CULTURE, RELIGION, AND THEOLOGY

BY JAMES G. MOSELEY

"Systematically constructive thinking about the meaning of life has become suspect in the West . . . As we learn how vital a role religion plays in human life and culture, so, too, we despair of accepting the legitimacy of any vision of the truth of religion . . . Cultural awareness, then, must join conceptual adequacy and worshipfulness as a criterion for contemporary theology."

AMERICANS have recently heard much about a "crisis of authority." Yet religious thinkers confronted such a crisis long before President Jimmy Carter called it to more general attention. Thoughtful people in all ages have experienced problems in articulating the reasons for religious belief. As Wilfrid Sheed put it in an essay on America's Catholics, "the intellectual side of things hasn't changed that much since Tertullian's *credo quia impossible.* We always knew the doctrines were far-fetched."[1] At best, it has always been a matter of faith *seeking* understanding.

But thinking about God is especially hard in our time. In addition to traditional difficulties, systematically constructive thinking about the meaning of life has become suspect in the West. The rationalistic temper of technology and bureaucracy has called into question any sustained attempt to ground one's values in a "non-scientific"—not even to say "supernatural"—vision. Various social sciences have provided for modernity the large-scale explanations that theology and philosophy gave for previous times. Anthropology, social psychology, economics, and political science have greatly illumined the nature of modern life. They can help us to analyze, but not to solve, the crisis of authority in religious thought. We need to learn from the social sciences without capitulating to them, to learn what they can teach about the religious dimensions of our cultural situation without abandoning the proper work of theology.

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[1]Wilfrid Sheed, "America's Catholics," *New York Review of Books,* March 7, 1974, p. 21.

I

The social sciences have shown that all human societies require the cultural cohesion religion has traditionally provided. Such knowledge creates a double-bind, or "Catch-22" situation, for theology. We face a crisis of authority in religious thought because insight into our need for social and spiritual coherence is inextricably linked to a suspicion of the grounds of anything claiming to provide such coherence.

Describing a major thrust of the Enlightenment in terms of the critical scrutiny of ideas and institutions, Peter Gay has shown how Enlightened thinkers challenged standing assumptions in all areas of life.[2] Yet the principles of criticism undercutting naive acceptance of certain ideas of order, including religious order, also show how very much we still require the social and cultural coherence supported by those ideas of order. The analytic perspectives that interpret our deep need for social and spiritual coherence are intellectual offspring of the enlightened criticism which loosened the moorings of the beliefs upon which such coherence rests. Hence as we learn how vital a role religion plays in human life and culture, so, too, we despair of accepting the legitimacy of any vision of the truth of religion. Facing such a crisis, religious people may well be tempted to seize what solace there is in what sociologist Thomas Luckmann calls "privatization."[3] Religious thought may occur in a mental space increasingly remote from other areas of life and other modes of reflection.

Consciousness of this problem must temper our work in theology. Of course, a theology without conceptual adequacy will not stand up as thought, and a theology about a merely philosophical deity has little interest for religious people. Whether or not a conceptually adequate idea of a God who can be worshipped can systematically be articulated is—given the "acids of modernity"—at best an open question. But it cannot even be raised today without an awareness of how religious thought participates in the crisis of authority throughout American life. Cultural awareness, then, must join conceptual adequacy and worshipfulness as a criterion for contemporary theology. The theologians of our future, along with anyone who wants to understand our current crisis, will have to consider carefully the case of the social scientists who have recently accented the importance—and the problems—of religion in modernity.

II

Modern sociology began, as Gregory Baum has shown, by criticizing the direction of modern life.[4] For example, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Ferdinand Toennies, each in his own way, criticized how modernity was

[2]Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation; the Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

[3]Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan,1967), pp. 77–117.

[4]Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975).

alienating men and women from their places in an authentically human society. Several American commentators have continued this general critique, with an interesting new twist. They concede that the ideas and institutions of traditional ecclesiastical religion will no longer find acceptance among truly modern people. Nevertheless, these intellectuals rely on something like religion (its "functions" but not its "substance," as they might say) in their analysis of modern life.

Walter Lippmann's important early book, *A Preface to Morals,* provides an example of the kind of argument I want to consider. Here Lippmann argued, as early as 1929, that "high religion" reveals "the quality of mature experience . . . when desire is in perfect harmony with reality."[5] Since modernity has dissolved the bonds of popular religion, the argument goes, this new spiritual religion—modeled along the lines of developmental psychology—is now available. In modern times, says Lippmann, "to be saved is by conversion, education, and self-discipline to have achieved a certain quality and harmony of the passions" (p. 198). Because he is looking at the functions of religion rather than what he sees as its outmoded substance, Lippmann is able to conclude that "what the sages have prophesied as high religion, what psychologists delineate as matured personality, and the disinterestedness which the Great Society requires for its practical fulfillment, are all of a piece, and are the basic elements of a modern morality" (p. 323). Relatively few people, one supposes, would be able to argue their way into Lippmann's syncretic stoicism, or to sustain their motivations through a tragic experience with his serene *apatheia.* Yet for an intelligent, cultivated, intellectual minority, it might suffice.

Lippmann's view of "religion as insight into a cleansed and matured personality" and his projection of God as " the supreme symbol in which man expresses his destiny" may strike us as spiritually anemic. We are, however, in his debt for observing that "the crisis in the religious loyalities of mankind cannot be resolved by weariness and good nature, or by the invention of little intellectual devices for straightening out the dilemmas of biology and Genesis, history and the Gospels, with which so many churchmen busy themselves. Beneath these little conflicts there is a real dilemma which modern men cannot successfully evade" (p. 325). In his next book, Lippmann resolved the dilemma for himself by anchoring his "religion of the spirit" in the natural law tradition. He was then free to become a more purely political creature. Lippmann serves to express the frustrations of modern thinkers who want the social effects but not the traditional beliefs and practices of religion.

In 1949, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., argued that the "pessimistic" view of human nature promulgated in Reinhold Neibuhr's "Christian realism" is a necessary ingredient for preserving the "vital center" of a free society.[6] Schlesinger, and other "atheists for Niebuhr," exemplify what the influential theologian himself called "Harvard orthodoxy"—a

[5]Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 193.

[6]Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), pp. 45, 147, 166, 170.

label for those who accept a Christian diagnosis of human problems but reject a Christian remedy. More recently, Robert Heilbroner concluded an otherwise gloomy essay on "the human prospect" with a vision of post-industrial inwardness and a call for a renewal of "the elements of fortitude and will from which the image of Atlas springs."[7] And Robert Bellah has written widely about the glory and the trials of America's "civil religion."[8]

Others, too, call for the functions but not the substance of religion, the most insightful, complex, and—I think—ultimately fruitful case being Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). To Bell, American society is characterized by "the disjunction of realms." Different aspects of life are separated from each other, each "realm" having its own dominant values. Principles of economizing and efficiency govern the production of commodities and the formation of investment capital in the technical-economic realm. The principle of equality regulates conduct in the political realm. And the principle of self-realization guides personal meanings and symbolic forms in the realm of culture.[9] Moving from realm to realm, a person is pushed or pulled in conflicting directions—and modern society may then fairly be characterized by the incoherence or disjunction its members experience from day to day. In an important sense, Bell's distinction between these realms is merely heuristic. In actual life, as Bell knows, it is impossible to distinguish neatly between economic, political, and cultural experience. Economic activities are expressed and analyzed in cultural symbols, culture is bought and sold, politics is a cultural system for managing the economy, and so on. Yet, however much one may want to argue about the adequacy of these values in themselves, one does feel the centrifugal pulls of efficiency, equality, and self-realization.

Like many social thinkers, Bell seems to believe that modernity is to blame for these tensions—that especially in America, and especially after World War II, do these "axial principles" come into conflict. Also, like many social thinkers, he believes that religion unified these realms in premodern societies into coherent, integral cultural systems, but that the "acids of modernity" have weakened the ability of traditional religion to perform this service. Hence, as the argument goes, we need a new religion—or something like that—to heal the disjunctions of modern society and consciousness. This move from noting the deleterious effects of modernity to calling for a new religion feels forced. His argument's abrupt turn shows where Bell's real commitments lie. As he puts it, "the real problem of modernity is the problem of belief. To use an unfashionable term, it is a spiritual crisis, since the old anchorages have proved illusory and the new ones have become submerged" (p. 28).

[7]Robert L. Heilbroner, "The Human Prospect," *New York Review of Books,* January 24, 1974, p. 34.

[8]Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

[9]Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp. 10–14.

So Bell asks, "What holds one to reality, if one's secular system of meanings proves to be an illusion?" And he replies, "I will risk an unfashionable answer—the return in Western society of some conception of religion" (p. 29). We need religion, says Bell, because, "what religion can restore is the continuity of generations, returning us to the existential predicaments which are the ground of humility and care for others." Bell is labeled a "neo-conservative" because, among other things, he forthrightly (and with the support of Max Weber) acknowledges that "such a continuity cannot be manufactured, nor a cultural revolution engineered. The thread is woven out of those experiences which give one a tragic sense of life, a life that is lived on the knife-edge of finitude and freedom" (p. 30).

Bell presents his proposals as a kind of holding action. Shifting gears "from the culture to the polity," he argues that "if society can respond, through a new public philosophy that commands respect and through institutions that work, then there may be time for the other, slower processes of cultural reconstruction to take hold" (p. 176). At this point, one notices an ambivalence in Bell's argument. He either takes his case about "the disjunction of realms" too seriously, or not seriously enough. On the one hand, he wants a new religion, or a return to traditional religion, or something like religion, to bring a new—or renewed—unity to modern life. On the other hand, he relegates religion to the "realm" of culture and works out a theory of "the public household" to heal "the contradictions [which] derive from the fact that the liberal society was originally set up—in its ethos, laws, and reward systems—to promote *individual ends,* yet has now become an interdependent economy that must stipulate *collective goals*" (p. 176). This ambivalence about the place or role of religion in modern society leads Bell to wind up—like many social thinkers who want the social fruits of religion but are uneasy about its theological roots—with a pretty weak tea and lavender potion. He mixes a renewal of *civitas* (p. 245) with a concluding call for "a self-conscious maturity" about the possibilities and limits of human life (pp. 281-82). I want to suggest now why Bell should have stuck more resolutely to his argument about the disjunction of realms, and why the theologians of our future should learn the lessons Bell has to teach.

III

In the panoramic view of Mircea Eliade, when primitive hunting and gathering tribes evolved into early agricultural societies—a process covering some thousands of years—people discovered new sacred powers more intimately involved than the old gods in the routines and challenges of a new way of life. Eliade even suggests that the unforeseen manifestation of the sacrality of plants—with their systemic ties to cosmic cycles of birth, reproduction, death, and rebirth—may have initiated the agricultural revolution. In any event, the "sky gods" of the hunters became increasingly distant from day-to-day concerns and generally available only as periodic consorts of the regenerative earth

deities or as figures in merely aetiological mythology. Yet in times of extreme crisis, when all else had apparently failed, the early agriculturists would appeal to the old power of these distant divinities. When the crisis—whether natural or social—passed, the authority of the new gods and goddesses was restored.[10]

As the industrial revolution—or whatever it is that we have been living through since, say, the fifteenth century—proceeds, social thinkers like Lippmann, Schlesinger, Heilbroner, Bellah, and Bell respond to crises in a similar way. But the correspondence is only analogical. These thinkers are not calling upon the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, or the Blessed Virgin. In fact, they might well be terrified by an actual revelation of the *God* of what we call "our Judeo-Christian tradition." Instead, given a crisis like "the cultural contradictions of capitalism," these modern social thinkers are calling only for a renewal of *religion.* But religions inspire no one—except perhaps politicians and cultural historians. The much-desired functions of religion actually come into play only as by-products of what Rudolf Otto described in classic terms as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans.*[11] Without the terrible justice and merciful acceptance of Yahweh, the Ten Commandments might as well be part of Hammurabi's Code. Indeed, religion has become so clearly defined institutionally, and so broadly attacked intellectually, that the integrative, unifying, motivating functions these writers seek may come upon us only from a source beyond the boundaries of what we designate as "religion." But the functions alone will not suffice. We are wise, I think, to be wary of the "political religions"—whether Marxist, Fascist, or American Civil—that have, for example, come forward as surrogates for traditional religion.

To indicate why I think the needed new birth of "religion or something like that" ought to be tempered with Bell's insight about "the disjunction of realms," let me call again upon Eliade's history of religions. Modern people are fascinated by the myths and symbols of primitive religions. We yearn for the cultural coherence they seem to have expressed. But why were primitive peoples religious? If their lives were coherent, why did they spend so much time with the myths, symbols, and rituals? Eliade interprets primitive religions as symbolic attempts by archaic people to re-integrate their personal and social experience with the sacred rhythms of the cosmos. Many of the things archaic peoples had to do—such as killing animals or wandering in search of gatherable plants—made them feel cut off from the sources of personal value and social conventions. The elaborate complex of myths, symbols, and rituals surrounding the widespread Master of Animals, for example, shows that they spent most of their other time and energy

[10]Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 38–111, 239–262; and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), pp. 121–129.

[11]Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 12–40.

working toward a re-integration with the "original" harmonious order of things.

So "the disjunction of realms"—the experienced centrifugal tension of several "axial principles"—is nothing radically new. The disjunction of realms, what Peter Berger calls "homelessness," is the way people in a complex, modern, differentiated society experience the tension between "ethos" and "metaphysic" that cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes as basic to all religious experience.[12] There never was, in history at least, a time without such tensions. The disjunction of realms is simply their modern expression. Religions have helped people live through such tensions. We fondly suppose that religious myths and rituals expressed the idyllic unity of life for primitive tribes or our own grandparents. Yet, as Clifford Geertz, following Max Weber, has shown, religions actually serve by helping people endure suffering.[13]

Any "new" religion which promises salvation by liberating its adherents from the conflicts of axial principles that are characteristic of the disjunction of realms will be demonic, for, even if it could effect such a liberation, its saints would then be subject to new tensions that, because unforeseen, would be the more violent and destructive. "Getting it all together" will not suffice. We require a way of coping with the disjunction of realms that is, at the same time, a way of coming to terms with those more basic religious tensions of which the disjunction of realms is a modern case.

IV

Perhaps because they deal with ultimate concerns, as Paul Tillich warned, religions tend to make ultimate claims for themselves. So it may be wise to invoke Tillich's "Protestant principle"—the critique of religion in the name of religion—when we hear calls for a renewal of the unifying function of religion.[14] In this sense, theology is a culturally vital enterprise. By attending to the substantive center of religion (its vision of God, if you will) it unveils ultimate principles for criticizing undue claims for the functions of religion (the things people do in God's name). There is no getting away from the critique of religion—we have to be aware of religion's ineluctable involvement with human needs and its undeniably historical nature. A vision of the God they worship should make us wary of the claims people make for their religions—claims that their particular ideas and values are, for example, supra-historical or supra-scientific. We should also beware of the claims made in the name of "religion or something like that." Much as we have to learn from it, more and better social science cannot take the place of theology.

[12]Peter Berger, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 82, 138, 184–85, 195, 214; and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 89–90, 126–27.

[13]Geertz, pp. 103–108.

[14]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), Vol. I, pp. 37, 227; Vol. II, p. 147; Vol. III, pp. 6, 176, 192, 208, 210, 223, 224, 239, 245.

The need for a critique of religion does not then entail the demise of theology. Instead, like the "death of God," this critique is precisely where constructive theology ought to begin. On the one hand, Daniel Bell and his cohorts are correct in their intuitions—the crisis of authority in contemporary America is a spiritual crisis. But religion alone will not solve the crisis. Given the acknowledged demise of the social authority of religious institutions and the collapse of the intellectual authority of religious ideas, modern people are tempted to invest other aspects of life with the ultimacy that ought only to be accorded to the substantive center (not merely the functions) of religion. Theologians have recently revelled in yielding to this temptation, producing apparently endless "theologies of"—theologies of hope, of play, of civil religion, of liberation, of dance, of sex, of. . . . But no new or renewed religion will itself provide the kind of unity the social theorists desire. True religion is only one aspect of modern life: its greatest service is in the ways it prophetically relativizes the dominance of other aspects of life and ritually eases, for a time, the tensions between them.

On the other hand, the crisis of authority in religious thought is a cultural crisis—and religion alone will not solve this crisis either. Any religious solution that is compartmentalized as, and only as, "religious" will not see its adherents through the tensions brought by their experience in other realms of life. A religious solution that does not serve symbolically to ease the strains between non-religious aspects of life will find its compartment, however beautifully decorated, continually shrinking. So religious thought must be concerned with the general conditions of the culture of which it is a part, and its substantial contribution to the culture as a whole will come not from claiming for itself, or accepting from neo-conservative social thinkers, a functional dominance unwarranted by its status as an aspect of life. It will instead come from articulating in a conceptually adequate way its substantive vision of the God who claims our worship. As H. Richard Niebuhr put it, such a theology will say "to all the 'circumnavigators of being' as Santayana calls them: 'I do not believe you. God is great.' "[15]

[15]H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 89.