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GOD AND MODERN MAN

by

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Part 3 of 3

V. CONCLUDING QUESTION ABOUT RELIGION

- A. The new theologians are impressed by the secularism of our society, by the spread of irreligion and of atheism or disbelief in God.

It is this which leads them to propose a religionless Christianity, an atheistic Christianity, a secularized Christianity—to meet the needs or fit the conditions of contemporary life.

(Need I say that I regard these proposals as more double-talk—that a religionless or secularized Christianity is as much of a self-contradiction as an atheistic theology?)

In the few moments that are left, I would like to make two points about secularism and religion.

One is to question the fact that secularism or irreligion is on the increase.

The other is raise a question about the meaning of religion itself—a question that will affect the view we take of religion in the East and in the West.

- B. With regard to the apparent increase of secularism of irreligion in our Western society, I would like to suggest that the men and women who have given up religion because of the impact on their minds of modern science and philosophy were never truly religious in the first place, but only superstitious.
- a. The prevalence and predominance of science in our culture has cured a great many of the superstitious beliefs which constituted their false religiosity.
 - b. Bishop Robinson is right if what he means is that a truly contemporary person cannot be superstitious in the way that countless human beings were in earlier times.
 - c. The increase of secularism and irreligion of our society does not reflect a decrease in the number of men who are truly religious, but a decrease in the number of those who are falsely religious, that is, merely superstitious.

There is no question that science is the cure for superstition, and if given a chance will reduce the amount that exists.

- d. The truths of religion, by the very nature of the case, must be compatible with the truths of science and of philosophy. As scientific knowledge advances, and as philosophical analysis improves, religion is progressively purified of the superstitions that accidentally attach themselves to it, as parasites.

That being so, it is easier to be more truly religious today than ever before, precisely because of the advances that have been made in science and philosophy.

Easier—but only for those who will make the effort to think clearly in and about religion; not for those whose

addiction to religion is nothing more than a slavish adherence to inherited superstitions.

It is the latter who in earlier ages were the majority.

Throughout the whole of the past, only a small number of men were ever truly religious.

Moses and the majority—the vast majority that Israelites—
 give their epochs and societies the worshipping the appearance of being
 religious—were Golden Calf. primarily and essentially superstitious.

It is that majority that has been cut into today and reduced in numbers, so that now

we have a growing number of men who, cured of their superstitions, confess to being irreligious

still a considerable number of men who confess to being religious, but are really superstitious

and the same small number of men who, with full cognizance of all that modern science and philosophy can teach, are still religious in the true sense of that word.

- e. What I have just said goes a long way toward explaining the increase of atheism.

The growing number of new atheists consists of those who never did understand the conception of God, and whose mistaken conception of God have been shaken, as well they should be, by modern science and philosophy.

- C. I come finally, then, to the question about religion itself.
 - 1. I said earlier that I regarded this as the most difficult of all the questions with which we are concerned this evening—
 - most difficult, that is, to approach from a purely philosophical point of view (however easy it may be for a person of true religious faith).
 - 2. The difficulty lies first of all, in drawing the line between the natural and the supernatural in the sphere of human thought and in the sphere of human action. Let me try.
 - a. By the natural, in human thought and action, I mean that which man can achieve entirely by the exercise of his own powers, without any aid whatsoever from any agency or power that is not included in the natural order itself.

b. By the supernatural, in human thought and action, I mean that which man can think or do only through the aid of an agency or power that transcends the natural order.

3. With this distinction made, the difficulty we then face arises as a consequence. Let me show you what I mean.

a. If, for example, such disciplines as mathematics, history, the natural, social, and behavioral sciences, and all the branches of philosophy exhaust the departments or branches of natural knowledge, then

either religion is supernatural knowledge—knowledge that man possess through God’s revelation of himself to man.

or it is nothing but a set of superstitions

b. Another way of saying this is as follows: many persons think of religion as an ethical code, a set of prescriptions for living in a certain way, a set of beliefs about the world and about man, etc.

Now: If these rules or prescriptions are arrived at by the natural processes of the human mind, they are nothing but moral or ethical philosophy. There is absolutely no reason for calling them religious.

If the set of beliefs about the world and about man are similarly arrived at, they are nothing but metaphysics or speculative philosophy. There is absolutely no reason for calling them religious.

They deserve and demand the name “religion”—as something distinct and different from science and philosophy—only if they are supernatural in origin—

a gift of God’s grace, something that man receives from God.

not something that he achieves entirely by his own powers in an entirely natural way.

c. What I have just said applies equally to the religious life.

1) No one can lead a way of life that is religious except through the supernatural agency of God’s grace.

2) If a way of life can be lived entirely through the exertion of man’s natural powers, entirely through the exercise of his own free will, the habits he can form through his own acts, or the discipline he can acquire through his own efforts, then that way of life is not religious.

3) In short, I am saying that a religious way of life can be lived only through God’s grace, just as religious faith or belief can be had only as a gift of God.

4) Hence if God does not exist, religion does not exist, but only counterfeits of what it would be if it did exist.

4. Fully to appreciate the difficulty of either accepting or rejecting this definition of religion as that which is supernatural in man's thought and action, you need only clearly examine the consequences of the alternatives.

a. On the one hand, let's suppose that this definition of religion is false.

(1) On that alternative, there is no way of drawing the line between

(a) Such things as science and philosophy, on the one hand, and religion, on the other;

(b) In fact, in view of the way in which religious beliefs are formed and the way in which they are held, it would then become necessary to say that most religious beliefs are simply bad philosophy, or worse than that, unfounded conjectures about things beyond our knowledge.

And on this alternative all religions are secular institutions and are fraudulent when they pretend to be sacred!

(c) This applies to the religions of the East as well as to the religions of the West.

It is generally admitted that most of the religions of the East cannot be distinguished from philosophy.

That being the case, the only important question about them is how good they are as philosophies.

(d) What I have just said applies to the teachings of Jesus just as much as it applies to the teachings of Confucius or of Buddha or of the Zen masters.

If Jesus is not the incarnate word of God, if he is not God revealing himself to man, if he is just a man like you and me, then his teachings are no different from those of Socrates—no different in character, in their origin, or in the standard to which they must submit.

Being a follower of Jesus, as one might be a follower of Socrates or of Ghandi, is not being religious.

Moreover, I would seriously question the possibility of following Jesus's teachings, of living according to his precepts, of imitating his way of life, if his teachings be taken on the purely natural plane, the same plane on which we take Socrates' teachings or Ghandi's.

And in the same way that I question whether anyone can imitate Christ, as the Christian saints did, without God's grace, so I also question whether anyone can become a Zen master and achieve Sartori without God's grace.

2. Let me summarize in another way what I have just tried to say:

a. On the alternative that religion is entirely a natural product of man, and not something that man has through a supernatural gift,

I say, first, that it cannot be distinguished from philosophy; and that, in addition, most of it, by the strictest standards, is very bad philosophy;

and

I say, second, that the way of life or of thought that is recommended by the great religious leaders, treated as purely natural, not as agents of God, makes demands upon man that human nature by itself—i.e., without supernatural aid—can never fulfill.

b. On the other hand, let's suppose that this definition of religion is true, namely, that religion involves a supernatural gift that lifts human thought and action above the natural plane.

(1) On that alternative, there is a clear line of distinction between

- (a) philosophy, on the one hand, and religion, on the other—so far as thought, knowledge, and belief are concerned.
- (b) ordinary ways of life, on the one hand, and the religious way of life, on the other—so far as conduct and action are concerned.

On this alternative, a secular religion or a secularized Christianity is as impossible as a round square!

(2) Further, on this alternative: only the religions of the West, and among these especially orthodox Christianity, make claims that entitle them to the name of religion.

(3) My knowledge of the Eastern religions is not sufficient to make judgment that is here implied, and so I leave with you the question whether the so-called religions of the East claim a supernatural foundation for the beliefs they inculcate and a supernatural support for the way of the life they recommend.

If they do not, or if, further, they deny any supernatural foundations or sources, then they are not religions in the sense defined.

And if they are not that, then they are at best philosophies - moral or speculative—and we must judge them by the same standards that we judge any other philosophical efforts on the part of man.

(4) To which I would like to add one other pertinent observation:

- (a) The teachings of Confucius, so far as I can understand them, seem to be no more than philosophical thought. I say this without making any judgment about the truth or falsity of Confucian doctrines. And so far as these doctrines propose a code of conduct and a way of life, they seem to me quite practicable by ordinary men; that is, they make no demands on man that human nature cannot meet

—no demands that would require supernatural help to meet.

- (b) But, on the contrary, the teachings of the Buddha and of the Zen masters, so far as I can understand them, seem to be the very opposite of philosophical thought.

If you were to take them as philosophical thought, you would have to dismiss them—as one must dismiss the Christian mystics ... as having little or no philosophical merit.

Moreover, the way of life and of thought that they recommend are quite unpracticable by ordinary men.

They make demands that human nature cannot meet—that is, not without supernatural help.

Hence I am impelled to ask the question whether the achievements of Buddha and his saintly followers, and the achievements of the Zen masters—both in thought and action—

may not be manifestations of God's grace, the products of a supernatural intervention in human life and thought—

even though Buddhists and Zen masters may never themselves claim a supernatural foundation for their doctrines or supernatural help for their way of life.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

1. *What I have and what I have not tried to do*

- a. I have not in this lecture asserted, much less tried to prove, the existence of God.
- b. I have done nothing but present the minimum philosophical analysis that is required to
 - (1) EXPOSE the inanity and double-talk of the new theology and the death of God movement
 - (2) RAISE SOME SERIOUS QUESTIONS about secularism and religion—applicable to both East and West.

It is this *very last point*—applicability to East as well as West, and applicable in the same way to both

that may be objected to, especially by participants in the Seminar on Far Eastern Thought.

To meet that objection, or at least to challenge it, I would like now, finally, to state the controlling principles underlying everything I have said.

2. *The controlling principles*

- a. Science—natural and social—thought mainly a Western invention and development—is neither Eastern nor Western, but universal—exactly the same in both East and West.
 - (1) Anyone who in any way or degree lives by means of the technology that is nothing but an application of science tacitly acknowledges this.
 - (2) To acknowledge the technological applications is also to acknowledge tacitly, at least, the truth of the science that is applied.
 - (3) In short, both Eastern and Western cultures must agree that science gives us a measure of truth—not the whole truth, but considerable truth—about the world in which we live—about nature, about society, and about man himself—all objects of scientific investigation.
- b. *Truth is one*; i.e., there are not three separate kinds of truths—scientific, philosophical, and religious—unrelated and incapable of being inconsistent or incompatible.
 - (1) This is the basic insight of Aquinas against the Latin Averroists, who wished to keep the truths of science and philosophy and the truths of religions in logic water-tight compartments.—

thus to avoid the apparent contradictions between the science of that day and some of the superstitious beliefs attached to the religion of that day.
 - (2) This principle applies to philosophy as well as to religion—and to both in the same way.
 - (a) Though philosophy may add truth to the truth learned by science, nothing can be true in philosophy that in any way violates or contradicts what we know by science.
 - (b) Similarly, though religion—through revelation—may add truth to the truths learned by both science and philosophy, nothing can be true in religion or as a matter of religious faith that in any way violates or contradicts what we know by science.

Comment: Augustine vs the Manicheans—whom he dismissed as superstitious because their astrological views were incompatible with the science of his day.
- c. If these two controlling principles are sound, then they apply equally to Eastern and Western thought—philosophical or religious—and apply in the same way:
 - (a) Like Western philosophy, Eastern philosophy can have truth beyond what we know by science, but nothing that violates or contradicts what we know by science.
 - (b) Like Western religion, Eastern religion is separated from superstition and fraud by a line that divides what is and what is not compatible with the truths of philosophy and of science.
- d. To try to avoid these two conclusions,

- (a) You would have to deny that science and technology are common to West and East—and that truth of the one and the usefulness of the other is the same in both.
- (b) You would have to take refuge in the abhorrent doctrine of two truths—or three truths—that the truths of science, the truths of philosophy, and the truths of religion, can have no relation to one another and can be quite incompatible and yet all be true in some of the word “true” that is the same for all.

In my judgment, for what it is worth, it is impossible to deny that science and technology are common to West and East.

And, in my judgment, to take refuge in the doctrine of two or more modes of truth—separated in logic-tight compartments—

is to embrace intellectual insanity—an intellectual schizophrenia that is the utter ruin of the human mind.



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