

THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE

The argument retaken

1. My theme in the first lecture was the motive, the occasion, and goal of a revolution in the religious consciousness of humanity. My subject in this second lecture is the program of this revolution.

I described three major orientations in the religious history of mankind. The third one -- which I called struggle with the world -- has appeared, not just at the beginning but repeatedly and increasingly, as a revolutionary force. In the last few centuries, it has helped spark and inform both the secular ideologies of emancipation, which have aroused much of humanity, and the worldwide popular romantic culture, which has helped teach every living person that he is marked out for a larger life even though his circumstances may seem to deny it.

The claim of this vision to our allegiance can be vindicated only in the limited sense in which any large view of our place in the world can be supported: by the combined promptings of many forms of experience and in a fashion that never entirely rescues it from being both a gamble and a self-fulfilling prophecy. Moreover, its ascendancy is qualified. In many respects, what I called humanizing the world, rather than struggling with it, has greater purchase over the ideas and attitudes enshrined in the conventional practical interpretations of the very religions -- Christianity included -- that I have associated with the struggle-with-the-world orientation. It has also set the tone and direction of the prevailing secular humanism. What these humanizing beliefs lack, however, despite their immense influence, is the power of initiative; they do not, and I believe they should not, command the agenda.

At the heart of the revolutionary spiritual program, lie the two related themes that have always been central to the struggle with the world: the replacement of altruism by love as the organizing principle of the moral life, and the conception of the individual and humanity as both context-shaped and context-transcending, or as being, in the old theological and metaphysical language, a placement, an embodiment, of the infinite within the finite.

These ideas – of love and of infinity -- are connected in such a way that they incite us to change the world. We would change it to bring our lives and our circumstance into closer conformity with the vision. We would change it as well because the struggle itself will help make us more godlike. It will increase our share in godliness. It will turn the tables against the experience of belittlement, which it is the commanding aim of this revolution to defy and to overcome.

2. I develop the argument in the following steps. I describe two ways in which the spiritual revolution can be undertaken. One -- the sacred way -- continues to rely on a narrative of divine redemptive intervention in history. The other -- the profane way -- relies on no such narrative, and thus pushes to the hilt the idea that everything is not alright after all.

The major part of this lecture sketches the content of this profane way.

The sacred and the profane ways

1. The revolution can proceed with or without an appeal to faith in the redemptive work of God in history. The difference between making such an appeal and avoiding it matters, on two main accounts.

First, it matters on account of authority. The narrative of divine intervention gives rise to contests over an authority shaped by the role of human agents in the interpretation and transmission of God's saving work. No narrative, no privilege. The opportunity is then open not only for the priesthood of all believers, in the manner of the Protestant reformation, but for an assertion of the prophetic power of all men and women, in the spirit of democracy.

Second, it matters on account of substance. The story of divine intervention tells us that the way lies only partly in our hands to open and to envisage. The better part of the rescue comes later, and is hidden in the end of time and in the aftermath to human life. The rejection of this view forces us to accept the notion that there is only such prospect of rescue -- or response -- as we ourselves are able to provide. There is no one here but us. There is no one out there watching out for us.

Some taint of Pelagianism will always hang over the proponent of the profane way in the eyes of those who take the sacred path, no

matter how insistent he may be in denying our power to bring history to a close by achieving a definitive reconciliation of the conflicts and contradictions that beset us. For his part, the traveler on the secular road, will see the believer, with whom he shares the transformative ambition, as a victim to William James's principle that people believe everything they can, and suspect him of a flight into edification and self-deception that threatens to dull and divert the revolutionary impulse.

2. Despite the real differences that divide them, the sacred and the profane ways of making the religious revolution are closer to each other than either of them is likely to be to the predominant secular humanism or to the fossilized forms of religious practice and belief. The reason is at once simple and fundamental: awareness that the vision invoked in the breach by the religious conventionalists and the secular humanists, and subject to a radicalizing impulse by the would-be revolutionaries, remains incompatible today with much of what we think, of how we live, and of who we are.

I propose a view of the content of the revolution from the standpoint of the profane way. I too would like to believe, but I do not. I hope that the sentimental attitude to religion, with its mendacious quest for a halfway house between the truth and the untruth of religious beliefs, will find ever less favor in the eyes of future humanity.

3. What is gained by calling the profane form of the revolution a change in the religious consciousness of humanity – given that the concept of religion lacks any stable core?

In the first place, the point is to underline the close connection with the tradition I have described under the label struggling with the world. The message of that tradition needs to be radicalized by an overcoming of the constraints – institutional and intellectual -- that now restrict its reach and impoverish its meaning. However, the radicalization represents an enhancement as much as it amounts to a break. What turns on the acceptance or rejection of a narrative of divine intervention in history forms the matter in dispute among the sacred and secular revolutionaries.

In the second place, the goal is to emphasize the extent to which the program of the revolution shares at least two of the

characteristics we associate with religion. One of these characteristics is the anchoring of an existential orientation in a vision of our place in the world. The other characteristic is the fragmentary, complicated, and limited character of the justification that religious belief can claim. The profane program of what I nevertheless insist on calling a religious revolution offers a view of the direction in which to change both who we are and how we see ourselves, and it connects its spiritual and institutional program with a certain way of facing mortality and contingency. It requires us to take a stand before we have what, by the standards of rational discourse, is enough of a ground on which to stand.

What would the sacred way to carry forward the religious revolution look like?

1. Because, like an increasing number of people alive in the world today, I do not believe, and because, unlike many of them, I will not pretend that there is a halfway house between belief and unbelief, I propose to outline the program of the religious revolution in its secular form. I begin, however, by suggesting what a few characteristics of the religious revolution in its sacred voice might be. For this purpose, I seize on the only religion I know, as it were, from within: Christianity. I speak as I were the Christian, and particularly the Catholic, theologian that I am not. What encourages me to do so is confidence in the affinity between the sacred and the profane routes to the religious revolution I have begun to outline. In this exercise, I move, in fragments, from the political and moral implications to the core of theological conception and method.

2. The social teaching of the Church would have as its focus a rejection of the present economic, social, and political institutions for the reasons stated in the last lecture and further developed later in this one. A decisive point is the refusal simply to attenuate the consequences of the class structure.

Consider, by way of example, the trajectory of Catholic social doctrine. From its late nineteenth-century focus on social rights, without any institutional machinery of economic and political organization capable of delivering on those promises, it went on to the corporatist communitarianism of the interwar papal encyclicals. After

this doctrine was discredited, the social teaching of the Catholic Church returned, at the end of the twentieth century, to the institutional vacuity from which it suffered at the close of the nineteenth century. What is required today is a program to democratize the market economy and deepen political democracy through innovation in the institutional forms of both the market and democracy. (Such an effort would stand in sharp contrast to the combination of institutional conservatism or agnosticism and redistributive egalitarianism that has marked the dominant tendencies in Anglo-American political philosophy for the last several decades.)

The passive relation of much of Christian social teaching to the established forms of social and economic organization is analogous to the Christian spiritualization of European feudalism. It is an accommodation papering over the manifest tensions between prophetic vision and established structure.

3. For centuries, the shaking up of Christian doctrine against the conventional rule-bound morality of the day, as well as against the background to this morality in the inherited social institutions, has found inspiration in a recovery and reinterpretation of the Pauline and Augustinian emphasis on faith against reason, grace against works, and love against law. The result has often been confusion on a matter central to the religion.

Institutions and rules, if insulated against challenge and change, become instruments of an idolatry inimical to spirit. But the Christian religion must be as opposed to an antinomianism that treats all repetition, rule, and institutional structure as the spirit-killing hand of Midas as it is to the idolatry of the established institutions. The “*via negativa*” of anti-institutional antinomianism ends in an abandonment of the world, above all the social world, in manifest contradiction to the central teachings of the religion. (This is the heresy, a doctrine of despair, into which the Pauline-Augustinian party is always in danger of falling. We see its signs in twentieth-century thinkers as different as Karl Barth and Jean-Paul Sartre.) The simple opposition between spirit and structure (or repetition, rule, and institution) must be overcome by a progressive change in the relation of structure to spirit, in the life of the individual as well as in the organization of society.

The point, after all, is to insist on the embodiment of spirit in the world. There can be no such embodiment so long as the spirit hovers over a world whose routines it is unable to penetrate and transform.

One of the practical implications of this view is the theological weight of experimentalism, about the course of each individual life as well as about the organization of society. Openness to the new is related to openness to other people.

4. By placing our self-transformation and the transformation of society in the context of a narrative of God's redemptive work in history, we affirm a principle of radical hope. The transactions between God and mankind can be understood only by analogy to the dealings among people. However, they give those dealings a measure of openness, of possibility, of depth, of significance, that they would otherwise lack, or possess only in much more limited measure.

The hope is the hope that the world, especially the human world, can be penetrated and transformed, which is to say, in the theological language, that it can be redeemed. The Christian lives for this future, but he lives for it as a way of living right now, and he lives for it by the light of something that has already happened.

5. The God of Abraham over the God of the philosophers. The scandalous enigma of the personal God and his historical work over the reassuring rationalism of impersonal divinity. Time in this one real world over the eternity of many possible worlds.

Christianity must indeed be freed at last from the grip of Greek philosophy. It must be freed from it, however, in a form that grasps the news of divine intervention and reconciliation as the deepening and the broadening of something we already know, darkly and imperfectly, in our secular human experience of encounter and attachment and that is therefore capable of partial elucidation. Its theology must not end in a celebration of obscurity.

6. What justifies calling a transformation of beliefs with such characteristics a revolution is its combination of change in spiritual vision, in theological method, in institutional program, and in existential attitude.

7. Now that I have suggested, as a sympathetic unbeliever, possible traits of the revolution in its sacred form, I turn to an account

of the program that, in its profane form, it would advance. The program has four parts. Let me call them: the overthrow, the transformation, the self-transformation, and the reward.

The overthrow

1. The first part of the program is our waking up from the dazed state in which we ordinarily live our lives. It seeks a wrenching out from the consolatory routines of society and of culture. Faced with death and with groundlessness -- with the fact of mortality and with the mystery of our place in a world that we are unable to understand as whole, within an expanse of time into whose beginning and end we cannot reach -- we risk losing ourselves in a cowardly and belittling retreat into a life that is diminished through the dimming of consciousness. Life, lived right now, so long as we are alive, is all we have. In squandering it, we lose all.

There is hardly a major thinker in our tradition who has not written about this basic feature of our experience in one way or another. It is, for example, Pascal's "divertissement" or Heidegger's "Zerstreuung."

2. And what is to be done about it? Part, but only part, of the answer lies in ideas and in the stories they inform. The beginning and end of the ideas must be the recognition of mortality and of groundlessness, without the anesthesia of the feel-good theologies and philosophies.

Unembodied and unenacted ideas are not, however, enough. Many an educated German soldier carried Being and Time around in his knapsack at the front in the Second World War. We suspect that if he had lacked Being and Time, he would have had something else, capable of testifying to the experiences that place us at the limits of what we can see and endure. It was not the text that did it. It was the war.

3. The ideas must be supplemented by practices: the institutionalized practices of society and the discursive practices of culture. Such practices must serve as bearers of our self-inflicted overthrow, so that we can be both the overthrowers and the overthrown.

They must have a distinctive and shared attribute. We can usually distinguish between our context-preserving and our context-challenging or context-revising activities. We are accustomed to make moves within a framework of arrangements and of assumptions we take for granted. Exceptionally, we act to challenge and to revise the framework in ways that are unavoidably piecemeal but that can become, through their directed and reiterated movement, radical in their transformative effect.

The distance between these two classes of activities is not constant. It varies. The distance depends on the organization of society and of culture, and indeed, in the high culture, of each of its disciplines. The greater the distance, the more change depends on crisis.

To favor the overthrow, not as one-time event but as a continuing process, we must work to diminish the distance. We should prefer that the context-revising practices result, more readily and continuously, from the exercise of the context-preserving ones. One of the consequences will be to attenuate the dependence of change on crisis, to render the revisionary impulse more internal to our experience. We shall then be freer and greater: so this overthrow is one that lifts up as it wrenches out.

We would have little prospect of developing and disseminating such practices did they not serve as well a host of material and moral interests other than our spiritual stake in the overthrow: our interests in the development of our practical capabilities and in the weakening of entrenched social hierarchies and divisions. Here, then, is a point of contact between the motives of the earlier religious revolution -- the one that gave birth to the three dominant world-historical religious orientations I have described -- and the revolution that it is now our task to bring about.

3. It should hardly need saying in a great university that such an effort stands in opposition to the rationalizing, humanizing, and escapist tendencies that command the social sciences and the humanities, now that large accounts of the ascent of humanity, supported by the more ambitious and the more hopeful social theories of the past, have ceased to be believable. These rationalizing, humanizing, and escapist tendencies may seem to antagonize one

another. In fact, they work in concert to disarm the transformative imagination. By the same token, they put mystification in the place of insight.

The transformation

1. The second part of the revolution is a change in the institutions of society. There are three chief evils to be addressed: the life-shaping and belittling divisions and hierarchies of society -- in particular its class structure; the restriction of solidarity to the family and, beyond the family, to the thin bond of money; and the dependence of change on crisis. Of these, the third is at once the most remote from the immediate concerns of social life and the one that has the most intimate relation to the religion of the future.

The evils are causally connected through the overlap of their causal conditions. Each of the evils has a proximate relation to one set of institutional innovations. Yet each series of such innovations bears on all the evils.

1. The evil of entrenched, opportunity-denying inequality relates most closely to the need to reconstruct the institutional content of the market economy. We cannot make a market economy more inclusive without innovating in the institutions that organize it. (Americans did this once, in the early nineteenth-century when they organized both a family-scale form of agriculture and a decentralized system of banking and credit.) We would need to innovate both in the arrangements governing the relation between governments and firms and in the arrangements shaping the relations among producers. Different regimes of private and social property would have to coexist experimentally within the same market economy. To broaden the gateways of access to the advanced, experimentalist forms of production and of learning that now emerge, together, in the world would be one of its chief ambitions of this institutional program.

The transformative potential of such reforms would be realized only insofar as they combined with a reshaping of education. Such a reshaping would reconcile local management of the schools with national standards of investment and quality. And it would insist on a method of teaching and learning that is cooperative and dialectical

(proceeding always by contrast of opposing views) as well as analytical and problem-oriented.

2. The failure of solidarity beyond the family cannot be remedied by money transfers alone. It requires the development and enactment of the principle that every able-bodied adult should, for periods of his life or for some part of his time always, be responsible for helping to take care of other people beyond the family, according to his talents and predispositions. Money, without time and engagement, is not enough to provide, for each individual, an answer to the most important question: where are the others?

By insisting on the primacy of this question we also bring ourselves face-to-face with human weakness in all its forms, and turn away from the power worship that would corrupt the religion of the future.

From these concerns arises the case for mandatory as well as voluntary social service.

3. All our institutions -- economic, social, and political -- in all societies, all over the world, are now so organized that transformation continues to depend upon trauma, traditionally in the form of ruin and war. It need not be that way, at least not to an unchanging extent. The extent turns on the organization of society. Among our institutions, our political arrangements enjoy special significance, especially under democracy, because they set the terms on which we can revise all other arrangements.

The most general consequence of the dependence of change on crisis is to produce a situation in which at every turn we must choose between engagement and resistance, between acceptance by others and keeping the last world to ourselves. Insofar as we find ourselves forced to make such a choice, we cannot heed the call to be in the world without being of it.

A high-energy democracy is the project required in our present historical circumstances if we are to advance in redressing this evil. Such a democracy would be defined by five sets of institutional innovations. One set would enhance the level of organized civic engagement. It would raise the temperature of politics. The second set would provide means rapidly to resolve impasses between the political branches, thus upholding the liberal principle of fragmentation of

power while repudiating the conservative commitment (enshrined, for example, in Madison`s scheme) to slow politics down under the false banner of liberty. It would hasten the tempo of politics. The third set would better tap the experimentalist potential of federalism, by giving sectors of the society or the economy as well as territorial units within a country more space to experiment with counter-models of the established direction of policy. The fourth set would create in government a power specially designed and equipped to rescue disadvantaged groups from circumstances of exclusion and subjugation that they are powerless to escape by the devices of political and economic action available to them. The fifth set would enrich the institutions of representative democracy with features of direct and participatory democracy without diluting safeguards to the freedom of the individual.

4. It may seem strange to invoke an institutional program in the outline of a program of religious revolution. It is however, not so strange after all if the religious orientation is one that insists on the creation of a social world that does better justice, and gives a better chance, to the context-transcending person: that is to say, in another language, the embodied and situated spirit, the radical original, that each of us knows himself to be. We have an institutional program so as not to give up on the world.

The ultimate goal of this program is not to humanize society; it is to divinize humanity. It is to raise ordinary life -- not just for an elite of heroes, geniuses, and saints, but for everyone -- to a higher level of intensity and capability.

The self-transformation

1. With the program for reconstruction of society goes a project for transformation of the self. And if the social project must advance by fragmentary, cumulative steps, so, for better reason, must the personal one. It is, after all, easier to change a society than it is to change an individual. This project turns on a reinterpretation of the habits of mind and heart most valued in the tradition of struggling with the world. In a Christian context, it relies on a reinterpretation of the place of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in our moral life.

2. What is at stake in this redirection comes out most clearly by way of contrast to the pagan, Graeco-Roman picture of the virtues. We have yet fully to overcome the influence of this antique picture. Yes, the virtues of connection -- courage, fairness, and forbearance -- play an indispensable, enabling role. Their keynote is the progressive abandonment of our primitive experience of being at the center of the world; they reconcile us in practice to the view that it is not about us.

They must be married to virtues of purification -- the kenosis of the patristic theologians. By such virtues -- of attentiveness, simplicity, and enthusiasm -- we loosen our thralldom to the world. In so doing, are better able to see the world and the others in it. As our powers and comforts increase, so does the value of this unburdening for our freedom in the world from the world.

However, the significance of these two families of virtues is transfigured by a third family that is decisive in determining a course of life. These are the virtues of divinization: our openness to the new and to other people. It is they that draw us upward into an existence in which we can acknowledge more fully transcendence over circumstance and love for other people as the lodestars of the moral life.

Part of their place in our experience is to compensate for the consequences of the divergence between historical and biographical time: to make it possible for each of us to foreshadow in his own life, right now, the aims of the religious revolution to which these lectures are devoted, before we have succeeded, collectively, in transforming society and culture.

3. Seen from another angle, the point of this ideal of personality, of this existential orientation, is to die only once, given that we must die, rather than dying many small deaths. It is to resist and reverse the narrowing of focus and the adaptation to circumstance that threatens to overtake us and to kill us, little by little, in the course of our lives. For the highest aim of this conversion is to give us life so long as we live.

The reward

1. In the end, all we have is life right now. The roots of a human being, according to the religion of the future, lie in the future more

than they do in the past. Prophecy counts for more than memory, hope for more than experience, surprise for more than repetition. Time matters more than eternity. We live for the future, in the light of the future.

However, a formative paradox of the religion of the future is that living in the future is a way of living in the present as a being who is more, and who is capable of more, than his situation countenances or reveals.

By so reorienting our lives, we are rewarded. Our reward does not rescue us from either mortality or groundlessness. It does not console us for death. It does not even prepare us for death, as the *Phaedo* would want philosophy to do. It does not overcome, or diminish, the unfathomable and dreamlike character of our existence. Everything will not be alright.

2. What then, within these limits, is our reward?

Our reward is to be better able to act, single-mindedly and whole-heartedly, in the world without giving in to the world. Engagement is part of freedom: we make ourselves by engaging in a particular social and cultural order. Resistance is part of freedom: we make ourselves by resisting such an order. Insofar as the requirements of engagement and of resistance contradict each other, we are not free. To the extent that these requirements can be reconciled, we become freer. We have a better chance of acting as the context-transcendent originals, the sharers in the attributes of divinity, that this path in the evolution of our religious beliefs as the most reliable route to self-revelation and self-construction .

Our reward is a better chance to connect with other people -- to recognize and accept them as the context-transcending -- that is to say, the class, race, gender, role-transcending -- individuals we claim to be without forfeiting our separateness and our hiddenness. It is therefore also to enlarge the invisible circle of love by which we are all bound even when we fail to love beyond the close horizon of our acquaintances.

Our reward is life, death-bound, but brought to a higher level of intensity so long as we live. It is the chance to do die only once. It is the stopping and the reversal of the process of mummification – the carapace of routine and compromise – that forms around us as we

grow older. To possess life, right now, wide-awake, in the moment, is the overriding aim of our self-transformation, achieved through a self-imposed overthrow of the self. To this end, however, we need to reject the ideal of serenity through invulnerability, which dominated the moral philosophy of the ancients, and, through that ideal, penetrated the moral ideas of the last few centuries. We must replace it with a view that accepts vulnerability to disappointment and rebuff as a condition for heightening the struggle with the world.

Our reward is the manifest and manifold world, to which, as established society and culture we would not surrender, but which, as nature and cosmos, we would possess more fully. Possessing it more fully means lightening the weight of the categorical schemes through we see and interpret it. It means affirming our powers of transcendence in our relation to our methods and presuppositions as well as to our institutions and practices. It means hoping that humanity will have a wider part in the experience of genius, which is not to think better but to see more.

Such results will be both causes and consequences of the intensification of experience, of the concentration of life, right now, which is the only response to mortality and contingency for which, by the lights of the religion of the future, we are entitled to hope.

Countercurrents in the religion of the future

1. First, there seems to be a conflict between the reward and the overthrow. The unending confrontation with the fact of death and with the risk of meaninglessness and the rejection of any story, sacred or secular, that would dispose of their terrors, seems to cast a shadow on the reward.

Indeed, they do. The conflict lies in the world, not in the argument. The overthrow is the requirement of both the transformation and the self-transformation. They, together, form the gateway to the reward. The shadow and the gateway are inseparable in the constitution of our experience.

If, as a result of the overthrow, the transformation, and the self-transformation, we come to have more life right now, we may be more at risk of being overtaken and paralyzed by the sentiment of life than

we have been, or could be, by the fear of death and the vertigo of groundlessness.

2. Then, there appears to be a conflict between the reward, on one side, and the transformation and self-transformation, on the other. The self-transformation sets us on a course of endless searching. The transformation consists in institutions and practices that turn us toward such a quest rather than, as institutions and practices historically have, away from it.

Are we then to be chained, in the manner from which the philosophers of the overcoming of the world wanted to free us, to the wheel of desire, to the treadmill of longing, satiation, boredom, restlessness, and further struggle and, in the realm of perception of the manifest world, to the oscillation between seeing and starring?

Indeed, we are. Or at least we are except to the extent that the enhancement of our experience of life, and of our awareness of others and of the world, changes the way in which we experience a dialectic inscribed in our constitution. It can change this dialectic, quite simply, by turning the treadmill into an ascent with respect to the only good we really have, life lived right now, although viewed in the light of the future.

Religious revolution

1. Tocqueville remarked that every great revolution in human affairs is at once a political and a religious revolution, by which I take him to mean that it represents both a remaking of institutions and an enlargement of consciousness.

We live in an age of disillusionment. If we fail to become disillusioned with disillusionment, political and religious prophets will nevertheless arise. They will undertake, sooner rather than later, what we neglected to accomplish.

I have suggested what I believe to be not the doctrine but the direction of the revolution of which we now stand in need. I have described it here from the standpoint of religion, and elsewhere from the perspective of politics. I know, however, that the distinction makes sense only from a viewpoint that is alien to the aims and the methods of such a revolution.

The expressions that this upheaval may take, on its more distinctively religious side, are likely to have in common with the forms of past religious revolutions only the combination of exemplary action and of visionary teaching. Everything else is bound to be different, so different that it may, at first, be unrecognizable as the revolution that it is.

2. The simple central teaching of the revolutionaries should and will, nevertheless, be one that we can already hear and heed.

We shall soon die and waste away and be forgotten, although we feel that we should not. We shall die without having understood what this strange world, and our brief time within it, are really about.

Our religion should begin in the recognition of these terrifying facts rather than in their denial, as religion traditionally has. It should arouse us to change society, culture, and ourselves so that we become – all of us, not just a happy few – bigger as well as more equal, and take for ourselves a larger part of the qualities we have attributed to God. It should therefore, as well, make us more willing to unprotect ourselves for the sake of bigness and of love. It should convince us to exchange serenity for searching.

Then, so long as we live we shall have a greater life, and draw further away from the idols but closer to one another, and be deathless, temporarily.