

THE REBIRTH OF RELIGION

Bernard Murchland

Religion, long dead, is now coming back to life, moving at a steady pace to the center of our cultural interests. Times of crisis are propitious for religious rebirth. When the idols of human aspiration have fallen and the old gods have died, the stage is set for new beginnings, a new upsurge of religious creativity.

To trace all the steps by which the rebirth of religion has come about would require a volume or two. One would have to mention first the great renewal in biblical studies that has been going on since the nineteenth century. This, together with concomitant research in such disciplines as history, philology, comparative literature, and anthropology, has opened new vistas on the meaning of religion—vistas that relate mainly to the imaginative powers of man. Perhaps the chief outcome of these studies has been our greater understanding of the central function of myth-making and symbolism in any vital culture. When we are divested of nourishing images of celebration and wholeness, it becomes painful to live. Our own age, it would seem, has survived mostly on images of alienation, the shards of our psychic impoverishment.

When I studied biblical literature, it was precisely its strong symbolic structure that impressed me, the way in which the experiences of a people were ordered about a central imaginative vision. I began to understand that human identity was not merely a matter of good genes and a fortunate environment, but was further predicated on a symbolic rendering of the elements of experience. When I later found John Dewey describing faith as "the unification of self through allegiance to ideal ends" and speaking of God as "an active relation between ideal and actual," I found myself on familiar ground (although by Dewey's time the lack of compelling ideals had become a problem in our culture).

Two further outcomes of the biblical perspective are our sensitivity to religious pluralism and an emphasis on the positive content of religion. In important ways, a common interest in the Bible has brought the various sectors of the Judeo-Christian tradition into

closer cooperation. But even more important, it has made us sensitive to world religions, particularly those of the Orient. Zen, for example, is highly influential in large sectors of our Western population.

I mentioned the emphasis on the positive content of religion. I do not mean to imply that the biblical perspective ignores the enormity of evil. But the latter could to some considerable extent be resolved by positive ideals. The biblical categories of salvation, redemption, etc. are such ideals. One also thinks of recent explorations of such categories as love, community, and the powers of religion for social transformation. One thinks of Buber's I-Thou dialogue and Tillich's courage to be and Marcel's philosophy of presence. At a more practical level, religion has become in our times extensively involved with the issues of peace, poverty, race, war, revolution, and the like. Reinhold Niebuhr spent a long career trying to establish the relevance of religious thought to politics, and Vatican II is a recent example of a religious tradition trying to update itself.

An extreme but nonetheless important example of accentuating the positive is what is called the theology of celebration. Sam Keen has given a succinct statement of this wing of theological thought in his book *Apology for Wonder*. It is, he says, Dionysian rather than Apollonian in inspiration. It favors attitudes of ecstasy, spontaneity, and wonder, and gives primacy to the symbolism of flux and fertility. The Apollonian has been the dominant Western way, and it is primarily concerned with laws, regularity, control. Apollonian theology conceives of God as a being transcendent to his creation and postulates a real distinction between time and eternity. The Dionysian mentality tends to a different emphasis. In Keen's words, "it exalts ecstasy over order, the id over the ego, being possessed over a possessive orientation, the creative chaos of freedom over the security of inherited patterns of social and psychological organization, divine madness over repressed sanity."

Dionysian religion is akin to Eastern religions insofar as it stresses mystical participation in the whole of being over the fractionalized way of reason. It postulates a God of process, himself of the temporal and changing, whose revelation is given in an ongoing present. In relativizing God, it takes a clue from the dynamics of modern science, which sees

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reality as an interrelated organism and follows this insight to speak of the divine as an immanent principle: the creative ground of all things. This is why the death-of-God school of theology has had such an impact in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The old God, scaled to an Apollonian model, was repressive and dictatorial. He had to die to make way for the god who would enter "the dance of history." This god is believed to be better able to organize and integrate modern man's experience. (And in many ways he is, although I am suspicious of the presentism of the Dionysians. The point they seem to overlook is that experience cannot be encompassed in the moment. When we feel, we feel out of a past and into a future. So too with all of our experiences. I am also afraid that many of this persuasion fail to take sufficient account of the evil in the world.)

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The schools of thought that have been the greatest boon to contemporary religious thought are naturalism and existentialism. I use the term naturalism broadly to include such thinkers as James, Dewey, Santayana, and Whitehead (and, in a limited sense, Teilhard de Chardin)—all of whom were inspired by their deep knowledge of modern science to seek a unified view of man. Naturalism, whose guiding rule is that nature is all there is, is an all-inclusive term signifying that whatever we encounter in experience is natural. Since religion is something encountered in experience, it must therefore be natural and subject to explanation by a naturalistic methodology. Like any other interaction of men with their world, it must be understood. How can this be done without doing violence to the claims of religion itself?

John Randall, a representative exponent of naturalism, approaches the question of religion in typically pragmatic fashion by asking for religion's function. What does religion do? This will give us an important insight (if not, in fact, an adequate answer) to the nature of religion. Randall finds at least four things involved in religion's functioning. First, religious symbols stir men to action and strengthen their practical commitments. Second, religion encourages cooperative activity through shared response and thus cements the social fabric. Third, it is able to communicate experiences of an ineffable sort, the kind that go beyond the ordinary and literal. Finally—and this is the most distinctive function of religion—it discloses something about the world in which it functions; it imparts a special kind of information.

But what kind of information? Not, to be sure, the factual kind of knowledge a science might yield. Randall uses two analogies to make his point. Re-

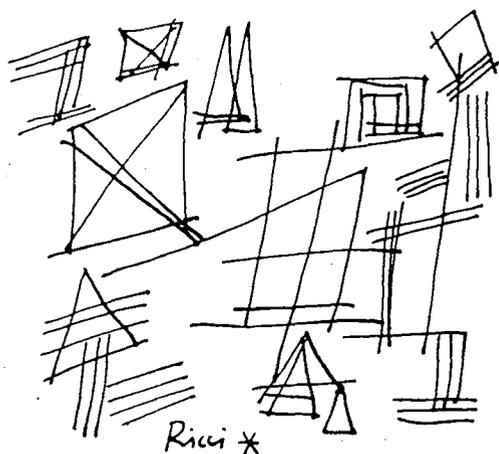
ligious knowledge, he says, might be likened to the knowledge we have of other persons. It is experiential knowledge, based on intimacy, exchange, interiority. Or it might be likened to the work of the painter, the musician, the poet. They teach us how to use our senses, our feelings and minds with greater power and skill. They show us, Randall says, "how to discern unsuspected qualities in the world encountered, latent powers and possibilities there resident." So too the prophet and the saint. They lead us deeper into the mystery of being; they broaden our horizons and make us more able to unify the materials of our existence. Still, religion is not art. Its function is analogous to the arts but not the same. The kind of knowledge religion gives is a knowledge of the world's religious dimension. Religion introduces us to the "order of splendor" and induces us to ponder and celebrate that order.

To the fundamentalist objection that there must be something more, the naturalist rejoins: "What more? Can anything more be discerned in religious experience itself? And anyway, why should anything more be desired? What could be more important than to understand and celebrate the world in which we live and breathe and have our being? Is this not enough?" Should the fundamentalist object specifically that this is mere humanism, making no place for supernaturalism, a judging God, or eternal life, the naturalist would have to rest his case by observing that these are not encountered in experience. Should the fundamentalist persist that *he* encounters them, then the naturalist might concede the subjective experience but, to the extent that it cannot be articulated, would call it an experience lacking in intelligibility.

The vein of naturalism that has proven richest for religious thought is process philosophy. Whitehead, the most influential of process philosophers, called his mature thought a philosophy of *organism*. By that he meant that all things in nature are interconnected. Nature suffers no leaps, splits, or conflicting dualisms. One of the moral lessons of the life sciences is that a healthy organism cannot integrate elements that are fundamentally contradictory. By postulating "creative becoming" as the ultimate category, process thinkers have been able to revitalize a number of traditional religious themes, foremost among them freedom. If I am free to choose, then I can add to my human stature. I can introduce novelty, I can posit something that did not previously exist. In orthodox theology this raised the question of how God can know my decisions. The answer given was that He decreed them in eternity, and therefore any particular human exercise of freedom added nothing to either his knowledge or his being. Process thinkers

are not impressed with this answer. It makes no sense, they say, to speak of free acts being decreed in eternity. By definition, a free act comes into being at a given time. What does not exist cannot be known beforehand. Something *new* is introduced each time freedom is exercised. A theological consequence of this is that there has to be a change in divine knowledge to encompass each successive act of freedom. Reality, including divine reality, augments, and is enriched by, the fact of self-creation.

In a somewhat similar fashion, process thought has made a conscious attempt to refute the bifurcation of experience into profane and sacred, religious and secular. What is distinctive about experience is the way it unifies its various aspects into a creative now. In any given unit of experience, past units are summed up and the new sum slides imperceptibly forward to gather in yet newer units. Whitehead called this creative process "the many become one and increased by one." There is a continuity about our activities that binds us always to our past even



as it launches us toward our future. Thus, process philosophy neither rejects the past out of hand nor worships it; it does not clutch convulsively at the future in the style of a modern revolutionary, yet it realizes that it is to the future that our destinies point. The writings of such thinkers as Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, and Schubert Ogden bear the impress of process philosophy and mark, it seems to me, a "creative advance" in contemporary religious thought.

Following upon those insights of modern thinkers which seem most fruitful for religion, I would want to join Tillich and others of the existential camp to define a religious experience as that locus where all the strands of one's experience come together, where all the dimensions of the particular field of reality

that is disclosed to us converge. Religion is what *centers* our lives. I realize that a term like "center" can have static overtones. We speak of a "dead center" and think of the centered as fixed. Consequently, I would want to reinforce the term with the full dynamism of process philosophy. The centering of experience would thus be an ongoing affair, a continual task of uniting biological urges with the deliverances of imagination for the maximal benefit of personhood.

I would not want to argue, as Tillich seems to, that the centering function is exclusive to religion in the sense that a centered personality is by definition a religious one. For the arts, as the naturalists have well seen, also deal with the realm of inner meaning and frequently furnish commanding centering images. This seems to be particularly true of poetry, and especially in these days when the poet has taken upon himself the priestly task of supplying the consolations of belief. Art can indeed serve a religious function. But it has no special mandate to do so. I think the case can be made that it pertains specifically to religion when it deploys its energies at that nodal point where subject and object meet, where the "there" becomes a "here," the outer the inner—at that point precisely where experience is unified.

Robert Bellah expresses this centering function of religion well when he writes in his book, *Beyond Belief*, that it

... must provide not only a symbolic reordering of experience but an element of consummation and fulfillment. The experience of worship should produce an influx of life and power, a feeling of wholeness, of the grace of God, of being at the still center of the turning wheel. If this happens, there may occur a shift in the definition of the boundary of the self, perhaps, as with Blake, an identification with everything that lives, but at any rate a transformation of motivation, commitment, and value that may galvanize not only individuals but the collectivity of worshippers.

What the recent career of religion has shown beyond a doubt is that religion is something natural, a dimension of ordinary existence. It is not something imposed, dropped from above, an affair of strange powers manipulating human destiny from afar. Rather, it illuminates the condition of man even as it speaks of the divine. Furthermore, there is widespread conviction that religion is a necessary dimension of ordinary existence—both in the negative sense, that without it something important is missing, and in the positive sense, that with it something vital is furnished. It came as a surprise to many that religion survived the nineteenth-century demolition of the supernatural. But it has. The traditional categories are still viable in a transformed context.