

Religion and America's Moral Crisis

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There is a crisis in public morality. Apparently the decline in our standard of behavior is so obvious that, despite our political and class and religious differences, we can agree upon the disorder if not the therapy. I therefore propose not to document our ills any further, but I do wish first to diagnose them and only then to suggest a line of significant treatment.

I see our problem less as one of ethics than of metaethics. Our difficulty is not rules or values. There are so many of them around that our difficulty is in choosing among them. Worse, it is in caring at all about being moral. I suggest that our ethics have become so anemic because they have lost their support system. More, I shall argue that our characterological breakdown is the result of misplaced faith.

Let me begin my analysis of our condition by applying to it Paul Tillich's understanding of what it means to be religious. For him, and for me in this stage of the investigation, one's religion is best thought of in existentialist terms: What is, in fact, one's ultimate concern? This is an untraditional and uninstitutional way of thinking about having faith. For all its novelty, it is highly appropriate to our task, for we are concerned with the moral crisis of our civilization and thus require a tool which enables us to understand how believers and unbelievers alike have caught the plague.

I will begin by applying the Tillichian concept of religion to morality. I suppose my Jewish sense of the centrality of duty, of action, of good deeds manifests itself here. Yet in this enterprise I know I do not betray Tillich's sense of Christianity nor that of many other Christian thinkers, like the great nineteenth-century thinker Albrecht Ritschl, who taught

that religion is primarily the realm of human value judgments. I shall, however, turn Ritschl on his head and argue with Tillich that, rather than our values being our religion, we have lost our values because we have lost what was, existentially, our religion; and that we have lost our religion, not because we never had any, but rather because we have now discovered that we have had an inappropriate one.

What has been the operative faith of most Americans for the past generation or so? Note that the question is not, What would people say to a pollster?, nor even In what religious buildings might they, with some frequency, be found? When we inquire about ultimate concern we reach far beneath the level of conventional behavior or locations. We ask, rather: When people were faced by significant, demanding choices, to what did they give the major free energies of their lives? What did they really care about more than anything else? In phrasing the question in this existentialist fashion we are debarred from the precision of an empirical answer. Hence my response is admittedly subjective and impressionistic—but not therefore eccentric or unsupportable.

What most Americans have believed in, I submit, was not God or Church or Torah but the burgeoning American society. In simple terms, we put our trust in ever greater affluence: once deprived, we gained sufficiency, once degraded by unceasing want, we came to the self-respect of a steady, decent income. For us Exodus or Resurrection was the liberation from a slum flat to clean rooms, thence to a decent neighborhood, a garden apartment perhaps, or on to a home in the suburbs, even a second home. This process, repeated on many levels, promised not only satisfaction but, in its own way, salvation.

I do not mean to describe us as merely economic animals. We were, amidst our upward social striving, also concerned about the quality of our existence.

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In our aspirations for our families we can most easily see the close relationship between greater good and greater goods. And a similar broad sense of the promise of growth was felt in other areas of our civilization. We looked to schooling not only as preparation for a good job but also for a richer life. So as adults we turn to books and records and magazines and concerts and hobbies to deepen our minds and increase our sensitivity. The arts would give us character; recreation would restore our soul. Psychiatry would solve our personal problems, science our technical ones, politics and community work our social ones.

By calling this a misplaced faith I do not mean to denigrate these activities. They were, and are, legitimate concerns, productive of much that is morally worthwhile. The question is: Is this complex of interests and values worthy of our ultimate trust? Does it create and sustain the morals it contains, or must they be drawn from another, deeper source? Can the American way of life bear the full weight of our ethical existence, or must it derive its sense of quality and direction from something that lies beyond it, a "more ultimate" concern?

The key issue here is the power of secularity. We had put our trust in man and his capacities. That is, our ultimate hope was in ourselves, singly and jointly. Either we abandoned the God of the Bible or made God marginal to more significant concerns. In either case we based our lives and our values on our secularity, and it is this, our old, fundamental, existential faith, that has now been thrown into question. For it is no longer clear that secularity mandates morality. To the contrary, it seems abundantly clear that secularity is compatible with amorality and can even accommodate and encourage immorality, by the standards of the Bible. I do not think this feeling was created in the hearts of most Americans by any of our contemporary scandals. I think they only made the issue of the past decade or so all but inescapable.

For most of us the new realism about secularity began with a changing sense of perspective. Instead of taking certain rules or institutions for granted as exemplars of ethical practice, we began asking what, in truth, they did to people. Segregation was the classic case. It had claimed the sanction of law, tradition, established practice, and the apparent will of the majority of voters in a wide region. But when we got down to thinking about what it was doing to people, we knew it to be wrong. We knew that when one cannot think of a certain group of people as persons, entitled to the rights of all persons, then one is immoral. And that from the perspective of being a person, the great good is freedom, the great goal is being true to oneself. We also came to see the great problem in human relations as power and its abuse: If you use your power over me to constrain

my freedom you render me less a person. There was recognition that when our society or members of a group coerce another group they effectively reduce their own humanity. Of course, it might be necessary for the common good for each of us to sacrifice something of our individual freedom. But too often we were not asked to participate in the process of determining what limits shall be set upon us.

With persons as the criterion of the good, with power seen as a common force for the bad, a new moral realism began to dawn on us. The institutions whose goodness we had taken for granted now showed themselves to be run by relatively insensitive power, and thus to be injurious to persons. We became aware of tyrannies we had never before noted, at home, at school, in business, in sports, in our social relationships and our politics. Noble terms were being used to cover power drives and ego trips. And it also seemed clear that we should be able to find better ways to structure our lives with others.

So we set to work. A hundred causes claimed our allegiance: civil rights, better housing, decent education, care for the aged and the sick, peace abroad and peace at home. We had some successes. They only made clear how much yet remained to be done. Increasingly we learned the hard lessons: Most of us are not very willing to change. We are comfortable with our evil and at ease with our sin. We do not propose to live up to the values supposedly inherent in our culture.

More disturbing, it began to dawn on us that the morality we thought was demanded by our secular culture was only another option to it. What was there in a secular view of things that could mandate concern for all other persons as well as self-interest? Why should we indeed care for the weak and the powerless, the ungainly and unattractive, the failures and the bores, as long as we get what we want? Our science is value-free, our economics interested in profit, our politics concerned with power, our arts dominated by questions of technique, our lifestyle devoted to strategies of escape and indulgence.

Perhaps we might have come to terms with that, for people have often lived poorly in the name of great ideals. But secularity also took away our sense of guilt. Ethics became reduced to conditioning, to convention, to education, to psychic mechanism—anything but a commandment, a duty, a summons.

A great part of our crisis, then, is that many people today are effectively amoral. In Freud's day neurosis was most commonly traceable to an oppressive sense of duty and guilt. Today it is more commonly associated with having no firm set of values and by having no sense of limits or direction, thus having no true sense of self at all.

Another part of our crisis is that those of us who still retain a strong sense of biblical morality suddenly feel alien and ill at ease. The moral America

we took for granted is not the America we see around us. We are depressed and sickened by its strange hospitality to evil acts and evil people. Our civilization has become our problem—how then can it continue to deserve our existential faith? We now stand in judgment over the secularity which once comprised our ultimate concern. How can we any longer put our most basic trust in it? We are deeply disturbed because we have lost our faith. We believed in a god who was no god. The idol of secularity has fallen, and we are shaken to our core.

A number of Americans do not participate in the sense of moral crisis I am describing. For one group the old secular style still remains the only true way. Their problem is largely that they do not understand why everyone else has lost their moral nerve. They are disturbed only because they are increasingly isolated and marginal in our society. Where once they seemed to be moving with what was the major mood of the times, now they seem somehow old-fashioned and out of touch.

Unsecularized religionists are similarly untainted by our society's ethical malaise. If anything, they are somewhat elated by it. They always knew secularization was wrong. Now that the pseudo-faith created by it has come to grief, they have been justified by history. Relying now as before on revelation, they remain unperturbed. They still know what they must do. But because they have never been through the refiner's fire of secularization, I find their ethical horizons narrow and their sense of responsibility limited essentially to themselves and their kind.

One need not agree on secularity as revelation. But that does not mean there was nothing to learn from it. The notion of humanity, of one global humankind, was surely implicit in biblical faith. It took the rationalist rigor of secularity to make it clear and unavoidable. That is a precious gain I am not willing to sacrifice. I repeat: Many of the concerns of secularity are legitimate and remain morally compelling. My major quarrel with it derives from its being made a god.

No, America is not all bad, but at the very least it has lost heart. It still does many good things, but it isn't sure they still count. It no longer knows what to care about. It isn't even certain that caring itself still makes much sense.

Yet, paradoxically enough, this moment of doubt creates a new openness to a more adequate religious faith. Insofar as we are deeply disturbed we evidence deep moral concern. We show that somehow we know our ethical values are right, for it is in the name of those values that we deny the old idolatry. We have here the dawning recognition that our ethical commitments transcend us and our society, though we had, for a while, lost sight of that. We are now willing to search for a faith adequate to this new sense of personal depth.

Apparently a good many people in our country share this feeling, for we live in a time of unprecedented American religious search. Six or seven years ago no self-respecting magazine or lecture platform was complete without some comment on the death-of-God movement. It was explicitly stated then that henceforth it would be necessary to do theology and practice religion out of the knowledge that God was dead. This year two of the leaders of that movement, William Hamilton and David Miller, having already passed through the stages of religion as celebration and as play, are announcing a new stage in our religious life: the rebirth of polytheism. From a time when they identified the chief religious reality of our lives as the experience of the absence of God they now apparently feel that there is so great a sense of the holy among us that one god is not sufficient to describe that reality.

In any case, the identification of our new polytheism by those who said God was dead is fitting, if ironic, proof that America is experiencing a resurgence of spirituality. One might almost call it a rebirth of enthusiasm, in the technical sense of that term, were it not that much of this movement is highly personal, determinedly quiet, and deeply suspicious of religious institutions. Indeed, many people touched by it are afraid to share their quest with others, despite their longing for community, lest public exposure kill the tender shoots of their spirituality. The dramatic manifestations of this surge are regularly brought to us by the media: the more established Asian cults like Vedanta and Zen, as well as the currently fashionable sects like those of the Maharishi or the Maharaj Ji. And in our own communities we see extraordinary signs: Catholics who are charismatics; Protestants who as Jesus people turn legalistic, while others from sophisticated churches talk in tongues and heal by faith; and Jews who take a fresh interest in Hasidic devotion and Orthodox discipline.

I submit that these phenomena arise from a sense of the new emptiness at the heart of our culture. They are a desperate, sometimes unthinking, effort to fill it. And something similar may be seen as far away as the Soviet Union.

What Judaism and Christianity can uniquely bring to the American culture at this juncture (in other areas of the world we should, of course, have to add Islam) is their root religious intuition that a transcendent God stands over against us and our society, summoning us to moral conduct. These biblical religions proclaim, against almost all of Asian religious teaching, that God's ultimate character, insofar as humans may speak of such exalted matters, is not neutral. The Lord we serve is not finally beyond the categories of good and evil. Our God is not to be approached through a realm that

ultimately lies beyond morality. God's holiness is intimately linked with God's ethical command. There is a direct movement from "You shall be holy for I the Lord, your God, am holy" to "You shall not hate your brother in your heart but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." True, the God of the Bible stands in covenant with us, but this intimacy never negates the distance between creature and creator, never destroys God's right to command. Our God in personal presence comes to us as compelling love and purposing forgiveness. We are summoned and sent and judged and held accountable—and in just such moral suasion we also see the signs of God's close caring.

We Jews and Christians will argue between us and among ourselves whether the new or old law is in effect and in what mode it is to be followed. We shall differ as to the form and nature of the commandments. But I think we will both insist that those who know God should devote themselves to doing good and those who love God ought to love people and dedicate their lives to creating a humane and holy social order.

Not so long ago this Judeo-Christian sense of reality linked to responsibility was taken to be the basis of the American ethos. It gave the American way of life a strong, metaphysical impetus to sustained moral striving. It was, of course, not the only and perhaps not the most important factor in creating that unparalleled mixture of idealism and opportunism we recognize as American. Yet despite the frontier and our lavish natural resources, despite immigrant vigor and extraordinary industrialization, it was the accepted sense of a transcendent ethical demand laid upon us which gave us Americans our special brand of national idealism. The hand of the Puritans still rests upon us.

In secularizing our culture in the past generation or so we have carried out an experiment, so to speak, to see what might happen to our way of life if we abandoned the Judeo-Christian view of human obligation. We did not do too badly for a while. Our commitments to our biblical past run so deep that despite our putative secularity we remain quite faithful to biblical values; much of the remaining moral content of our culture is there, I would argue, not because it is intrinsic to secularity, but as an inheritance from an earlier, more religious age. Only now is it clear what cutting ourselves off from our transcendent source of values does to us and our society.

I am not saying that if all Americans were instantly to take up Jewish and Christian religious duties or, better, were to share Jewish or Christian faith and the ethical responsibilities they entail, all the moral problems of America would be solved. The question of the ground of our values is only one of the many difficulties facing this nation. But it is our root problem. I do not see how, until we reestablish

our ultimate sense of why we ought to do the good and in what direction that good lies, the rest of our moral efforts can hope to succeed.

The temptation is for religion to seek to reestablish itself in our society by denouncing secularity as it criticizes every moral evil that has been created in its name. Surely there is ample biblical precedent for us to assert our roles as the critics of society. The prophets were continually involved in political and social judgments, for they could evaluate human affairs from a transcendent perspective. Since we claim something of their vantage, ought we not be the people most sensitive to every wrong and the most courageous in pointing it out? And since our civilization is relatively understanding of the evil men do, knowing "they are only human" and "that's the way things have always been," is it not our special responsibility to remind our fellows that to be human is to bear the divine image, that the way things are must give way to how things ought to be?

I do not see how, without the greatest peril to our soul, we can shirk the prophetic role of denunciation and witness and proclamation and dissent. Better to run the risk of looking foolish by being overly sensitive to sin than to retain our respectability at the price of learning to live in peace with it.

But in a time when so much has gone wrong it is too easy to fatten one's sense of righteousness by concentrating on the sins of others. I do not think prophetic criticism is what people most need from us today. Indeed, I am far from certain that they will take our prophetic role seriously until we establish our credibility on a more substantial basis.

The truth is that institutional religion shares in the crisis of our time. The skepticism that runs so deep through our society is no less directed toward religion. Consider, for a moment, the frequent distinction made between religiosity and institutional religion. We may find some grounds for optimism in the fact that presently the sense of religious concern is widespread in our society. Yet at the same time we must acknowledge that interest in churches and synagogues seems to have passed its peak. Like it or not, Judaism and Christianity, in all their variety, are closely connected with the American style of the past generation. What has been our great accomplishment these past twenty-five years? Our institutions—building them and staffing them, yes, and democratizing them. That was what dominated our activity in the expansionist 1950's and 1960's. Only now we live in a time when all institutions are suspect. We despair of government and are disturbed by schools. We aren't even terribly certain about the family. No wonder church and synagogue are suspect.

If anything, sensitive people will set higher standards for religious bodies than for any other institution in our society. I think they are right. If we are

the unique agencies of a transcendent morality, then we should exemplify it. But can we say we have done this? Have we transcended our society in moral stature? There is, at the very least, serious doubt about our moral performance. I suggest, therefore, that as people now turn to religion to help them in their search for a firm moral ground, they will want to know what religious organizations have done and are doing to merit their ethical confidence. They will care little for what we say. But they will care much about how we conduct ourselves. They will apply to us the same searching test they have used on all our social institutions: How do we use our power? They will ask: What do we do to persons in their freedom as we operate our hierarchies, our agencies, our commissions, our seminaries, our churches and synagogues, our ministries? So if we are to be able to carry out our mission as transmitters and celebrators of transcendence in a decadent age, we shall have to pass at least three key tests.

First, how do we, as we go about preserving what is good in our heritage, encourage the creation of the new and the better? Surely there is something timeless about God and what we ought to do for God. Yet people are not timeless. We do not, cannot, should not be expected to live as our grandparents did, perhaps not even as our parents lived. And we know that our religious traditions have changed in previous ages, sometimes radically. If we now change too much, we run the risk of losing what was good in the past, those truths and practices which carried the generations forward and linked them to each other in a history-transforming continuity. Yet if we do not change, we run the risk of losing the present generation and thus our necessary link with the future. The question then is: How will we place the burden of the past on the shoulders of the present?

The *second* challenge puts the same question in more individual terms: How do we propose to maintain the purity of our faith while fostering individual expression? We cannot be all things to all people; the recent decades have surely established that. We do see clearly that God is the source of our individuality and personal dignity. But if God can make no claim upon us and must be satisfied with whatever we choose to be, then God has no dignity; we who are created in God's image, for all our vaunted freedom, will have only the hollow worth of our freedom to choose it matters not what. Yes, we have a right to be persons and to be true to ourselves, but God has a right to be God and thus to make demands upon us. The proper question is: How will we lay God's command to humanity upon the individual?

But mainly, I think, people will judge us by seeing to what extent we serve ourselves and to what extent we serve others. To be sure, if Judaism and Christianity are to be strong enough to influence America, they must be organized and institutionalized. That

means a structured constituency which shares a common dream and supports its members as they seek to achieve it in a hostile environment. And it means a social apparatus that transcends any group of persons and thus can survive to keep the old hope alive from generation to generation.

Yet, in this process, what happens to people? How do we now relate to other human beings who are not of our group, whether of another faith or of no faith at all? What happens to our need for human community with other believers in our faith as church and synagogue rightfully seek to maintain their institutions? This *third* issue, I am convinced, is the most sensitive we face. For surely religion ought to bring us together as people, to show us how to share our true humanity with one another in the presence of the one God who is the source of our unity. Yet so often, in religion's name, we feel we are attending the clergy or the lay leadership rather than God; or we are too busy carrying out the heavy formalities of religious etiquette to be able to feel for one another. If we are to be God's people, then surely we should be encouraged to feel like people, sensitive, individual, concerned, open to one another, as we gather in God's name. We should be more a community of human sharing as we gather in God's assembly than anywhere else. And at the moment that is rarely true.

What makes these demands on us so difficult is that they cannot be met by following a rule. They are true dilemmas, mutually contradictory demands, and we must learn to live with these dilemmas. For even as we affirm the continuity and tradition and institution, so we affirm the precious significance of each individual soul. In the face of such demands we have no security and can only act out of our most basic faith and intuition. That is what many people know, and that is why they will examine this focus of our power and their need to make their judgment as to who and what we truly are. And we shall restore our credibility with them only insofar as we have met this searching test.

I do not see that we can approach this challenge with any special confidence. We have been tried in the past and found wanting. We must acknowledge that it is quite possible that this beloved country of ours, and we with it, have passed by the moment of our highest moral potential and entered into a period of moral stagnation, if not decline. The crisis is real, our loss may be quite serious indeed. But for all their realism, Judaism and Christianity are religions of hope. We not only believe in the coming of God's kingdom, we believe that, with God's help, we can live in it here and now. It is our difficult task in this difficult hour to live in the reality of God's rule despite all pessimism, and by our words and deeds to summon people from their sinfulness to God's steady service.