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THE CASE FOR A 21st CENTURY RELIGIOUS RENAISSANCE

And Why Now Would Be a Good Time

By

Jay B. Gaskill

Introduction:

In this article, I address the future of religion in this century. Many of my secular friends are dimly aware of the need to shore up the foundations of the ethical systems that support civilization, what I call “the moral infrastructure,” but they remain clueless as how that can actually happen. Frankly, many of the most intelligent minds in this group are even more clueless about the disastrous consequences should that vital task not be accomplished. Having witnessed the breakdown of the moral infrastructure first hand among the criminal population of the Bay Area over the last three decades, I consider myself forewarned.

The march of secularism through the culture is a mixed blessing. The persistent recurrence of violent inter-religious intolerance makes a strong case for secular models of governance. But secular “tolerance” comes at a high price when tolerance-as-ultimate value inevitably mutates into moral indifference. And it is hard not to notice that the very processes and contents of “modernization” are bundled with more and more secular “software”. It seems that the blessings of science don’t come without baggage. The attitudes and practices that accompany the blessings of science, especially benign scientific and technological advances in basic health and food production that developed in the West during the last century come bundled with “an offer we can't refuse”: We are expected to accept science itself as moral authority. But health and food are not science’s only gifts. Science has proven itself to be all too easily misappropriated by tyranny.

The history of the 20th century has vividly demonstrated that there are both moral and amoral scientists. Few scientists in Hitler’s Germany exhibited the moral courage of the Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Nazi Reichminister Albert Speer wrote (from his cell in Spandau) about how Hitler’s

regime exploited the amoral enthusiasm of the scientist and technician, so in love with the task that ethical considerations were not operative. When I think of the German physicist, Werner Heisenberg who directed the Nazi atom bomb project, I wonder: Did he secretly slow down the project due to his putative ethical qualms? Or was Heisenberg one of history's great villains who loved science more than morality? Science, qua science, is no more moral than its individual practitioners.

Thoughtful humanists need to be as concerned as the rest of us that, within all of the secularized, prosperous, hi-tech leading edges of society, churches are increasingly seen as irrelevant relics of the past. Most of the original European populations have abandoned their parents' religious affiliations altogether. And the American intelligentsia is very close behind Europe in this cultural trend. Because religions, more than any other set of human institutions, are the bearers of the gifts of ethical and moral wisdom for our species, the decline of churches cannot be witnessed with indifference. The reform of human religions will probably be a necessary precondition to their cultural reconnection with the educated intelligentsias in the world. And I readily concede that both tasks – reform and reconnection - will be very difficult.

Among the secular population, self-centered consumerism competes with versions of secular social justice and environmentalism for time and money. This is a milieu where religions are seen by many as less expensive “social welfare subcontractors.” Can it really be that the task of protecting children, women, the poor, and all the other marginalized ones in our species is actually better performed by secular minds than religious ones? If this is even marginally true, we must ask ourselves, “What good is religion anyway?” Can any of us within the great religious traditions answer that question in a way that resonates outside our own faith circle?

And there is an equally challenging problem for secular humanists, one that is at once more serious and more intractable because it is so thoroughly entangled with the dominant materialist mindset. In the materialist mindset, all human hopes and values, indeed our species' entire sense of the beautiful and the good, become reducible to chemistry and physics writ large, and our morality becomes the product of “cultural and economic forces”. If morality is culturally determined (read determined by the powerful to control the weak) then the only moral ethos available to control the powerful is “turning the tables” which – as we have seen in Stalin's Russia and Mao's China, merely produces a successor power elite. Religions are virtually unique in upholding the prophetic tradition, that cohort of dangerous but revered voices who, at great risk and divine confidence, spoke moral truth to amoral power.

The great issue of our time is this: Are the foundations of morality transient or transcendent? This may be the most important question in the whole realm of human ethics, yet it remains the elephant in the room, the troubling unspoken issue within secular circles. A corpus of transcendent truths underpinning fundamental morality is present in one form or another at the very roots of all authentic, robust, working ethical systems.

But secular “materialist” humanism is built on the notion that all reality, including our most private musings and inspirations, can be reduced to the essentially mechanical accounts provided by physics, chemistry, and the related scientific disciplines. This is what I will call arch-materialism, the comprehensive and questionable theory that matter and energy and the laws that govern their

behavior in space-time hold the key to all life's important value questions. It is not even parody to observe that, for the most dedicated arch-materialists, a thrilling work of music can be reduced to a series of air pressure fluctuations that govern the flux of electro-biochemical responses in the brain.

When trapped in such a cramped, narrow and reductionist context, humanism is rendered powerless to provide positive answers to the essential questions of the moral life. Questions like "Why care?" and "Is there any ultimate accountability" must be freshly answered and satisfyingly addressed by each generation. A spiritually empty answer to these key questions presages trouble.

Arch materialism and secular materialist humanism are trapped in the sterile, "everything is brain chemistry" answers to all these "big" questions. Consider the implications of this answer: "Care only about that which you choose to care because your freedom is either radical or utterly non-existent. Either way, there is no ultimate accountability."

When driven by bleak and disturbing negative answers to the "Why care?" class of questions, any culture will quickly find itself in free fall. I believe that it is a law of social behavior that any vacuum in civilization's foundational morality and governing principles must be filled. Nihilism and authoritarian lunacy will flourish whenever power becomes disconnected from the great moral foundations. If you doubt this, review the sad history of the 20th century.

Many of us know (as many of our secular friends do not) that the answers to the "Why bother?" category of questions lies in the domain of religion -- or at the very least in a transcendent form of humanism that recaptures the essential elements of religious belief -- in other words, religion by another name.

So what are those "essential" elements of religion? How can religion be restored? What does "restoration" entail? These are the questions that I propose to address.

In the course of the discussion, I will touch on a number of topics and subtopics, among them these six:

1. Why have religions at all?
2. The six social fault lines that religions must bridge in this century
3. The two most church-neglected values (i.e., the "Two Ghosts Outside The Church")
4. Recovering our original inspiration
5. The Four Models of belief, the traditional "spiritual technologies"
6. An outline of the path to renewal, discussing the "Fifth Model"

In the **First Appendix**, I briefly address the prospect of Christian renewal. If we members of tribe Homo Sapiens are to get out of this fix, the Christian story of renewal will be replicated in all the other major religion, and in humanism. This article is also a plea for your assistance.

I. Defining the Subject

What is Religion?

I continue to be frustrated at the apparent lack of self definition that accompanies the various groups who assemble in the interests of interfaith cooperation and interaction. It is as if the very premise of inter-faith, inter-religious cooperation is a calculated refusal to define the subject, lest someone be offended.

I began thinking about this problem at a workshop during which it quickly became apparent that the multi-faith participants were united by a narrow band of the politically liberal catechism. All were functional pacifists, for example, and no one – at least in this gathering – seemed capable of identifying a theory of evil, the opposition to which might unite people “of good will” everywhere. The notion of a careful and respectful dialogue from agreed first principles to competing real world applications was entirely beyond the reach of the gathering. Everyone seemed to assume that “we all know” what qualifies as a religion. My take is the problem of inter-religious exchange and cooperation tends to be finessed by permitting an implied, non-explicit self-definition based on a sort of loose affiliative ambience. In effect everyone says - if we call ourselves religious and gather here, that fact alone is a sufficient definition.

The approach seems to echo the Supreme Court’s problem with defining obscenity – “We know it when we see it.” Such a strategy is provisionally sufficient for interfaith gatherings around a common topic, say the medical ethics of assisted suicide, but it is entirely insufficient to embark on a really ambitious project such as that of religious renewal against the backdrop of rampant arch-materialism, moral relativism and nihilistic terrorism.

There is a trend afoot in the world. It will generate a changed “playing field” for religious affiliation (and already has done so in many part of the developed world). Increasingly, the old hereditary and other authoritarian models give way to a “free market” in religion. As I have proposed in the Second Appendix, in the 21st century religion must “earn its keep” or face obsolescence. Those of us who are rooting for religious success in this century need to heed the new reality and meet the new challenge. We are now required to do a much better job of identifying that which we are supporting. For purposes of this discussion, I will begin with a functional definition of religion as opposed to a doctrinal one.

I would have us start with one question, “What good is religion anyway?” i.e., “What core human needs does religion, qua religion, purport to address?” These answers will point us to a functional definition. [Of course, the IRS has its own, “value neutral” criteria. Eventually we’ll all have to address the “scientology” question (using scientology as a stand-in for all the New Age claimants for tax exempt status, adherents, and worship energy).] I submit that - to the extent religion survives into the late 21st century - it will have proven itself effective in addressing at least three core human needs: spiritual connection, ethical guidance, and support for the foregoing in a community setting.

A Snapshot of My Perspective

Anyone with the chutzpa even to attempt to write about the future of religion in the 21st century has an obligation to reveal his underlying personal perspective. This is a snapshot of mine.

I believe that we are - each of us - the sum of our histories, decisions and aspirations. As I attempt write about religion in the largest sense, dealing with the great universals it contains, I am unable to escape the fact that my feet are still planted in Judeo-Christian soil.

I suppose we all start and end with our feet planted somewhere. An Anglican theologian of my acquaintance (i.e., a well known Episcopal priest and theologian) was raised in a Greenwich Village household by secular humanists. The first phase of his education was in physics and political science. He was attracted to the spiritual side of things after reading Wordsworth while still at Harvard. He decided to get baptized (as a precaution) before shipping out in World War II. His second advanced degree was in theology.

My own story is more mundane, but it has shaped my religious perspectives. I emerged from my conventionally Protestant background in semi-rural Idaho to become a Unitarian in Berkeley where I was attending law school. Later, two significant things happened: I was drawn back into Christianity via the more formal “catholic” rituals of the Episcopal Church (sometimes self-described as Anglo-catholic) and I contemporarily discovered and studied the deep Judaic DNA that underlies the whole Christian tradition. My appreciation of the mystery of the Eucharist, for example, was strongly connected with my understanding of the Jewishness of Rabbi Jesus. For me, it was only by clearly seeing Jesus’ ministry as a development within Judaism, that could I grasp the world scale significance of the **failed** attempt of the occupying Roman authorities to extinguish this Rabbi’s life, teaching and significance to the future in a single, well publicized execution. But that narrative thread, however central to my own experience, cannot invalidate the authenticity of the spiritual life of a cherished cousin; years ago she was drawn to Buddhism in much the same way as I was called back to the essential Christian ritual.

All this time, my intellectual life was bound up in boundaries -- the creative zones between philosophy, science and religion. and my approach to the latter was informed by a deeply ecumenical perspective. Over the years, I have developed a thirst for the kernels of the universal as they are embedded in every religious tradition, as well as outside them. I see no conflict between that perspective and my bonds with one particular religious tradition.

It is my conviction, based on a convergence of philosophy and life experience, that the more that you or I are able to penetrate, study and unpack the particulars that life presents to us, the more we will tend discover and encounter the authentic and potentially life changing universals that are embedded there waiting to be found.

Our knowledge of the great universals arises from the fact that they **are** universals, that is, that they tend to **recur** throughout nature and human experience. We humans discover universal spiritual truth primarily in the intimate particulars of our own experiences. I don’t that will change over the next 92 years. But the shock of that discovery can engender the illusion of absolute uniqueness: “This is mine and mine alone. Well maybe mine to share with the elect, only, and them alone.” This tendency to private appropriation of the universal is what will – and must – change in the 21st Century if, as I hope and believe, religion will undergo a renaissance. We who “find religion”, as it were, must respect the **quality** of the discovery -- as something shared that will also be rediscovered at another place and time, but within the context and syntax of a different perspective and tradition..

Some Optimistic Predictions

Every new age generates a new paradigm, image or metaphor that filters our contact with reality, including spiritual reality, on a deep, often unconscious level. For the roughly 200 year period that began with 19th century chemistry and electricity, it was the powerful, almost shaman-like image of the lab coated scientist surrounded by test tubes and sparking wires (right out of the mind of Mary Shelly and the black and white films of the 1920's). The last century updated the image with pictures of the archetypal atomic scientist, and that frightening image of almost God like power, the glowing, roiling mushroom cloud.

Thus, Scientism was born. This development really grew out of the latter day 20th century tendency to regard someone who is an expert in one thing as an expert in everything.¹ At its most absurd, the uncritical reverence for “experts” has been transformed by the conflation of celebrity status. You know the phenomenon - undereducated movie stars become foreign policy gurus; a popular “science genius” becomes an expert in ethics and morality. The most problematic premise of scientism was that we are to look to science – and by extension to scientists – for *moral* knowledge. After all, it was “science” that destroyed God.

“Without God, everything is permitted”. Sartre, that cynical atheist, attributed this aphorism to Dostoevsky.” Sartre was paraphrasing of course, and I would now re-paraphrase - “Without religion or at least without deity or an equivalent universal moral authority, everything is permitted”...

I suspect Sartre was remembering a passage from The Brothers Karamazov, in Book X, at Chapter 4, where Mitya Karamazov is in jail awaiting trial for killing his father. He's speaking to his brother, Alyosha, the novitiate. Mitya has just said that he is “...sorry for God” because, “Your Reverence, you must move over a little, chemistry is coming!”

Then Mitya says: “How...is man to fare after that? Without God and a life to come? After all, that would mean that now all things are lawful, that one may do anything that one likes.” [Page 753, Penguin Edition 1880, 1993 trans. Reissued 2003 w/ revisions.]

For Mitya's “chemistry”, you can insert the general world view of arch-materialism. This was a powerful tool for those who had already begun to reject religion, and it became the foundation stone of Karl Marx's dialectical materialism and scientific socialism. Arch-materialism became the 20th Century's “Sorcerer's Apprentice”. As I briefly sketch in the next section, the two pseudo-scientific secular religions of that bloodiest of all human centuries were responsible for more killings than all religions combined.

So my new optimism is tempered by the omnipresent dark side of human nature. Still, I see a set of very promising developments.

¹ One definition of scientism is the “excessive belief in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques”. Oxford Online

We are living in a new paradigm, one shaped by the advent of powerful, popular and ubiquitous information processing technologies. I believe this will revolutionize our approach to spiritual reality by cracking open the closed materialist regime. Millions and millions of young internet surfers are being made aware on a deep intuitive level that information, an essentially weightless and “zero energy” existent, is powerful in its own right. Of course, information exists as an imprint on various energy/matter carriers (as bit-stream patterns on electromagnetic waves for example), but the message content is “non-material” in a sense that is immediately and intuitively understood by the user. Yet the information content is important, real and valuable in measurable ways (think of price, supply and demand) that are essentially unrelated to the comparatively minimal energy costs of transmission. This is a very large topic, one that I am addressing in a much larger piece, but here is the takeaway point: The reality and power of information to influence events in the physical world, when grasped on a “gut level” completely dissipates the hold of the older arch-materialist paradigm and opens the mind to the power and significance of spiritual awareness as a species of information.

Each new age generates new metaphors that help establish and promulgate the new paradigm. Already, we can detect an emergent set of useful metaphors in the use of the hardware-software distinction. I see all ritual and liturgy, including meditation practice, as forms of “spiritual software.”

A religion is the set of belief systems, traditions, institutions, and spiritual technologies that bind ethical-spiritual support communities together. All religious doctrine, ritual and practice is connectivity software that helps connect the individual to co-religionists across time and space, to the human condition writ large and to Ultimate Reality.

Not all religious software can run well or at all on a given platform. And because of human software differences (the metaphor now includes culture as “translation” software), the particular expressions of the religious sensibility will necessarily differ, but the Ultimate Reality to which we all connect is the same.

My prediction is that the new paradigm and some version of the connectivity software metaphor will inaugurate a religious renaissance characterized by a much deeper and more profound level of ecumenical and inter-religious understanding and cooperation that ever before was possible.

A corollary prediction: Just as there are sub-communities within recognized religions, i.e., denominations and orders, I think there are supra-communities among religions which make up “virtual” religions. We may see a growing virtual religion movement whose communities are organized across space and time via information exchange as well as meet and greet exchange. I suspect that virtual religions will prove to be every bit as authentic and universal than the more traditional, brick and mortar ones.

II. Defending the Subject

Why Have Religion?

One of Fyodor Dostoevsky's characters said in effect, "Without God, everything is permitted." And Friedrich Nietzsche's madman said that "God is dead." And speaking for many Marxists, Mao said that "Religion is poison." So we might ask ourselves: Is it possible that Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Mao were each right?

The landscape of the 20th century is littered with the casualties of secular, pseudo-scientific ideologies. Nazism and Stalinist Marxism appeared on the world stage, adopting the trappings of neo-religions (see Eric Hoffer's classic, *The True Believer*), infected with an inhumane intolerance whose virulence was more deadly than that exhibited by authoritarian religious institutions at their worst. In gulags, ditches, gas ovens, labor camps, prisons, torture chambers, and forcible relocations, the last century's totalitarian regimes between them killed more of their own people than the entire casualty list of the Inquisition, the Crusades, the jihads, and all of the religious wars and oppressions before them combined. If, as Mao said, "religion is poison," how was it that just two secular ideologies with scientist pretensions (Nazism and state communism) have caused more human suffering and death than all previous secular and religious movements combined?

While some secularists (both Marxist and otherwise) still think that religion is infected with a psychological poison, history suggests a more persuasive theory. The problem lies with the deep insecurities of any authoritarian regime (religious or secular) whose ideological underpinnings are deemed essential to stability, yet remains vulnerable to destabilization through heresy. The overreaction of the current regime in mainland China to the Falun Gong sect is yet another example of an insecure ideology faced with a possible competing belief system. The counter reaction of Islamic ideologues in the 21st century to secular modernity is another example of the same phenomenon, an authoritarian regime based on a distorted version of the original faith, riddled with deep insecurities.

Liberty and human dignity cannot long abide in a state of nature – they require a civilization for the maintenance of the hospitable conditions in which these desirable states can persist and even flourish. The inherent strength of a culturally diverse, free, yet coherent civilization cannot be overstated. Tolerance of diverse views within an overall framework of rational order that is well supported by a robust normative architecture is the single best guarantor of human freedom and dignity. Religion, as a source of moral authority that transcends political power relationships, can be (and sometimes is) a bulwark for the framework of rational order that supports human freedom and dignity. In other words, that strain of religious thought which is compatible with human freedom and dignity is part of the solution, and that strain which is incompatible is part of the problem.

In the presence of a psycho-social moral vacuum, when the moral infrastructure seems to give way and the legitimacy of the order itself is called into question, civilizations tend to revert to their most primitive, authoritarian, atavistic, degraded forms. Human society abhors a moral vacuum. Extreme authority rushes in to fill the gap when weaknesses in the normative architecture, (that set of well founded beliefs and practices supporting the political and civil social order), reaches a certain critical state. The desperate economic, social, and psychological conditions in Weimar Germany and in post World War I Russia were amplified by the deteriorated conditions of the respective moral infrastructures of those societies. The resulting moral uncertainty eroded the authority and credibility of those pre-fascist and pre-communist regimes. Irresolution and a lack of

confidence by their governments opened the door to their replacement with authoritarian movements with atavistic features.

During the reign of these two totalitarian movements, all independent religion was suppressed. Eventually, the internal and external opposition by religion contributed to the eventual defeat of both Nazism and Russian Communism and their replacement by more democratic institutions.

One of the distinguishing features of a world religion is the claim to a basis for moral authority that is binding on the kings, regents, and dictators of the age, as well as the rest of us. The appeal to trans-human moral authority, the kind of normative judgment to which even tyrants must be subject, is incompatible with the theory and practice of totalitarianism.

We can reasonably conclude that religion is not itself inherently poisonous, except to totalitarian regimes whose ideology is threatened. But can it still properly be dismissed as a primitive artifact of the pre scientific age? After all, is not God “dead”? Is not morality just a feature of anthropology and psychology? Is religion still necessary in the 21st century, or even relevant?

Put bluntly, what good is religion, anyway?

Let me outline my reply. Religion, if it survives, will flourish if it performs those functions for which it is uniquely suited. At its best, we can expect religions to provide the following benefits to the human enterprise:

1. Psychological and social environments that facilitate a common understanding of the universal basis of our core normative and metaphysical judgments, derived from trans-human authority, thus promoting communities of belief, common nexus to the numinous level of experience and secure foundations (culturally and intellectually) for the moral/ethical basis of civilization itself.
2. Support – in terms of community, logistic, and moral credibility – for the prophetic tradition, that is for the critique of “kings” -- all those who occupy and potentially abuse positions of secular power. When religion is functioning optimally, the critique includes those in positions of religious authority who succumb to the temptations and therefore abuse power.
3. A sacred space for personal exploration and development, maintaining sanctuaries for personal renewal.

The decline of religious influence over the last two centuries has occurred in direct relationship to the growth of the psychological power of the scientific/rationalist revolution among the intelligentsia, and that of the liberal/hedonistic revolution within the popular culture. Both developments are perceived in the popular mind as related.

In the early stages of the revolution, the targets were the remnants of feudalism, royal privilege, anti-democratic, class-based regimes, gender and race-based patterns of domination, and dour repression of the natural pursuit of ordinary human pleasure. As these targets were destroyed one by one (and that salutary task is ongoing), the same revolution has begun to attack the very basis of healthy human morality and the core norms on which civilization rests.

The response of religion to these developments was as diverse as its geographic, cultural, doctrinal and liturgical range. In some instances, elements of the popular culture were incorporated into worship, and the moral-behavioral strictures of traditional faith based ethical systems, especially relating to sex, and recreational activities, were dramatically liberalized. The response by religion to the scientific/rationalist critique has been equally varied, consisting in some cases of outright retrenchment into literalist, authoritarian fundamentalism. In other cases, the response has been the assertion of a “post-modern” irrationalism. In some versions of the “new age” post modern stance, the truth-claims of science have been demoted the realm of “preference” – ironically, the same low status to which some positivists have relegated ethics! In liberal theology, there has been cautious engagement with the scientific/rationalist revolution, usually coupled with a strategic retreat from traditional theistic/deistic doctrines.

Predictably, the results are mixed. Third world cultures have remained traditionally religious and afflicted with caste-based authority and allied religious institutions. An atavistic form of Islamic thought has given rise to terrorism on an unprecedented scale. The bulk of the European population has all but abandoned religion, yet, in America, popular religion remains robust, though generally more fundamentalist than in Europe. New converts may be in numerical decline among the youngest generations, especially those in urban areas. Almost everywhere, the intelligentsia seems to remain predominantly atheistic, materialistic, while at least nominally humanistic.

All of the foregoing acknowledged, no other set of institutions, other than authentic religious ones, yet have the stature and standing to assert the validity of any moral system which is credibly binding on those who wield political power.

Historically, only religious individuals and institutions have been able to perform this prophetic function. As the new century dawns, there is still no plausible successor for religion’s prophetic challenge to abuses of power.

III. The Challenges to the Subject

The Social Fault Lines

But religious belief as such, doesn’t answer the need for an authentically common system of ethical norms. In the last several hundred years, religions as a whole have contributed more passion and conflict than agreement and accord. The religious tendency to devolve into internecine factions and disagreements is amplified by the accelerating pace of social change in the world.

Each century generates a unique set of issues, or novel variations on the perennial ones. The current challenges must be met by any religion that claims relevance. Among the looming issues, we face vexing questions about the proper uses of technologies capable of remaking the human condition in ways that may significantly alter human nature itself. As these novel issues mature, there are still more basic divisions.

I have identified six cultural, philosophical fault lines, among the many fractures that mark the divisions of our times. Behind the headlines, the social and political conflicts, the issues of the

moment, these six fractures continuously reappear. I have stated each of them in a way that doesn't conceal my own bias about the needed resolution. A huge question for me², and for many who have fallen away from contemporary religious practice, is whether religions as we now know them in the early 21st century can effectively guide us to wisdom on these issues.

Or must we guide them? It remains very much an open question. My "fracture" list follows:

Fracture One: The moral politics of gesture vs. the gritty, risky task of moral accomplishment.

Few people actually exert much concrete effort in improving the lives of strangers, but all too many assuage their accumulated social guilt (for not doing that or for merely succeeding in life) by "standing for something good". At its most dysfunctional, this attitude can result in making political-moral gestures that, if actually implemented, would prove to be a public policy, humanitarian disaster. Mr. "A" proudly asserts that he "supports" the worthy cause of "helping the poor" by advocating pseudo-benign policies that enhance a socially destructive dependence. Ms. "B" decides to actually find out the real world measures that will work to improve the lot of the poor, and she commits time and resources to that end. Examples of "B" abound. Working to improve parental involvement and accountability in education, to foster basic work discipline among young adults, and to break the back of chemical addictions among underemployed populations is both more frustrating and effective than the moral politics of gesture.

Fracture Two: Promoting negative leveling vs. fostering positive development.

There are a number of closely related attitudes. Consider Mr. "C", who, having failed, now resents the success of others. Think of Ms. "D", who, when presented with the opportunity for happiness, feels unable to accept it or even experience it because others are still suffering. Australians talk of the risk of seeming to be the "tall poppy." By this they mean that the individual who stands out from the herd, by working harder, smarter, being taller, cleverer, more creative, etc., needs to shrink to the common level to avoid being cut down. Ultimately, this mindset creates a hostage situation, in which someone's misery must always prevail in hindering the happiness of others. Taken to its illogical extreme, this position means that no one can enjoy happiness without guilt since, inevitably, there is always someone whose position in life precludes the same degree of happiness.

A closely related mindset is the notion that all happiness, joy, achievement, etc., is some kind of perverse zero sum game. Therefore prosperity is always the result of the "exploitation" of those less fortunate. Closely allied is the notion that there is no real aggregate progress in human life. Presumably even our species' journey from disease ridden Medieval Europe to modern Europe and America does not represent real human progress, since the relative success of the latter were somehow attained and are sustained "at the expense" of others. Many failed public policies are associated with this mindset, including the notion that moneys spent on the exploration of space,

² This comment comes from a practicing Judeo-Christian who is also deeply universalist in outlook. I see no conflict between being rooted in one's own historical tradition and seeing it as but one example of a universal spiritual/ethical connection.

the arts, or the achievement of any other common goals that do not immediately and directly benefit the poor are wasted; that “inequalities” of achievement are inherently the result of “exploitation” of others; and that common growth can only be achieved through equally distributed sacrifice and without any unequally distributed rewards.

Tall poppies beware.

Fracture Three: Comfortable denial vs. the uncomfortable recognition of actual evil.

Those caught in the spell of cultural relativism seem unable to distinguish between ordinary wrongdoing and authentic evil. In this mindset, a runaway teenager who holds up a mini mart and a murderous drug baron bent on the chemical enslavement of a whole community are each products of their cultures.

If there is no evil, then even degrees of wrongdoing escape identification. Thus a genocidal dictator elicits levels of denial reminiscent of the “good Germans” who “didn’t know” about the nearby death camps. Material comfort and the unwillingness to recognize authentic evil tend to be mutually reinforcing. Once evil is defined as that which all moral agents must actively oppose, then comfort and denial operate to deconstruct the very idea of evil, obfuscate or excuse the reality of its malevolent actions, and anesthetize the impulse to confront and defeat it.

Edmund Burke’s admonition - for evil to triumph only requires good people to do nothing – remains true even as the scope and depth of 21st century evil threatens to outdo the staggering, bloody excesses of the 20th.

Fracture Four: Utopian pacifism vs. force structures that protect the innocent from social predators.

Any sufficiently large human population will always contain a significant number of social predators whose aggression can only be contained by a system of rules backed by force or the credible threat of force. This is a direct and unsurprising consequence of a primal fact: We humans have arrived at our dominant place in the biosphere of the planet earth because we are this world’s top predator species. Any doubt on this score can be resolved by a trip to the local marketplace. Food markets are run by our fellow humans, and the other animals and food plants are in the packages; were the tables turned, we’d be in the packages and I’d not be writing this.

Civilization is the social technology we super-predators have created to substitute a complex system of exchange relationships and task specialization for the raw and mutually defeating struggles of nature. But elements of competition survive within the overall structures of civilization and – when a civilization is well organized – that competition tends to serve the larger good. A short course in human relations reveals another unsurprising fact. Two or more “warrior” cultures blend into a common civilization (or cooperating civilizations) better than victim (read prey) cultures. [Think Greek and Roman civilizations, post WW 2 Japan and the US, among other examples. It is easier to love ones enemy (read competing co-predator) than one’s co-victim.]

Utopian pacifism is ultimately and profoundly a very selfish stance, that of one who seeks to avoid the psychological costs of robust self defense by withdrawal. As a personal strategy, this is hardly reprehensible since any functioning civilization requires specialization in the peaceful arts among others. Writ large, the stance of utopian pacifism becomes a foolish one, because it is so self defeating. We can and should value the contributions of the innately peaceful -- indeed we need to recognize that one of civilization's purposes is to optimize zones of protection for peaceful exchange relationships—but there is a correlative value.

The innately peaceful among us need to recognize and support the contributions of those who are willing to employ forceful means (with all the attendant risks) that always are needed, if only in reserve, to support the conditions needed to maintain a peaceful civilization.

Over the long term, civilization is maintained only by restraining the natural predatory impulses of humans and channeling them into constructive activities. At the end of the day, force linked to justice is ultimately necessary to sustain any civilization larger than a small clan of like minded individuals. Utopian pacifism denies this fundamental reality, and when implemented (even partially), tends to degrade and then destroy civilization itself.

Fracture Five: Rule consequences vs. mediation consensus.

When all interests, points of view and values are arbitrarily assigned “equal” weight, all disputes must be resolved via mediation and “consensus” because there is no other way save naked force. Force is “naked” only when it is divorced from a justice implementation model based on objective, principle-based norms. When power is otherwise used to resolve disputes, i.e., through coercive “process” without objective norms, it devolves rapidly to the personal. This can be seen operating in legal regimes in which objective, outcome-governing norms are rendered almost meaningless by elastic standards like “reasonable.”

This is why more judges and lawyers are murdered every year in family law disputes (where few of the most important decisions are actually governed by clear, outcome-determining rules) than in, say, criminal law, a field with equally high stakes but much more objective rules. When the outcome is not rule-governed, it all becomes personal.

While mediation-consensus has a valid, but narrow range of utility (especially in intra-family disputes), its application to larger scale societal management represents a huge and disastrous departure from the rule consequences model. That model is the underlying basis of law in any working civilization. Crime requires detection, apprehension and punishment. Rehabilitation occasionally succeeds, but almost always does so against the backdrop of a functioning criminal justice system in which bad deeds have bad consequences.

Mediation consensus fails as a general model for exactly the same reason that utopian pacifism fails.

Fracture Six: Cultural and Moral Relativism vs. Moral Systems Rooted in Deep Principle

Moral relativism closely follows cultural relativism and gives rise to the attitude that only power matters in human relations. The recovery of well grounded objective moral systems, of course, should be the core task of religion in the current era (if religion survives). It was a task that in prior centuries was so monopolized by religious and ecclesiastical authority that the royalist ruling classes had first to co-opt or control the “clerics” in order to govern. The survival of liberal civilizations in the current era (liberal civilization defined as those founded on robust protections for core individual liberties via governing norms that apply to rulers and ruled with equal force) requires a moral system rooted in deep principle supported by an authority that exceeds normal human institutions.

The Two Ghosts Outside the Sanctuary

Before religion can take up these six challenges, it must reform its own moral systems to incorporate all neglected universal values. This part of my critique is a very general one that admits of a number of specific and laudable exceptions. [I plan address the same topic in a book length treatment.]

With that said, here are my two targets:

1. Religious neglect of the hero and
2. Religious marginalization of the creative individual.

Of course, not all religious affiliations neglect both of these equally.

The first is a comparatively recent development, founded in growing political correctness, and the second has a longer history, at least for human creative activities that are outside the specific realm of the liturgical.

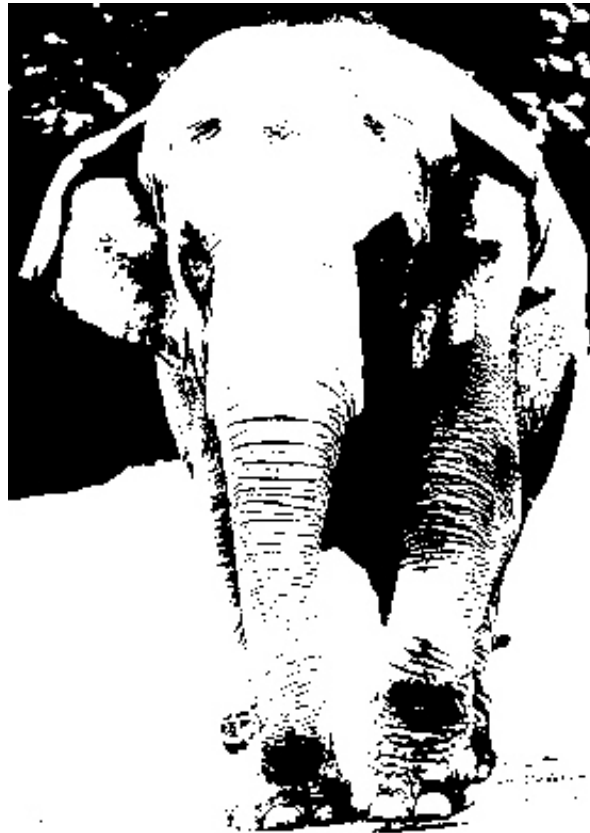
Let me take them up in order:



The Heroes in the Driveway

Heroic achievement, once sometimes honored by religious institutions is out of vogue, replaced in the main by a sense of communal “survivor guilt”.

Religions have marginalized the heroic elements in the human enterprise. There are exceptions. In the narrowest of religious contexts, heroic religious figures are recognized, especially in acts of noble self immolation. Opportunistically, (for example St. Joan), heroes are adopted when convenient. But show me where in the typical liturgy we honor human heroism as a specific good. When, for example, was the last time in a church or synagogue setting, we have heard a prayer honoring the bravery of firefighters and police, or of soldiers in a good cause?



The Elephant in the Sacristy

Creation, as an ongoing process and as a specifically human activity, is rarely seen as something with a specific religious import. It seems to warrant the attention of our spiritual minds only as diversion or perversion, not holy activity or holy accomplishment. More often, creation is simply left out of the religious conversation. Religions have marginalized the entire field of human creative achievement except in the narrowest religious context, as when a composer creates a mass, or opportunistically, as when a work of art is acknowledge as a “more acceptable diversion” than something else.

These twin failures are not accidental; they are structural.

In general, religion has not solved the conflict between sacrifice and self assertion. This makes it almost schizophrenic about the subject of human heroic accomplishment. Add a sense of post-colonial guilt among the members of the developed countries, and you get a sort of hero-aversion psychology.

Creation has become an orphan in religious terms, partly because of theological models that set up a sharp dualism between Creator and created, effectively marginalizing the ongoing processes of creative innovation in the arts, in scientific achievement and exploration, and, of course, in biological evolutionary development, itself. For these and other reasons, traditional theology and traditional liturgy have failed to integrate and honor ongoing creation – especially by members of the human family -- as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the world. Because religion has failed to recognize the special importance of creation as it has been incarnated in the human enterprise, we find most of the human creative communities indifferent to traditional religions at best, and at worst driven into strident opposition.

As a consequence of these twin failures of recognition, the culture suffers from chronic demoralization of our heroes coupled with the wholesale alienation of the creative community.

Police officers are drifting beyond the reach of the clergy while their very real spiritual needs are unmet. Heroes everywhere feel a certain cynicism and malign indifference in the general culture, and less than enthusiastic support from whatever elements of the spiritual community that haven't yet joined the critics of the heroic enterprise.

Is Nietzsche their only alternative?

This sense of alienation mirrors that experienced by the most creative people in our civilization.

Is atheism their only solace?

Universal Access to the Numinous Experience

I am convinced that, as conscious beings, we are all capable of achieving a universal apprehension, experienced as the awareness of a part of consciousness that is not fully space-time separated and fully not space-time limited. I believe that we commonly experience this reality within the conscious field, when our “subjective” being seems to soar, as if not space-time bounded at all.

All universal religious knowledge flows from two related insights: the apprehension of the universal unity of being and the intellectual process of global reality integration. The process of comprehensive reality integration, once under way, is like a powerful integrating software program that rolls everything together, including the universal essence of conscious being, the ultimate source of all creative development and the deep structures of reality. This integration is essentially a self validating heuristic faith stance, verified over a lifetime of guided trial, error, and reinforcement.

What religion calls deity can be viewed as the Essence of universal being, partly instantiated or replicated within the core of our local being, and constituting the parent, non-local source of our

own, separate “I-am-ness”. This is deity as the “Holy One” or the “holy oneness.” Depending on the particular tradition and the sophistication of its current theology, this general view is very, very close to traditional and aboriginal religious insights. The association of this locus of being with the source of all creation is a closely allied intellectual insight.

I find it hardly coincidental, (nor should anyone find it particularly surprising), that the many recorded accounts of human encounters with the numinous level of experience over the last five millennia (from Moses, the Buddha, the Hassidim, the Christ, the saints, seers, shamans, mystics, artists, musicians, and scientists, the skeptics during unguarded moments, the ordinary people in their “mountaintop experiences”, and most children during their thoughtful innocence) are deeply consistent. Filtered through various cultural traditions, these reports seem to record the same insight, in essence that beyond the immediate physical-material reality, there exists a deeper being that is benign, of central normative significance, and of intimate and ultimate reality.

Can we dismiss this body of evidence as “unscientific?” Can we ignore the data, disregard the consistent, repeating nature of the human numinous experience, or marginalize the wisdom of five millennia? We can at our peril. Or we can accept this large body of information for what it is: the witnessed accounts of the contact by intelligent conscious beings with a transcendent reality level revealed directly to cognition.

All the clerical hierarchical structures and all the positivistic skeptical postures are trumped by this evidence, especially when it is experienced directly. But the seduction of evil, which always draws its inspiration from power lures, reaches inside the institutions of religion via the illusion that official labels of ecclesiastical virtue can confer righteousness in fact.

And for the ecclesiastical bureaucracies, the temptation to monopolize our access to the numinous is almost irresistible. Yet it must be resisted.

The seminal and life-changing experience of the numinous level of reality is primary evidence. It is first hand experience of the existence and relevance of a universal, moral, creative level of reality. In its universal relevance we find meaning and purpose. In its universal nature we find peace and compassion. And in its felt, benign presence (should we be graced with consciousness of the attention of ultimate personality), we encounter the holiness that, in the mystical tradition, remains unnamed, but in all spiritual traditions is hallowed above all things on earth.

IV. Recovering Our Original Inspiration

If We Didn't Have Religion We Would Need to Reinvent It

The capacity to access trans-human normative truth and the ability to perform the prophetic function against abuses of power is the very domain of authentic religion. This is the soundest argument for working within those religious institutions whose moral authority and capacity for the exercise of the authentic prophetic function – has not irredeemably been forfeited.

At the end of the day, no societal nor personal renewal, and no ethical system can flourish without the ability to effectively address these three questions:

Why care?
Why bother?
Why act?

In a real sense, the core of all robust ethical systems is the ability to answer these questions, especially -- Why care about the future after I am no longer living my present mortal span? The domain of the answers to that question is that of authentic religion. But the answers that work are only partly intellectual. They are also deeply experiential. And that also belongs to the domain of authentic religion. Abstract belief, outside the context of a supporting community, rarely motivates people to act.

A Sketch of the Ancient “Spiritual Technologies”: The Four Models

In this century, we will find that the realm of the numinous is re-acknowledged, and the effects of information technology on our understanding of reality become more dramatic. The narrow and extreme versions of materialism (the mechanical universe, the brain-without-soul view of things) are already fading under the impact of a new generation’s experiences with computer amplified information manipulation. Those who regularly work with software or are in frequent contact with its amazing world-changing products, become aware on a deep, intuitive level of that something essentially non-material can be both real and powerful. It is but a single short step to appreciate the reality and power of spiritual practice. Although these developments are the topic of a book length treatment, we can expect to see a sea change in how all religious practices are understood. I predict that ritual, liturgy and religious practices generally will increasingly be understood as software, in effect they will be seen as connection modalities designed to facilitate access to the numinous. This will give rise to a more profound ecumenism, while at the same time presenting unprecedented challenges to the old religious traditions.

But at their purest, the old traditions already represented essentially complementary technologies, designed within differing cultural and language contexts, to accomplish essentially the same thing, numinous connectivity. The first hand experience of the existence and relevance of a universal, moral, creative level of reality, and the resulting discovery of meaning and purpose turns out to be a very ancient story. Its ancient provenance and perennial nature confirms that the core insights that underlie all authentic religious experience have been intuitively understood and widely recognized for millennia. These insights have found expression within at least four major religious-spiritual modalities or “spiritual technologies.” These four each represent the major religious traditions. Their key general and/or distinguishing features can be sketched as follows:

The Hindu Model

The local “I-Am” (Atman) is identified with the universal “I-Am” (Brahman). At this level of insight, meta-being is seen as less “I” more “am,” hence its earliest description as the “ground” of being. This core insight is echoed in the mystical witness expressed in a number of other faith traditions.³

³ One example: “By devotion to this divine spirit within himself, he attains an unsullied innocence that leads him to do right with instinctive sureness and without any ulterior thought of reward and personal advantage.” Hexagrams 25, 43,

The Buddhist Model

Contact with the universal “ground of being” (through “self-negating” meditative introspection—that I understand as the negation of self absorption and the distracting aspects of transience) yields not only peace but universal compassion. The attendant ethical implications are authentic, but often expressed in passive terms. Buddhism, having sprung from Hindu roots, has, like Christianity, jumped cultures several times, enriched in its various settings by those traditions.

The Abraham-Moses Model

The universal ground of being (“I am,” more stress on “I” than in the impersonal “am” of the first two models) is seen as the Creator, a being separate from the created, and therefore capable of the “I-God” relationship. Individual and deity are seen as perfect model and imperfect copy. This yields the possibility (and obligation) of dialogue between human and creator, and to the resulting knowledge of moral law (as captured in the Torah⁴). Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the three Abrahamic world religions, are representations of the same core insight, the human relationship with the invisible, supreme God, also expressed in some aboriginal traditions.⁵

The Christ Model

Following Jesus’ example, the deity-human dialogue is an individual one rather mediated by an ecclesiastical class,⁶ and the moral law -- focused on the core principle of love of creator and others -- is universalized, taking it far beyond tribal application. A doctrine of transforming love, seen as deity’s core message (see the earlier footnote) within the Torah-law, leads to active moral

from the I Ching as quoted in *The Essential Mytics*, Edited by Andrew Harvey, HarperCollins 1996 p 31. ISBN 0-06-25090407. Also: “.all souls and all sparks of souls have sprung from the primeval soul and have sunk and scattered in all creatures at the time of the original darkening of the world...” from *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, “The Life of the Hasidim, by Martin Buber, p 35. Princeton University Press. 1995. ISBN 0-691-04389-2.

⁴ Decades before Jesus of Nazareth emerged among the human family, Rabbi Hillel the Elder was asked whether he could summarize the entire Torah while standing on one foot. He stood on one foot and said “Do not that to your neighbor that which you find hateful to yourself. All the rest is commentary. Now go and study!” Jesus repeated this observation, adding the Shema (the obligation to love G-d) as the source of all the law and the prophets.

⁵ I am particularly charmed by this pigmy chant, “In the beginning was god, today is god, tomorrow will be god. Who can make an image of god? He has no body. He is a word which comes out of your mouth. That word! It is no more; it is past and still lives! So is god.” As quoted in *Sacred Texts Of The World*, edited by Ninian Smart & Richard D. Hecht, p 348. Crossroad Publishing 1982. ISBN 0-8245-0483-6.

⁶ Many major institutional religions have tended to restrict access to the divine dialogue, by insisting on the institutional monopolization of the sacral, the authoritarian use of doctrinal expulsion (heresy), and a general policy of high suspicion toward all extra-institutional revelation. But the life and authentic teaching of Rabbi Jesus, (who referred to deity informally as Abba), supports a contrary view. Individual access, following his own example, belongs to the institutionally excluded.

engagement-in-the-world. The Jesus Event⁷ carried the message further, yielding rebirth-in-the-world, and the hope of transcendence after.

And

I believe there is an emerging **Fifth Model**, fundamentally and generally consistent with the most important elements of the first four. More below....

V. Outline of a Path to Renewal

We humans clearly do need spiritual technologies, traditional and otherwise, and we also need supporting communities, and their power to nurture spiritual practice and ethical engagement. And our civilizations need the systems of authoritative belief that support the core moral norms. At their best, authentic religious communities that acquire moral authority influence the secular world in positive ways. In the current moral environment, they are needed more than ever.

As just indicated, there is an emerging **Fifth Model**, fundamentally and generally consistent with the most important elements of the first four. A number of fresh insights⁸, all of which are still emerging in the 21st century, are achieving a greater integration of science, reason, mysticism, esthetics, and ethics, than ever before. Perhaps the single central organizing idea is the meta-value of ongoing creation in the context of global reality integration. In this paradigm, the human relationship with deity⁹ (or universal conscious being, however described or named) becomes a discovery dialogue, one that includes all human creative activities, scientific and spiritual discovery as part of the conscious operation of ongoing creation.

Given these emerging insights and the developing **Fifth Model** context I have just sketched, what can we hope and expect from religion in 21st century civilization?

We humans desperately need an environment that facilitates a community consensus as to core normative and metaphysical judgments. We therefore need to find, renew, or construct religious communities that provide these five core functions:

1. A community of belief,
2. Common nexus to the numinous level of experience,
3. Foundations for the moral/ethical basis of the civilization,

⁷ On a personal level, I find it credible that the “Jesus event,” however else it might fit into a particular theology (see the First Appendix), represented a singular creative moral intervention, the in-breaking of a cultural transformation, mediated by universal creative being. All of the subsequent historical developments, many ongoing in world culture, including the processes and events through which the core normative message broke out of tribal boundaries and the moral implications of the ongoing relevance of Jesus’ moral persona to our species, exhibit a “divine signature.” The universal quality of this “incoming” message can also be described in enlightened humanist terms as products of a creative evolution in human culture prompted by arriving enlightenment.

⁸ I address these ideas in more depth in a book length work-in-progress from which many of these thoughts were borrowed.

⁹ This is essentially my personal view.

4. Support for prophetic tradition,
5. A sacred space for personal exploration and development, maintaining temples of personal renewal.

Therefore what we can expect to happen (because it must happen) is a series of revitalized and reformed religious communities, at least partly rooted in the extant traditions that effectively perform these five core functions. Yes, in transition, there will be friction and conflict. Bear in mind that the world, especially in its developed areas, presents an essentially free market in religious practice. If I am right about the fundamental human spiritual needs, then we can expect that institutions and individuals and communities will form up to fill those needs. America may or may not lead the way in this development.

We can also expect that these renewed religions will not monopolize access to the numinous experience, but facilitate it. We can expect that they also will convincingly address and bridge the six great social fractures I've already discussed, incorporating the missing universal values, such as authentic heroism and the (now partly alienated) human creative communities.

Therefore the renewed religions must and will find effective ways to lead: away from mere moral gesture to the more vexing and rewarding tasks of practical accomplishment; toward the guilt-free joy of authentic achievement and development, without sacrificing compassion and empathy; against all authentic evil without demonizing ordinary human frailties; for the robust, if necessary forceful protection of the peaceful; for the preservation of objective rules and consequences, leavened by earned mercy, and the appropriate use of mediation; and for the restoration and ongoing support of the moral infrastructure.

A tall order? Of course it is. But that is the nature of authentic renewal.

I was in Manhattan on 9-11-01 and noticed how many Americans, everywhere, found our way into churches that week. And I noticed how many did not go back. Americans were searching for something in church. Apparently, most didn't find it.

I am convinced that most of the so-called common people would resolve the social fractures I listed in just the way I've outlined here. Yet most of the religions have faltered.

Most of the so-called common people in this country who flocked into churches immediately following 9-11 expected to find a sanctuary where the five core functions I've listed above were up and running, robust and readily available to them. Most left.

Many of them expected to find a sanctuary where, among others, heroes were honored other than as victims, and where the great creative enterprises of human civilization were regularly honored. Indeed many expected to find a sanctuary where the very kinds of civilizations that honor and protect the conditions of freedom that foster the creative enterprises of humanity, would be honored. But most left.

As I've already pointed out, the human need for and response to the numinous level of experience is well documented. For thousands of years, the human narratives in the mystical tradition have

varied in language, idiom, and cultural context, but the sense is very clear that, at essence, the same sense of contact with the ultimate is being described: Sometimes through meditative practice or other liturgy; sometimes in the “Teveye”¹⁰ dialogue, i.e., the classic Jewish human-God dialogue; and sometimes in that unquantifiable, essentially indescribable sense of contact, of the tearing away of the veil of ordinary reality, that has been portrayed in countless idioms over the centuries by mystics and ordinary people of various religious and non religious affiliations.

Our species’ engagement with the numinous by whatever name or none at all has given rise to the baseline insight on which the moral order is founded. This insight is accompanied by a self-validating sense of contact with reality, a sense of peace, of the connectedness of life, and for many of us, the presence of a universal benign sentient presence before whom we are all like children. The uniform, natural response is overflowing compassion, and a deep, intuitive certainty of the common linkage between all thinking, living, feeling beings. In some instances, the mind reaches a clear understanding of the shared nature of the inner being of all such creatures.

This is why we must never again risk allowing any institution to package, monopolize, filter, or dilute our access to universal being.

The implications of the numinous spin themselves out in the refracting lenses of individual cultures, histories, understandings and situations, but each individual is forever changed by the contact. Respect for the being of others is the clearest and most enduring of the insights whose implications readily translate into the Tao in its various expressions.¹¹ Just as Buddha and Jesus might be seen (from a deeply universal and ecumenical perspective) as successive incarnations of this enlightened state, the Tao and the Torah’s highest moral commandments can also be seen as the successive iterations of its implications.

Tradition has enormous power to enable us to access the universal, which is another way of saying that the older, field tested software can still work, that old friends can still form community, and that the struggle for renewal doesn’t necessarily benefit from departure from the field. Given the stakes, the enlightened and the authentic seekers of enlightenment have no choice but to take back the institutions of religion whenever they become moribund, corrupt, sclerotic, or irrelevant. In the final analysis, “the church,” in all its worldly manifestations, is us...

¹⁰

Recalling “The Fiddler on the Roof”.

¹¹

I’m using the term, Tao, broadly as CS Lewis did in the appendix to his small masterpiece, *The Abolition of Man*, to refer to the innate natural moral order and its common precepts.

FIRST APPENDIX

The Prospect of Christian Renewal

As one who is enthralled with the Christian narrative, I see the Fifth Model as a way to recapture and reenergize the core experience within that familiar tradition.

The Passion is simultaneously a gripping historical account and mystery play. It tells of the oppression of Jewish religious freedom by the Roman Empire and the murder of the Son of God by those authorities; it is the story of the most spectacularly failed execution in history. The Passion is also the central account of Christianity, the confrontation of divine innocence and divine integrity with worldly power.

Both the Passion and resurrection are to be understood in the context of Jesus' role as God's anointed son, as counterpoised to what I see as a perverse version, in which, through God's kenosis, Jesus becomes a self-disempowered deity offered up to evil humans for ritual sacrifice.

The persistent fallacy of Jesus' full omnipotent-in-the moment divinity (as opposed to the divine incarnated, with all the concomitant limitations of the flesh) is a major obstacle to our understanding of God's larger purposes in this pivotal event and of God's ongoing presence in our lives. I am strongly drawn instead to the vision of the innocent holy man, anointed with a role whose full scope and terrible demands were not always understood by him. The deeper notion of Jesus as a person of the Trinity becomes meaningful only when understood as capturing through demonstration the vision of God as co-sufferer.

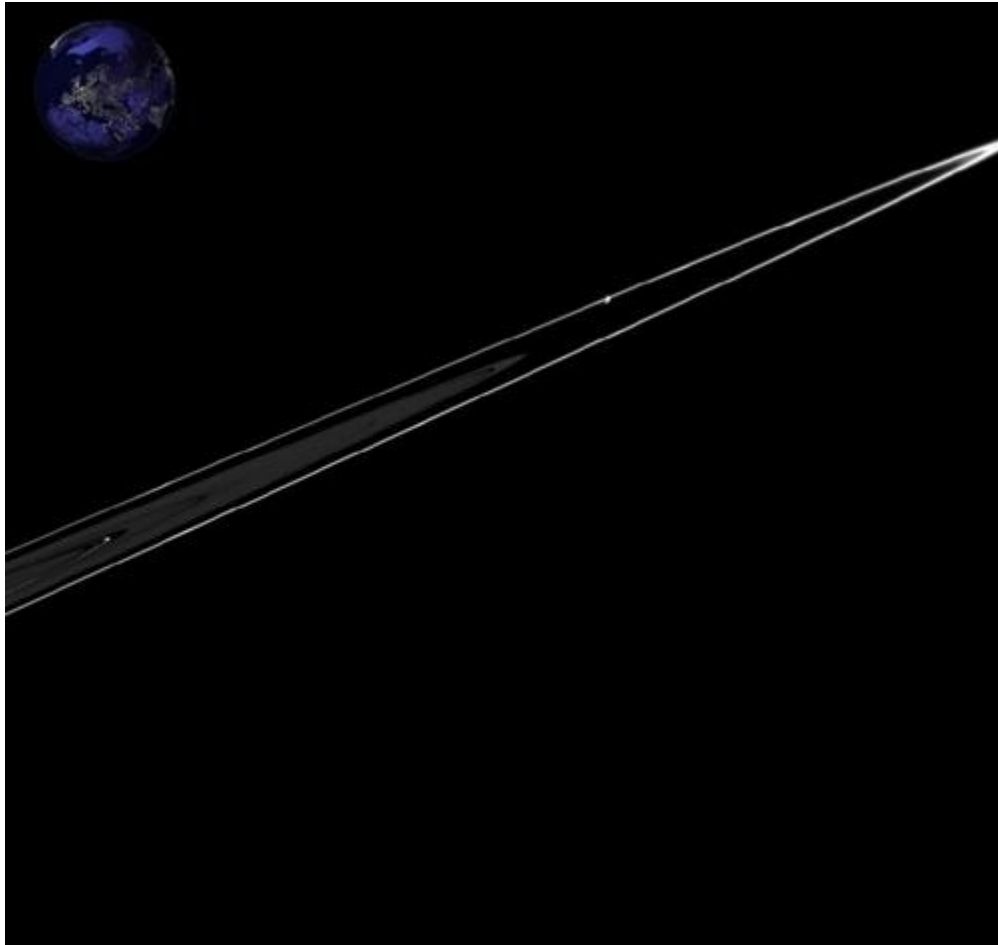
Jesus as Christ was the divine agent whose life was to become the fulcrum by which God moved human history. From time to time the divine agent was not fully briefed. Like the rest of us, he struggled with his charge, with doubts, and was puzzled. Yet God incarnated in him a number of aspects of the divine persona, first among them the quality of divine integrity; these divine aspects entered and transformed the life of a funny, flawed, frail, and immensely lovable, human being. The intimate, secret divine presence within Jesus was closest to him when his travails produced his most acute sense of despair and separation. In this way, God actually and directly felt his Son's aloneness, the fear, and "bereftness," and through this human window, God experienced the human condition at its worst.

The Passion is the Great Noetic Earthquake in whose aftermath we discover the tender shoots of new growth. Its principal themes are innocence, divine integrity, and the confrontation with evil, all against a backdrop of divine purpose. In the Passion we are allowed to see God's simultaneous participation in our despair and God's authorship of the bright hope that looms over the smoke and ruin of disaster at all times and places.

This is a religion founded on the story of a hero, whose divine integrity changed the world. What remains is to integrate a vision of the ongoing creative activities of humans as inherently holy activity, to recover the common sense and robust courage of the common people, and the sense of an underlying moral order of divine origin.

A single, vivid picture comes to mind that captures the sense of this coming renewal and transformation – I hesitate to call it a vision...

You stop for a moment to look across an impossibly brilliant sunlit scene into a black, star shot sky. Just over the charcoal horizon, the crescent earth glows, presenting the bright white polar caps, the cloud-swept blue Pacific, the green and brown land masses of the Americas, intersected by the day-night boundary, the terminator. On the dark side, you can just make out the tiny lights of the cities... Then, a few meters in front of you, you see the cross. It is twice your height, made of a burnished, pewter-hued metal. Gleaming on its sunlit side, it casts a deep, ink-black shadow across the lunar surface. Inscribed at the very center of the cross, you study the small, exquisitely carved Star of David; on the right post, the symbol for infinity is etched in the metal, and the left the double helix of DNA. The inscription in Greek and Hebrew at the bottom is translated for you: He is here, too.



SECOND APPENDIX

Seven Ways that 21st Century Religion Must Earn Its Keep

1. The Guardian of Intergenerational Moral Transmission.

Religion exists to guard and facilitate the transmission of the great moral order that underlies human life and civilization between successive human generations. Before all else, religion is called to support the deep normative infrastructure without which we humans tend to descend into the nihilistic abyss.

2. The Great Cheerleader of Moral Motivation.

And religion must also deeply persuade and motivate the human community to be moral, i.e., to remind and persuade us that the moral order is objectively real, vitally important and not self-executing. Religion must “earn it keep” by powerfully and persuasively answering one question, above all others, Why should I care about the human condition after my death?

3. The Optimum Model of Human Therapeutic Community.

Religion must demonstrate the optimum model of living together, by authentically incarnating the vision of the healthy, morally founded, healing community.

4. The Mediator of the Great Intra-Moral Dialogic.

Religion must occupy the center of the intra-human dialogue about ultimate ethical issues, serving as the heuristic mediator and honest broker of the dialogue among religions, between secular and spiritual communities, between belief and non-belief, between the realm of ethics and the demands of the world.

5. The Keeper of Ultimate Human Hope.

Religion justifies its role – even to outsiders - when it negates despair and authentically and credibly supports human’s life’s meaning, purpose and worth. Religion is charged to keep hope alive - both as transcendent and existential reality - for all humans, believers and unbelievers.

6. The Leader of the Great Human Integration Project.

To be relevant to the 21st century human condition, religion must lead our species’ halting journey towards the essential integration of value, thought, feeling and meaning, helping us achieve the fruitful integration of creative self assertion and heroic sacrifice; of joyful living and moral integrity; and of realism and idealism.

7. The Spirit Guide for Human Connections to the Ultimate.

Religion exists to facilitate human access to the numinous level of being. Religions fail dismally whenever they try to monopolize or appropriate the innate human link to the holy, the numinous and the divine, but succeed when they open the path and support the journey. Religion is called to succeed brilliantly.

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