of reason, or a century later through the antiseptis of science. A hundred years ago, Andrew D. White, the president of Cornell, could publish a book with the title of *The Warfare of Theology and Science*, and, at the same time, John W. Draper, a chemist turned historian, could write a bestseller entitled *A History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*. Draper, whose animus was largely against the Catholic church, believed in a severely planned society under the tutelage of a scientific elite. It is a view that has had a long history, from the French social philosopher Henri de St. Simon down, perhaps, to the late Leo Szilard.

Few scientists today would make this hubristic claim. More importantly we have come to realize a necessary distinction between science and religion as relating to two totally different realms. Science, if I follow C. F. von Weizsäcker, is the search for the unity of nature. In physics this takes two forms. One is the effort to state a “closed system” in mathematical terms—through transformation groups such as, in

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relativistic quantum theory, the Lorentz group defining the structure of space and time and the unitary group defining the metric of Hilbert space. The second is an effort of unity through reductionism, in which chemistry is united with physics, biology united with chemistry, while evolution links the molecule and man.

If science is the search for the unity of nature, religion is the search for unity of culture. Culture is a different realm from nature. If one is reductionist, the other is emergent, through consciousness. And it is the concern with the knower and less with the known. Culture seeks meaning on the basis of purpose. It cannot be indifferent to the imperatives of nature (e.g., the death of the individual for the necessary continuation of the strength of the species), for it is the conscious response of men to the existential predicaments that arise out of the interaction of men with nature and with one another.

The thread of culture—and religion—is memory. As Louis MacNeice once wrote, “. . . I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed/ The woven figure cannot undo its thread.”

### A SENSE OF THE SACRED

There is an old Midrashic parable that asks: Who first discovered water? We do not know. But one thing we do know: the fish did not.

We may be in the position of the fish, for the world of religion is the world of the nonrational, and we can go only so far in our understanding, for the realization of the nonrational (a category that sociology rarely has tried to define) is the recognition that the existential predicaments we confront derive from a mystery, one that we may never be able to penetrate. For Aristotle man's highest capacity was not *logos* (i.e., speech or reason) but *nous*, the capacity for contemplation whose constitutive character is that its content cannot be rendered in speech. The eternal, for Aristotle, was *aneu logou*—without words. That is also the source of the *hairos* which breaks into time, or the “holy sparks” of the *Shekinah* which becomes the sacred.

The sacred is the space of wonder and awe, of the noumenal which remains a mystery and the numinous which is its aura. With the sacred is the principle of *Havdolah*, the principle of distinction, of the realm which is reserved for the days of awe and lament, and the realm of the mundane and profane. It is a dualism whose content has been redefined by various cultures and different generations. But until contemporary times this principle has been observed by almost every human group we know. Ours is the first to annul the boundaries which maintained the preciousness of the principle of life itself. The viciousness of that annulment emerges when a society is wholly dis-

solved into the political maw of the “sacred” (as in the Soviet Union) and all spheres of life become subordinated to it, or where a society is wholly absorbed into the economic engorgement of the profane, as in a capitalism that treats nothing as sacred but converts all objects into commodities to be bought and sold to the highest bidders. When there are few rituals to mark the turns in the wheel of life, if all events become the same with no ceremony to mark the distinctions—when one marries in ordinary dress, or receives a degree without a robe, or buries one’s dead without the tearing of cloth—then life becomes grey on grey, and none of the splashiness of the phosphorescent pop art can hide that greyness when the morning breaks.

We stand, I believe, with a clearing ahead of us. The exhaustion of modernism, the aridity of communist life, the tedium of the unrestrained self, and the meaninglessness of the monolithic political chants, all indicate that a long era is coming to a close. The theme of modernism was the word beyond: beyond nature, beyond culture, beyond tragedy—that was where the self-infinite spirit was driving the radical self. We now are groping for a new vocabulary whose key word seems to be limits: a limit to growth, a limit to spoliation of environment, a limit to arms, a limit to torture, a limit to *hubris*—can we extend the list? If we can, it is also one of the relevant portents of our time.

What will come out of that clearing I do not wholly know, but since I believe that the existential questions of culture are inescapable I feel that some new efforts to regain a sense of the sacred point to the direction in which our culture—or its most sentient representatives—will move. Whether the new vision will be genuine, that is, fully responsive to the deepest feelings of people, I do not know; and even more, whether such new threads can be woven into meanings that will extend over generational time and become embodied in new institutions is something even further beyond my purview.

All these are conjectures, and we shall have to wait, in the fullness of time, for their refutations. But I am bound, in the faith of my fathers, to one obligation. In the *Pirke Avoth*, there is the “tablet” of Rabbi Tarfon. He used to say it is not your part to finish the task; yet neither are you free to desist from it.

#### NOTES

1. Karl Marx, “Toward the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and ed. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1967), p. 257.

2. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Prometheus Unbound,” in *The Complete Poetical Works of*

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Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), act 3, sc. 4, lines 190–96.

3. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964).

4. See Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, trans. Mary Ilford (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), p. 24.

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 72.

6. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 19.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (New York: Modern Library, 1945), p. 3.

10. As Hegel remarked, "in this absolute freedom all social ranks or classes, which are the component spiritual factors into which the whole is differentiated, are effaced and annulled; the individual consciousness that belonged to any such group and exercised its will and found its fulfillment there, has removed the barriers confining it; its purpose is the universal purpose, its language universal law, its work universal achievement. . . . For the universal to pass into a deed, it must gather itself into the single unity of individuality, and put an individual consciousness in the forefront; for universal will is an actual concrete will only in a self that is single and one. . . . Universal freedom can thus produce neither a positive achievement nor a deed; there is left for it only negative action; it is merely the rage and fury of destruction. . . . The sole and only work and deed accomplished by universal freedom is therefore *death*—a death that achieves nothing, embraces nothing within its grasp; for what is negated is the unachieved unfulfilled, punctual entity of the absolutely free self. It is the most cold-blooded and meaningless death of all, with no more significance than cleaving a head of cabbage or swallowing a draught of water. In this single expressionless syllable consists the wisdom of the government, the intelligence of the universal will; this is how it fulfills itself" (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie, 2d ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955), pp. 601–2, 604–5).

11. André Malraux, *Le Triangle Noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

12. Pierre Emmanuel, *Baudelaire: The Paradox of Redemptive Satanism*, trans. Robert T. Cargo (University: University of Alabama Press, 1970), p. 48.

13. In this paper I speak only of Georg Lukács. My reference to Bertolt Brecht is to the Lehrstücken, particularly *The Measures Taken*, in which Brecht justifies murder of a comrade for the sake of the Party. In the play Brecht has a song entitled "Praise of the Party." It says in part: "A single man has two eyes/ The party has a thousand eyes. . . / A single man can be annihilated/ But the Party cannot be annihilated" (in *The Modern Theatre*, ed. Eric Bentley [New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1960], pp. 277–78).

14. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971), p. 152.

15. Lee Congdon, "The Unexpected Revolutionary: Lukács Road to Marx," *Survey* (Spring–Summer 1974). See also Lee Congdon, "The Making of a Hungarian Revolutionary: The Unpublished Diary of Bela Balazs," *Journal of Contemporary History* (July 1973).

16. I owe this formulation to my friend Irving Kristol.

17. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 125.

18. Marcel Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1950), pp. 334ff.