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The Might Have Been and Could Be of Religion in Social Theory

CHARLES LEMERT

Religion may well be the most inscrutable surd of social theory, which began late in the 19th century dismissing the subject. Not even the renewal of interest in religion in the 1960s did much to make religion a respectable topic in social theory. It is possible that social theory's troubles are, in part, due to its refusal to think about religion. Close examination of social theories of Greek religion suggest, for principal example, that religion is perfectly able to thrive alongside the profane provided both are founded on principles of finitude, which in turn may be said to be the foundational axiom of any socially organized religion. The value of a social theory of religion, thus defined, may be seen as a way out of the current controversies over the politics of redistribution and politics of recognition. Any coherent principles of social justice, whether economic or cultural, may only be possible if one begins with the idea that all human arrangements are, first and foremost, limited—that is to say: finite; hence, strictly speaking, religious. Durkheim got this only partly right.

Near the end of his life W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the greatest of social theorists of the classic age, reflected on his attitude toward religion. True to form, he observed that he had loved and memorized the music to all the great Christian hymns but ignored “those silly words.”¹ In his half-hearted regard for religion, Du Bois was not alone among the great social thinkers of the founding era of sociology and social theory. It might well be said that their ambivalence toward religion was one of the more unstable features of the analytic categories of those early thinkers from whom we today still learn the fundamentals.

Weber's scholarly regard for religion drove his ethical despair over the dehumanizing effects of modern culture. As rationality came to govern modern social organization, the originating rationality of the ethical individual was threatened, with no hope of change in sight.² Durkheim, no less, stipulated the very lack of moral solidarity, of which religion

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¹The remark appears, to the best of my recollection, in *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Du Bois 1968), but, try as I might, I cannot find the page. Du Bois's relation to religion was always, if not half-hearted, at least cautious. Still, he often used religious forms to brilliant effect; most notably, in his Credo for the American Negro which for years was treasured in thousands of homes across the land (Du Bois 1920:3–4).

²Specifically, Weber's sociology of religion, which Parsons regarded as central to Weber's thinking about the evolution of modern society, emphasized the charismatic, ethical prophet as the source of revolutionary change. So strong was that emphasis that when, in relation to modern societies, the power of the immense cosmos of capitalist rationalization was apparent, only the charismatic prophet could offer hope for change. But in Europe in the early years of the century, there were no prophets that could lead the way out of the dilemma. There were, instead, the first signs that Weber understood something of the demonic forces that, after his death, dominated German society and Europe. Hence the instability of Weber's social theory. He was powerfully able to see the facts and the evil of the modern world without being able to imagine any plausible way out. It might be said, by contrast, that Durkheim had the hope without really seeing the world very clearly. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (1963), in which see also Parsons's extensive summary of Weber's thinking on religion. Weber's essay on religion is from *Economy and Society* (1976: chapter 6).

was the traditional source, as the cause of modern society's anomic dangers.³ Even Marx, preoccupied as he was to distance himself from Hegel by attacking religion's addictive effects on political consciousness, could not refrain from borrowing as much from the religious schemes of Jewish and Christian thinking as he did from the much-hated political economists.⁴ With rare exception, the founders of modern social theory took it for granted that the modern world was becoming—or, in Marx's case, ought to become—radically secular. They were, in short, oddly fascinated by religion in curious contradiction to the central principles of their social theories.

The evidence of the century now ending is that, though the forms of religious life and of their influences upon the societal whole have changed, religion itself has not disappeared. Anything but. It could well be said that the most unyielding of social scientific puzzles over the last century has been just why religion, which was so firmly the foundation of premodern social order, has lost so *little* of its effective force in post-traditional societies.⁵ For which, it is all too easy a solution to fall back on the Durkheimian *a priori* that it is religious institutions, not the need for religious ideas and practices, that have slipped out of public visibility. Since the patchwork "we" of those who do social theory claim as its reason for being that we do the hard thinking others abjure, it is all the more remarkable just how long one can go between these occasional sightings of a subject that, just outside the gates, continues to fascinate the very public for whose attentions we long. Hence the curious possibility that our theoretical sins of omissions on the subject of religion owe to the continuing, largely uncontested, sins of commission of the founding social theorists of the late last century.

It may well be the time for social theorists—and especially those who work up against academic sociology's bracing hostility—to consider the return of religion. Apart from the evidences of public life, there are sure, first signs of an interest in religion among social theorists. Barely a week goes by without some new work on religion by entirely serious people, notably Harold Bloom,⁶ as distinct from the mindless spirituality handbooks that are always with us. Closer to home, one is surprised by references to religion in various corners of the library—an essay by Donna Haraway (1992) or the interlinear shadows of major works by Charles Taylor (1989, among others to be mentioned later in this essay⁷). Still, since sociologists are now chief among those who refuse on principle to do what others do, the subject of religion requires a more straightforward recommendation. For which, I offer the following points upon which I will expand: that there are lessons to be

³For recent evaluations of religion and morality in Durkheim's thought, see the essays in Stephen Turner (1993). The background motif of Turner's introduction and of some of the essays is the attempt to reunite the religious and the sociological in Durkheim, which of course bears on the fact that Durkheim's religious and moral sociology were at odds with his sociology proper.

⁴The idea is familiar in a number of forms. The most interesting debate, however, is that which centers on the relation of Marx to the idea of progress. The argument is whether the idea of progress, whatever its relations to Hegel in Marx's case, was or was not a product of Jewish and Christian ideas. See, among endless other sources, Christopher Lasch (1991), Marshall Berman (1982), and Daniel Bell (1976).

⁵The staying power of even traditional religious beliefs is remarkable. The United States (with 90 percent of those surveyed in 1989 believing in God) ranks with the Republic of Ireland at the top of so-called modern societies with astonishingly strong indices of religious adherence. Even those European nations known for their disregard of traditional doctrine (notably, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Denmark) turn out to be more strongly religious when belief in "God as a spirit or life force" is substituted for an un glossed God. See George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli (1989:47).

⁶At the extreme of the utterly serious is the recent series of books from Bloom; *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (1992) and *Omens of Millennium* (1996) are the most notable. But even his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1999) is suffused with the heterodox scholarly gnosticism he defends. Other examples include recent works of the poets Robert Coles (1999), Annie Dillard (1999) and Kathleen Norris (1999), among others too many to list.

⁷Taylor calls serious attention to the importance of Jewish and Christian thinking to the ideal of the moral self in, for example, his the chapter on Augustine, (1989) but also in the concluding lines to *Sources of the Self* (ibid.:521).

learned from social theory's more open encounters in the past with religion; that social theory might do well to reconsider its understanding of religion with reference to the lessons of Ancient Greece; that such an exploration might yield surprising ways out of a current theoretical dilemma, namely: the problem of justice as it arises in the confusion over the politics of recognition and redistribution.

Though, at first glance, this may seem an unwieldy assortment of topics, the following attempt to gather them together is justified, at the least, by the surprising silence today on the subject with respect to which, a century ago, social theory as we know it was established; and by the consideration that the silence might just account for several immutable confusions and failures in the field. Religion, thus, presents itself today less as a topic than as a resource that may be consistent with our most fundamental working assumptions.

Charles Tilly, in a recently well-received essay, reminds us that the *might have beens* are ever with us in social research, for they are how we explain what has in fact come to pass:

Regularities define possibilities that could occur, but do not—at least not yet. Sound social science concerns counterfactuals: explaining what actually occurs, which ironically requires specifying what did *not* occur but could have occurred, then comparing factual with counterfactual. The central work of social science consists of specifying nonexistent social structures and processes that were possible, that are now possible, that under specifiable circumstances will be possible. (Tilly 1997:41–42)⁸

Although many of Tilly's readers will want to ignore the normative word behind this observation, those with an interested affection for social theory would be wise to take to heart Tilly's implied moral imperative. Paying strict attention to what might have been not only allows us better to explain the facts of social process, it would also permit us to examine the *might have beens* themselves—hence to rethink the future course of social life, including how we think about it.

LESSONS FROM THE NEAR PAST

The *could be* of religion in social theory would not, however, take the form of a renewal of the sociology of religion—at least not necessarily. Were religion to serve new theoretical work, it would have to reveal itself as a resource to the general concerns of the field as a whole. Toward the end of this essay, I will discuss just how religion might thus serve. But to arrive at the point, while respecting Tilly's principle of virtual history, it is necessary first to show how religion has been misrepresented and why.⁹

To this end there is no better example than the sociology of religion as it was practiced for a brief, crucial moment in the near past. For about a decade, from the mid-1960s, the sociology of religion enjoyed prominence among the more important subfields of sociology proper. This prestige owed to the fact that religion was, then, very much a central preoccupation of several of sociology's more influential social theorists. Today, nearly the opposite is true. Notwithstanding the excellent work of writers like Robert Wuthnow (e.g.,

⁸Tilly may not agree, but his remark invites comparison to the virtual history rage, notably associated with the writings of Niall Ferguson in *Pity of War* (1999) and *Virtual History* (1998). On the other hand, he would certainly appreciate the comparison to the tradition of sociological virtual history associated with his teacher, George Homans, *The Nature of Social Science* (1967).

⁹This must be done, of course, without suggesting that religion alone is the answer to any and all problems in the field.

1994, 1996, 1997) and Rodney Stark (1996),¹⁰ the sociology of religion is not nearly so salient today as it was in 1967, the year when the early, quasi-theological Robert Bellah published his famous “Civil Religion in America” essay and, simultaneously, Peter Berger came forth with his once astonishing, still curious, work, *The Sacred Canopy*.¹¹ Though Weber and Durkheim, most notably among the classic theorists, were founders of the sociology of religion, the subfield’s golden age of influence fell neatly within the relatively short period of the few years on either side of 1967.

Importantly, influential writings on religion in years on either side of 1967 were more or less intentionally set dead against the specialist subfield. Berger’s co-author, Thomas Luckmann—writing in his own 1967 book, *The Invisible Religion*—pointedly chastised the sociology of religion for its lack of attention to theory (1967:17–18). Berger himself wrote entirely as a theorist in *Sacred Canopy*, a book that came to serve, for many, as a companion to his and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (also 1967). Also, Bellah’s civil religion essay appeared not in a specialty journal but in *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In those days social theories of religion enjoyed a considerable importance in their own right. Yet, as Luckmann (1967: chaps. 1–2) observed, the sociology of religion, the subspecialty, was trapped in the relatively more professionalized empirical concerns of studies of religious attitudes and participation rates. The broader theoretical implications of religion were, for the most part, the preoccupations of those who sought some higher prize.

For a short while in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the prize was much valued. Then, young American sociologists avidly read Peter Berger and his sometime colleague Thomas Luckmann to learn, in works like *Social Construction*, of the then strange world of European social ideas. This may seem odd in these days when everyone is trying, often disingenuously, to make passable sense of Derrida and Foucault. But, in those days, foreign mysteries were considered fresh, scrutable, and palatable. Many took from Berger’s and Luckmann’s renderings of the surprising amalgam of Hegelian and phenomenological ideas a more or less necessary regard for, if not religion itself, at least the religious impulse behind the socially constructed meanings to which they called attention.¹²

Though Bellah’s writings made explicit reference to quite another literature, he too took religion or its functional equivalents more or less for granted. Those were extravagant days

¹⁰ Among the more intriguing features of books like these is that they have received considerable attention in commercial and literary reviews while having gone largely unnoticed by sociologists. For one example, Stark’s book was generously reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* and other such public places where it was generally hailed as a breakthrough in the sociological study of religion. But *Contemporary Sociology*, the discipline’s most important journal of reviews, gave it a standard two-page short review.

¹¹ By quasi-theological, I refer to Bellah’s writings in the 1960s, many of which were direct attempts to revise basic theological categories like transcendence. Steve Seidman claims that Bellah was very much indebted to the ideas of Paul Tillich (Seidman 1994:283). It is true that Bellah referred to Tillich in his no less famous essay “Religious Evolution” (1964) and that Tillich was surely behind Bellah’s interesting essay on transcendence collected in *Beyond Belief* (1970: chapter 11; but see also chapter 15 where Tillich is discussed). Yet, too much should not be made of Bellah’s theological period. I participated in a small reading group Bellah led in those days at Harvard. We discussed Weber, Durkheim, and Freud with great care. I don’t recall a single word of theology being uttered even though it was Bellah’s ideas on religion that drew several of us in that group to him. Berger, by contrast, was in a fashion much more than “quasi” theological. Though he wrote as a social theorist, Berger was a player in several now forgotten theological controversies, notably one collective effort to correct heterodox theological ideas that had grown out the 1960s (see Berger and Neuhaus 1976). Berger’s out-of-the-closet Christian theology led him, in this instance, to oppose some of the quasi-Christian notions that were behind the thinking of many in those days, including Bellah. See also, Berger’s early book of sociologically grounded essays on theology, *Prekarious Vision* (1961b).

¹² Berger began *The Sacred Canopy* with these words: “Every human society is an enterprise in world-building. Religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise.” *The Social Construction of Reality*, published the same year (1967), offered, as I suggest, the companion argument by developing the theory of world-building. In this period, not only was Berger party to theological controversy, but Luckmann, always (at least so far as I knew him in that period) more circumspect in his personal views on religion, was a visiting professor at the Harvard Divinity School.

that inspired a readiness to find cultural meaning and meaningful practice in any number of epiphanies. The Sixties were a neo-Durkheimian cornucopia. Few resisted the tempting fruit. As a result, religion—or something akin thereto—seemed a necessary, if occasionally infested, feature of the social landscape. Bellah's still beautifully parsimonious account of the evolutionary stages of American civil religion, read through the meditations of figuratively great American presidents, made good sense in those days—as much because it bestowed a degree of order on the overwrought hopes of the time as for its scientific explanations. Bellah ended his sociological meditation with words that but a year later, after the turmoil of 1968 which began with the Tet Offensive and the turn of opinion about Vietnam, would sound hopelessly innocent:

Since the American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality, the reorganization entailed by such a new situation need not disrupt the American civil religion's continuity. A world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion. Indeed such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning. (Bellah 1967:18)¹³

By the time of the second, ill-fated Nixon administration in the early 1970s, the appeal of religion to the left-liberal dispositions of social theorists faded fast as Nixon's weird cynicism reminded just how uncertainly presidents and other monuments embody a nation's transcending values. What becomes of civil religion when civil society itself becomes indecent?¹⁴

Berger's and Luckmann's more complicated notion of the necessity of social meanings faded apace as Americans awoke to the belligerent nonsense of a then still very new televisual world which, among other ordinary spectacles, brought home the American government's lies about Vietnam and Watergate. If anyone whomsoever is able to beg or borrow a little air time to say whatever comes to mind, then the idea that the social whole is somehow knit together by collectively constructed meanings seemed quaintly irrelevant to the first forays of what became the cultural wars.

In the 1990s it seems truly strange to speak of anything like an American civil religion or, more abstractly, of Berger's religion as world-building. Much public religion is uncivil. Most actually existing religions are anything but world-builders (at least not in Berger's Hegelian sense). Plus which, thirty years ago few would have predicted that the gentle steps toward the primacy of culture that were evident then in Bellah's and Berger's religious sociologies would eventually play real, if smallish, roles in the rise of the cultural left. One supposes that Peter Berger squirms every time someone uses the term "constructionism" today, as Bellah chokes on much of the new culturalism in social and political thought. Yet, it is certainly the case that their ideas on religion and political culture in that earlier period encouraged then younger social theorists to take constructionism and cultural politics down a very different path than either Berger or Bellah envisaged. It is entirely possible that neither saw what was coming because neither truly embraced the fundamental contradiction about culture and religion in which they and their elders were implicated. The sociologists of religion were not alone.

It is perhaps too obvious to mention, but the most striking contradiction among the leading social theorists of the generation that came into its own in the two decades prior to the

¹³Bellah's "Civil Religion" essay, though empirical in the general sense, was itself written from an evolutionary perspective, as was his more formal, nearly as popular, "Religious Evolution" article (Bellah 1964).

¹⁴Bellah himself later offered a more sober interpretation of civil religion in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (1975).

1960s is that the empirical facts of the time were so at odds with doctrine. At the very time when theoretical doctrine gave religion and its operative equivalents a very strong place in the explanatory sciences of social action, the sway of religion in private and public life was weakening. In Europe church attendance fell to new lows. In America, where churches and synagogues were packed to the hilt, there was well-founded concern among experts that the religious revival was more social than spiritual. Berger himself was among those who wrote on the subject in *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (1961a), a book written when he was still a seminary professor in Hartford, Connecticut. Berger's prophetic challenge to church leaders was one of many books of this sort. The most notable of those written by theologians was Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (1965), a neo-Weberian essay challenging religious people to come to terms with the disenchantments of modern, urban society.¹⁵ Though to sociologists the ideas behind Cox's book were hardly new, this was the first time a theologian had so prominently addressed the nineteenth-century concept of secularization in words that appealed to the general public.¹⁶ *The Secular City* was a runaway best seller largely because its upbeat liberation theme was unable to mask the truth Cox let out of the bag—that practical religion was then, especially in America, driven not by the spiritual within but by the social force of urban life. Though the connection is not always drawn, it is clear that these doubts as to the spiritual authenticity of the religious revival were part of a developing social criticism of the loss of moral character in postwar societies, especially America.

Those who specialize in theory have tended to overlook the irony in the commercial fact that the all-time best seller among books of social theory is so robustly pessimistic. David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (with Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney) published in 1950, took the sharply Weberian position that behind all the wonders of postwar affluence lay the dark reality of which Weber had warned—the Protestant ethic, the invigorating virtue of the Christian West, was at risk as inner-directedness faded fast before the conforming power of the consumption ethic. Just as Berger's *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* was but one of many complaints by church leaders, so Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* was but one of many such books by social critics. In the same year (1950), Erik Erikson published the first of his works that gave to the popular imagination the phrase “identity crisis” (Erikson 1950). Shortly after, Erving Goffman, lacking the moral preoccupations of Riesman and Erikson, published the first of those early works that still today shock moral sensibilities. In essays like “Face Work” (1955) and books like *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman gave reason to believe that the loss of the inner-directed self was nothing remarkable. The self thus conceived, according to Goffman, was the product not of an inner moral gyroscope but of the very practical necessity of managing impressions with others. In *Stigma* (1963:56, 105), Goffman used Erikson's theory of identity to formulate the notorious notion that insofar as we have a “core being” it is not an endowment of the interior life, but the product of a unique personal history of social relations. Which is to say, in effect, that we have no soul—that is, no inner moral self able to inspire the great works of civilization and industry.¹⁷

What is remarkable is that these works of social skepticism in the 1950s—each founded on reasonable (if inconclusive) evidence—coexisted with social theoretical convictions

¹⁵ Another popular book of this sort was written by Gibson Winter, a student of Talcott Parsons: *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (1962).

¹⁶ Of course, others had debated the role of secularization in religious life; among them, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937). But as prominent as Richard Niebuhr was among theologians and church people, his public presence was nothing compared to Cox's in the years after the publication of *The Secular City* when Cox was regularly a guest on late night television or a featured speaker at Hugh Hefner's Playboy House in Chicago.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Goffman's own attack on the presence of the inner self appeared three years before Derrida made the same point in respect to an entirely different literature. See Jacques Derrida ([1966] 1978). For a discussion, see Lemert (1997a).

that required an optimistic doctrine of the moral and religious order in society. When, beginning in the late 1930s, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton invented modern sociological social theory by their respective reinterpretations of certain classic theorists, they most famously taught the idea that religion *or* its functional equivalent was irreplaceably at the core of society itself. They were each, needless to say, rigorously Durkheimian in this respect. I was a student in (as they say at Harvard) *the* Divinity School when I took Parsons's course on American society. I found nothing in those brilliantly parsimonious lectures that disturbed the faith we were taught by the theologians. Chief among the cold comforts a divinity student could take from Parsons was that students learned their Max Weber first through Parsons's tendentious translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*—therefrom also to learn of Weber's sad lament that the religion at the heart of the modern world had become the prison house of the souls of modern individuals. Divinity students are always looking for occasions to borrow thus to preach prophetic words of the kind Weber pronounced upon capitalism.

In his more circumspect fashion, Merton also broadcast the notion that everything social, including the varieties of social deviation (Merton [1938] 1949), is a function of the availability of legitimate means to the achievement of the dominant cultural goals.¹⁸ Merton kept the Durkheimian faith in the ultimate binding value of the collective conscience, but kept it in a crypto-Protestant form. He thus transposed Durkheim's epistemological theory of religion into a moral one. Anomie was not merely the ultimate cause of social despair, but the social condition in respect to which the practical genius of the ordinary individual pursued any number of optimistic or fatalistic adaptations. Parsons, not all that differently, executed a transposition of Weber's social ethical despair. Technical reason for Weber was the root cause of the disenchantment of the modern world. For Parsons, the latent function of cultural values lay in their liberating potential for the social system—a liberation wrought by the capacity of values to maintain the latent but rational patterns of the social whole. When Parsons, by contrast to Merton, spoke at length of cultural values everyone knew that the image in the back of his mind was the importance of Protestant Christianity in American society.¹⁹

One way of regarding social theory's awkwardly inconsistent attitude toward religion in the 1950s and the 1960s is to say, simply, that it was then that the half-heartedness of the classic era on the subject came home to roost—not with a vengeance but under the cover of good intentions. Those, like Parsons and Merton in the earlier decade, who sought to locate religion in a necessary aspect of their formal theories of social structures carried forth a classical idea that had never been well thought through. Not even Durkheim, the most open definer of religion, allowed himself to consider the possibility that haunted Weber—that religion, however foundational it may be to social order, may well serve to limit the human condition in ways that far exceed its protective guidance of the social individual. Weber, who was preoccupied with the rationalizing nightmare into which Western religion had fallen, by his failure to define religion at all, may have misunderstood what Durkheim realized—that religion serves as much to limit and constrain as to liberate the moral passions.

Together, Weber and Durkheim would have made a good team on the subject of religion. But apart, each lapsed to a different side of a complete definition of their subject. Hence, their half-heartedness, although less overtly cynical than either Marx's or even Du

¹⁸Some may quibble that Merton was never as indebted as was Parsons to Weber's idea of Protestant Christianity as the source of the latent values of Western capitalism. Still, it would be difficult to account for Merton's idea of the structural force of cultural goals in social behavior without, at the least, Durkheim's crypto-Jewish principle of moral solidarity.

¹⁹A particularly clear example of Parsons's thinking about religion in society is evident in his *The System of Modern Societies* (1971). Of this little book's eight chapters, four are largely or entirely the presentation of a religious history of the West culminating in the emergence of America as a modern system.

Bois's, was the half-readiness to see religion fully for what it must be. The occluded visions of Weber and Durkheim could thus be said to have provided the opening of which their spiritual heirs took advantage. Parsons and Merton took up the subject of religion with spirited innocence. Though they were perfectly able to be critical of their classical fathers in some things, with respect to religion they were perfectly willing to take their subject for granted, thus more easily to suit it to the formal requirements of their grand and middling theories of society.

If, in short, religion, or its equivalent, is not more rigorously considered than, in my opinion, either Weber or Durkheim did, then it will remain a kind of conceptual virus. In this respect, Berger and Bellah, though differently and for different reasons, were party to the analytic uncertainties of the tradition. Both shared the predisposition of Parsons and Merton to think of religion as (a) somehow necessary to the social order and (b) somehow still at work, even though (c) the drift of time is toward the secular. Not only do propositions such as these sit uncomfortably with each other, they simply do not, and did not, fit the facts of the time, which were much discussed by countervailing social skeptics among social theorists and religious leaders alike.

WHAT IS RELIGION? LESSONS FROM THE LONG PAST

Which brings us to the question anyone of right mind wants to avoid when speaking of the social value of religion. What, exactly, is meant by the term? Weber, true to scholarly form, began his essay on religion by refusing even to try to define it. "To define 'religion,' to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this" (1963:1).²⁰ Weber went on to say that definitions could only be attempted at the conclusion of study, which promise turned out to be empty. Weber never tried, surely because, as he also said (all too earnestly), "the essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behavior." Weber sought first to be the rigorous sociologist, thus to hide his deeper, personal affinities for religion without which it is impossible to account for the moral passion in those famous last paragraphs of *The Protestant Ethic*.²¹ Since Weber was famously ready to define other concepts, mostly especially the basic terms of sociology (Weber 1976:3–62), it is reasonable to conclude that there was something about religion itself that kept him from proposing what in fact he meant by it.

Durkheim—always less cautious, if more aloof than Weber—did define the term, famously: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practice which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim [1912] 1965:62).²² Though Durkheim's definition was instrumental to the purposes of *Elementary Forms* which it introduced, it still serves well, if insufficiently, as a point of reference for

²⁰Weber does, of course, imply a definition of religion in many places. But only once, as far as I can determine (with the help of William Pinch), does he offer more than the tentative ideal of religion as "holy ends in the beyond" (in *Religion of India* [1958:22]); the definitional fragment is offered, interestingly, in support of his claim that Hinduism is not a religion "in our sense of the word."

²¹So little is said on the subject of Weber's religious attitudes; in this, the field has perhaps respected his wishes. In the more familiar sources, the most intriguing note is Lewis Coser's most oblique suggestion that the conflict between his mother's Calvinism and his father's hedonism lay principally behind Weber's personal troubles (Coser 1977: 235; cf. 242–440). For a more thorough discussion of Weber's ideas on religion, see Honigsheim (1950; for which source I thank Alan Sica). Honigsheim attributes Weber's tragic view of the modern to Weber's liberal Lutheranism, secularized by Kant (see especially Honigsheim 1950:238–39.) This view is confirmed (though less explicitly) by Marianne Weber (1988:331–42).

²²The question of definitions is always difficult when the subject is so intangible a one as religion. Many years ago, I studied the subject of the definitions of religion somewhat systematically and found, to my surprise (since I was not at all interested in him at the time), that Durkheim's definition held up very well against the prevailing sympathies for the ideas of Luckmann (Lemert 1972: 26–32).

a serviceable idea of what religion might be and, thus, what it might have been in social theory.

In a particularly shrewd essay, Robert Alan Jones (1993:40) has clarified the origins of Durkheim's idea of religion. The usual, and still useful, assumption is that Durkheim's academic understanding of religion owed to his teacher Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889), author of the great work, *The Ancient City: A Study of Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome* ([1864] 1877). Durkheim clearly learned much from his teacher about the sociology of religion in complex societies. One striking example is found in Fustel de Coulanges's analysis of the social implications of the Greek word for family which signifies "*that which is near a hearth, [hence] a group of persons whom religion permitted to invoke the same sacred fire, and to offer the funeral repast to the same ancestors*" (Fustel du Coulanges 1877:52. Italics in original).²³ The idea is pleasing to many more than today's family-first types. Though its author was a classicist and historian, the idea is rigorously sociological. Though Durkheim, curiously (and possibly to his disadvantage) did not study ancient Greece and Rome, he did use his teacher's ideas in reference to those cultures he studied through his principal source books—James George Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890) and, notably, William Robertson Smith's *Religion of the Semites* (1889). These studies were, as Jones astutely observes, Durkheim's indirect link to his own childhood hearth in the Alsatian countryside made sacred by generations of rabbis.

Religion, thus, if we may trust Durkheim up to a point, is a social formation (whether original or not) founded in the human experience of family and community. Hence, the still compelling Durkheimian idea that, in the simplest of terms, religion is the shared experience of the sacred—of, we might say, the presence of some other, more grand dimension in relation to which we humans, when conscious of ourselves as gathered in society, experience life as limited. But there is more to be said about religion than can be found even in Durkheim's elegant definition.

We who expose ourselves to the weekly homilies attendant to most religious services are very often reminded that the word "religion" derives from the Latin *religare*—to bind. It does indeed. But a closer look at the *Oxford English Dictionary* (second edition) reveals that, before the word settled into the abstraction implied (that of being bound to a transcendent reality of some or another kind), the Latin *religare* denoted "a state of life bound by monastic vows"—hence the still surviving habit of referring to a member of a monastic order as "a religious." Though the usage survives, this definition would seem to be one of those false, earlier forms of meaning that need bother only those who have nothing better to do than read the O.E.D. But, as a remark by Stephen Turner (1993:104) reminds us, there is an altogether more current value to this usage, namely that passingly, but weightily, mentioned by Alasdair MacIntyre in the closing words of *After Virtue*:

A crucial turning point in . . . earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of the *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. . . . What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are

²³The comment comes at the end of the chapter "Religion was the constituent Principle of the Ancient Family," in which the Durkheimian idea of religion is particularly evident.

already upon us. . . . This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for a doubtless very different—St. Benedict. (MacIntyre 1984: 52)²⁴

Even those who do not share MacIntyre's apocalyptic impressions of the present situation might be willing to ponder his reference to Benedict.

Benedict of Nursia (480–547 C.E.) was the founder of Western monasticism. Benedict's rules for the governance of religious communities are widely considered one of the most important texts of community, hence social, theory. *The Rule of St. Benedict* is often taught in law schools as an exemplar of the balance between rule and freedom, which honor is due by virtue of its proven success in organizing religious communities that have endured over a good millennium and a half. The idea to ponder is that Durkheim, whatever his predispositions toward scientific sociology, was not far off in identifying religion first and foremost with the local, human community in relation to which, it seems, the term first came into use.

Yet, Durkheim neglected a subtlety at the root of the Latin word *religare*. As the Benedict example suggests, religion does more than provide moral guidance by binding the individual to the social community. That binding effect arises from deeper limitations inherent in the nature of human community, limitations even so sober a man as Durkheim was unwilling to ponder. Nor is it clear that MacIntyre's apocalyptic aside would lead him so far as to recommend the full social meaning of Benedict's rules. Though Benedict's *Rule* is famous for its common sense, and good humor, his idea of community was founded on a stern requirement: "This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord" (Benedict of Nursia 1982 [525?²⁵]:15). MacIntyre was correct to say that Benedict's genius for community sustained the remnants of Greco-Roman and Christian culture through the so-called Dark Ages. But that genius was, first and foremost, an insistence on obedience demanding the utter and final giving up of individual will. It was also, in the words we may take as metaphor, a demand that members of the order give up all ultimate loyalties to the secular social in order to do battle "for the true King."

Leaving aside the precise religious object of Benedictine obedience, the sociological effect of this ancient definition of *religare* is to introduce (or, in our time, to reintroduce) the idea that life with others demands the admission that human beings in society are ultimately creatures limited not just by the community, but also by the facts of human life as such. Not even Durkheim, who taught an exceedingly strong theory of the limitations of the individual, went so far as this. Durkheim's sociology, including his sociology of religion, by comparison to Benedict's binding idea of religion, offered nothing more than a theory of the finitude of the moral *individual*. Durkheim had nothing in particular to say about finitude as a condition of social life itself. To the contrary, his hope was to reestablish a new, if secular, collective conscience that would heal the divisions of industrial society. In this he shared the vaguely liberal and republican ideals of human progress unleashed in history. Whatever one thinks of this ideal, the question remains whether it serves the purpose of an adequate theory of religion, much less of a social theory of the

²⁴In his reference to MacIntyre, Turner pulls up short by interpreting the allusion to Benedict as little more than a warrant to appreciate Durkheim's attempt to make religion relevant to the times.

²⁵The precise date is unknown and unknowable. It may reasonably be associated with Benedict's early years of monastic life (hence the approximate date of 525?), though it surely arose over time.

present situation in society nearly a century after Durkheim wrote. Hence, the reason to look beyond Durkheim for a more adequate social theory of religion.

Granting the point made by Jones that Durkheim's theory arose from sources beyond those represented in his teacher's book, it is still possible to keep the point that *The Ancient City* was, and may still be, a tolerably reliable source for thinking about religion today. This claim relies not so much on the singular authority of Fustel de Coulanges as on his figurative importance to the historical study of religion during sociology's classical era. Curiously, Durkheim took from his teacher a general idea of the sacred in social life (as well as inspiration for a positivist method), but he largely ignored Fustel de Coulanges's empirical topic—religion in classical civilization. It is, perhaps, here that Durkheim took his wrong turn toward an insufficient definition of religion. In any case, others writing at the same time defined religion more completely than did Durkheim. It may not be by accident that they studied the Greeks as Durkheim did not.

In the half-century between *Ancient City* ([1864] 1877) and Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* (1912), the social (as distinct from sociological) study of religion was little affected by the half-heartedness of the classic social theorists. Quite apart from the intervening works of Robertson Smith (1889) and Frazer (1890), which influenced Durkheim, two comparably great works on the subject were published in English in 1912 (at least one of which was heavily, but not definitively, influenced by Durkheim). They were F.M. Cornford's *From Religion to Philosophy* ([1912] 1957) and Gilbert Murray's *Five Stages of Greek Religion* ([1912] 1955).²⁶ What calls these two works to mind is their common reference to a very different religious tradition from those on which Durkheim relied. Greek religion, perhaps because (to us moderns) it has all the appearances of the "secular," is a particularly apt comparison case for the study of religious change. It is because ancient Greek culture is so free-standing an empirical case. It is free, that is, from the direct or indirect influence of the modern West which (according to the secularization thesis as we know it) is the imputed source of the desecularization of the world. Since we understand secularization as both the actual consequence of modernization *and* as an essential attribute of the culture of modernity, then the thesis itself is a virtual surd of modernity—an irrational root of the modern culture.²⁷

Greek religion—by being so utterly prior in historical time *and*, though a reputed source of the modern, so archaic to modernity as to be less responsible for its sins—offers an unusual comparative leverage. This odd advantage may owe to the fact that not even the religions of ancient China and India could be as unlikely as those of ancient Greece to be misread as failed or secondary instances of Western culture (as Weber so explicitly did in the opening of *Protestant Ethic* and Durkheim did in *The Division of Labor in Society*).²⁸ The cultures of ancient Greece, by being *both* similar to and different from the modern

²⁶ It is Cornford who acknowledged his debt to Durkheim's early writings on religion (Cornford [1912] 1957: 58–63). It is to Murray that we owe the debt for his concept of failure of nerve ([1912] 1955:119–65).

²⁷ In place of "surd," one is tempted to use "aporia," the Greek term brought into current usage by Derrida, among others. Aporia has more the sense of "that which can neither be explained nor gotten around." But, although religion may well be the aporia of modern social thought, it has been treated in actual practice as the "inexplicable" of modern thought, while an aporia is meant to be the provocation of explanations that must be sought even though they cannot be achieved. The distinction is worth drawing on the grounds that my purpose here is to remove religion from its veiled status as a surd in order to establish its aporetic value. For an uncommonly clear discussion of aporia in empirical context, see Kraus (1999).

²⁸ I discuss these claims in more detail in Lemert (1995: chaps. 3, 5). But, compare, for a different view, Bellah (1957), which is the classic argument that equivalents to the West's rationalizing, hence secularizing, power arose independently in other cultures. On the problem of Western influences in the understanding of world religions, note the controversy over whether or not Confucianism was ever anything more than an invention of Christian missionaries to China (Jensen 1997).

West, tend to stand out in the sociological mind. Hence, Greek religion, as discussed by Cornford and Murray, may well provide the clues to the *might have beens* of Western religion that were ignored in Durkheim's definition and not at all considered by Weber, who refused to define the subject. Durkheim's and Weber's English contemporaries wrote their no less classic studies of religion with reference to the two crucial stages in the secularization of Greek religion. Greek religion's two important transitional periods were both times when the prevailing religion lost its power to apparently secular forces with the result, however, not of a decline of religion but of the continuation of the guiding principles of the pre-existing religion.

Cornford's *From Religion to Philosophy* concerned the decline of the classic religious system of the Homeric age and the rise of the first Greek philosophies with the Melesian school, notably Anaximander (612–545 B.C.E.). Murray's *Five Stages of Greek Religion* was the more comprehensive historical study, but it is best known (and aptly so) for its famous "failure of nerve" chapter, which concerned the later Hellenizing period when, after the conquests of Alexander (356–323 B.C.E.) in the fourth century, *both* Greek religion *and* its philosophy lost their distinctive force only to prompt the beginnings of another religious system. As the world, in the later period, was colonized by the Macedonians, the way was opened to the syncretism that usually accompanies colonizing cultures; then to the more secular organizing force of the Roman Empire which, in its turn, led to the full blossoming of Christianity in the West (hence, not incidentally, to the importance of Benedict, nearly a millennium after Alexander, when the Roman synthesis disintegrated). The details of Cornford's and Murray's accounts of the two periods of Greek religion, taken together, suggest an aspect to human religious organization that was ignored by both Durkheim and Weber²⁹ and, *ipso facto*, by their intellectual progeny.³⁰

Cornford's idea can be well introduced by recalling any of Homer's descriptions of the relations of men to the gods. The gods of the Homeric age were, without exception, in regular communion with men; yet, they maintained an ever ambiguous but still higher level of power. Odysseus, for example, was a direct descendent, by Laertes, of Zeus; this relationship accounted for his unusual intercourse with the gods and occasional visits to their realms, even (in Book 11 of *The Odyssey*) to the House of the Dead. Cornford's idea was that, in the period following the decline of the Homeric gods, philosophy arose with the cultural idea of *Moirai*, destiny or fate. It was this prevailing concept that inhabited the thinking of Anaximander and the Melesian philosophers, allowing them to consider Nature an object of philosophical speculation. Read through the conceptual lenses of modern social thought this would appear to be a straightforward case of the disenchantment of a once sacralized social order.

²⁹Greek religion was not, of course, among Durkheim's comparative sources. Durkheim's earliest and last great books were both indebted to his knowledge of the religion of ancient Israel and the elementary forms of religious life among aboriginal peoples in Australia and North America. His knowledge of the latter, essential to *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1912] 1965), was based on secondary accounts. But his knowledge of the former, crucial to the argument in *Division of Labor in Society* (1893) was at least partly based on first-hand experience, which may have led him to ignore ancient Greece in his discussion of ancient forms of mechanical solidarity; for a discussion, see Lemert (1994:87–92). Curiously, with respect to Weber, according to Marianne Weber, Greek religion was not among the projected but never completed studies of religion Weber left at his death (see Kaesler 1988:137). Nor was religion among the subjects discussed in Weber's principal work on the other than Hebrew ancient civilizations of the West (Weber 1988). Hence the riddle: Why did they both ignore such an obvious case?

³⁰I take the first and last stages of Greek religion as examples because they are the extremes that most strongly challenge my counterinterpretation of the secularization theory. One could just as well present the more obvious case of the polis, which is a nearly pure instance of civil religion. For example, Jacob Burckhardt: "all that was highest and noblest in the life of the Greeks was centered upon the *polis*, then fundamentally the *polis* was their religion" (1998:57; cf. Guthrie 1950:82ff.)

Yet, what Cornford argued, in effect, was that the process was just the opposite of modern expectations. In the chapter of *From Religion to Philosophy* most explicitly influenced by Durkheim, Cornford presents a very un-Durkheimian point. The decline of the Homeric gods was not, Cornford proposed, the consequence of the disappearance of the religious but of its continuity in different form. *Moir*a, the ancient Greek concept of destiny, was part and parcel of the Homeric age. It was, in fact, that which governed the gods no less than men. This is why the gods, though beings of greater power, were nonetheless limited creatures subject to their own destinies, which is why, most memorably, the Homeric gods entered into so many intimate associations with mortals. Fate, or destiny, thus stood behind the Greek idea of their gods to the same degree as it was essential to the idea of Nature. The philosophical idea, though less mythic, was (to use our word) a secularized idea but not one borne on a belief that the world had lost its finite place in the realm of the sacred.³¹ Nature and its philosophy, in effect, took their force directly from the religious culture.

*Moir*a came to be supreme in Nature over all the subordinate wills of men and Gods, because she was first supreme in human society, which was continuous with nature. Here, too, we find the ultimate reason why Destiny is moral: she defines the limits of *mores*, of social custom. (Cornford [1912] 1957:51)

Through the first sentence of the passage, Cornford's thinking is straight from Durkheim (whom he acknowledges).³² But his conclusion, and his application of the idea, is quite something else.

For Durkheim, religion served the simple and sociological purpose of "uniting the moral community." For Cornford, the religious impulse, though grounded in social life, "defines the limits . . . of social custom." Though slight in appearances, the difference suggests a very different kernel to the husk of a social theory of religion. Cornford's discovery among the earlier Greeks emphasized that religion, whether as such or "secularized" as the Nature of the philosophers, was the expression of the limits of social life. Durkheim's idea of religion (perhaps owing to the influence of Fustel de Coulanges) grew out of the limiting force of the social. But the social was stipulated, from the first, in Durkheim's idea of the social as the virtual sacred—that is, as the transcending power of human experience.³³ If the social is the primary and sole foundation of the sacred, as Durkheim seemed to think in parts of *Elementary Forms*, then the social, which in the earlier writings serves to bind the individual, must be without discernible limits because it exercised, in effect, the force of the sacred. From the point of view of Durkheim's thinking as a whole, the distinction between the sacred and the profane is confused.³⁴ In other words, using a more modern term, though Durkheim's human individual was a limited

³¹ This is why Greek philosophy was able to be, a millennium after its golden age, a crucial bearer of Christian ideas through the influence of Plotinus (205–?270 B.C.E.) on, among others, Augustine. For example, see Taylor (1989: chap. 7); cf. Elshtain (1995).

³² Even in his use of Durkheim, Cornford misrepresents his French contemporary's ideas as the very sort of psychological contagion theory Durkheim was so bent on dismissing, especially in *Suicide*.

³³ Though *Elementary Forms* alternates between being a theory of religion and a theory of knowledge, what unites that book with Durkheim's earlier ideas on sociology in *Rules* and *Suicide* is precisely the idea that, relative to the individual (and his thoughts), the social is the limiting power. Durkheim's theory of society, thus, assumes that even the secularized social order must have the function the sacred had in traditional societies.

³⁴ For a more adequate view of the sacred and the profane than Durkheim's, see Eliade (1957).

creature, the social force that provided him those moral limits was not—at least not in any systematic way within Durkheim’s theory of religion. On this, the example of Greek religion is, once again, instructive.

In *Five Stages*, Murray ([1912] 1955:31n) accepted Cornford’s point on the continuity between the religious and the philosophical in the earlier periods, then extended it in his famous study of the fourth of the five stages of Greek religion. The Hellenizing period, which culminated in the conquests of the god-like Alexander, followed upon the collapse of the polis and the great, classical philosophies associated with it.³⁵ Murray’s expression, the failure of nerve, is complex and ironic, but crucial to his history of Greek religion. A strictly Durkheimian view of this period, when the social foundations of the later Greek faith in philosophical wisdom disappeared, would suppose that it was a time in which all that was holy was lost. It was not. In fact, beginning in the fourth century B.C.E., the failure of nerve was, to Murray, a necessary preparation for a new religious order:

Mankind has not yet decided which of two opposite methods leads to the fuller and deeper knowledge of the world: the patient and sympathetic study of the good citizen who lives in it, or the ecstatic vision of the saint who rejects it. But probably most Christians are inclined to believe that without some failure and sense of failure, without a contrite heart and conviction of sin, man can hardly attain the religious life. I can imagine an historian of this temper believing that the period [after the fall of the polis] was a necessary softening of human pride, a *Praeparatio Evangelica*. (Murray [1912] 1955:120)

Murray’s commentary on the Hellenizing period between the polis and the rise of Christianity is exceedingly complex. But his main point is simply enough consistent with Cornford’s and, accordingly, at odds with Durkheim’s.

Religion, by both accounts, entails a definite correspondence with a failure of nerve sufficient to embrace the human experience of finitude. Whatever may be the social function of religion, we are not speaking with good sociological sense unless we are talking about the *shared* experience of finitude. To speak, whether religiously or sociologically, of limits, one must speak of more than the limits society imposes on individual life. Otherwise, the religion referred to remains a conceptually vulnerable figure of speech as Durkheim’s did. One of the reasons *Elementary Forms* wavered between being a study of religion and a study of the social origins of knowledge and culture is that Durkheim’s definition of religion was too weak to bear the theoretical load.³⁶

All social arrangements, however great or small, are contingent. Their contingency, however, is not merely a matter of human failure to construct the good society. It is, instead, in Murray’s phrase, an entailment of the human itself and of the inevitability of

³⁵ Murray’s description of Alexander makes the conclusive point about the Greek gods and men: “To people who were at all accustomed to the conception of a God-Man it was difficult not to feel that the conception was realized in Alexander. His tremendous power, his brilliant personality, his achievements beggaring the fables of the poets, put people in the right mind for worship. Then came the fact that the kings whom he conquered were, as a matter of fact, mostly regarded by their subjects as divine beings” (Murray [1912] 1955:147).

³⁶ Durkheim began *Elementary Forms* (introduction) with the claim that religion was the principal subject of the book and that the “genesis of the fundamental notions of thought” was the secondary. But by the time one gets to the conclusion of that book, the principal subject is indeed the social origins of the categories of knowledge. It is possible to say that Durkheim’s own ambiguity on these points is what allowed *Elementary Forms*, through its influence on Claude Lévi-Strauss, among others, to be a *locus classicus* of cultural studies.

our failure of nerve. We are not gods (but then, as it turned out, neither quite were the gods). As Anaximander discovered, and the later Greek philosophers, notably Plato, took for granted, the gods were as fated as Nature itself, of which all ordinary mortals partake. Thus Odysseus's descent to the House of the Dead, while metaphoric, was perfectly coherent in his culture, as it should be in all human cultures. Whether the operative concept is *Moirai*, destiny, dread of death, or finitude, there would seem to be, at the least, room for a sociological idea of social limits imposed not so much willfully by the social whole but as a necessary consequence of the human order.

What, then, might have been had the nineteenth-century sociological idea of religion been less innocent of the historical varieties of the secularizing process? What if Durkheim and Weber, the most courageous of the early social theorists of religion, had not understood religion in ways so restricted by their prior scientific purposes and plans? Such questions are worth the while for any number of reasons, but supremely so if they lead from a *What might have been?* to a *What could be?*

THE *COULD BE* OF RELIGION IN SOCIAL THEORY

In the retrospect of the late 1990s, when religion has long since passed from the public consciousness of most social theorists, the events in ancient Greece (like those in the 1950s and 1960s to which I alluded at the beginning) may seem absurdly beside the point of the preoccupying issues of our day. Still, in keeping with Tilly's *might have been/still could be* warning, it is possible to begin, at least, to see the *could bes* of religion in social theory in the awkward silences with which one of today's most urgent social theoretical debates neglects religion.

To be fair, one of the more striking recent examples of such a silence is less a silence on religion than a misconstrual of it. I refer to Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* (1998a), in which, as in previous books, he attempts to derive a liberal principle of hope from pragmatism, in this case Walt Whitman and John Dewey. Rorty makes frequent references to religion, including civil religion (though without commenting on Bellah, whose view of civil religion, however innocent in some respects, was at least specific and serious). The religion Rorty has in mind in *Achieving Our Country* is more a cartoon of American religion at its Cotton Mather or Elmer Gantry worst than a serious philosophical or sociological idea of religion. For example:

Both Dewey and Whitman viewed the United States as an opportunity to see ultimate significance in a finite, human, historical project, rather than in something eternal and nonhuman. They both hoped that America would be the place where a religion of love would finally replace a religion of fear. They dreamed that Americans would break the traditional link between the religious impulse, the impulse to stand in awe of something greater than oneself, and the infantile need for security, the childish hope of escaping from time and change. They wanted to preserve the former and discard the latter. They wanted to put hope for a casteless and classless America in the place traditionally occupied by knowledge of the will of God. They wanted that utopian America to replace God as the unconditional object of desire. They wanted the struggle for social justice to be the country's animating principle, the nation's soul. (Rorty 1998a:17–18)

What is so unsettling about this passage, as about the entire book, is that Rorty abandons the very irony he had done so much to call attention to in earlier writings (1979, 1989). The

confusion at the heart of Rorty's philosophy is a good illustration of the value of a serious theory of religion to social thought. Although Rorty himself has been anything but pre-occupied with religion, he has devoted himself to reworking the very idea of social and philosophical thought with due and comparable consideration to the necessity of irony and the possibility of liberal hope. It is possible that he has not succeeded because his political philosophy lacks an essential ironic principle of the human condition that religion may best supply.

Although not all religions as practiced are ironic, religion itself is. Religion, at its best, and notwithstanding its many varieties, commands attention to the irony that human hope is bound to human finitude. The fundamental religious impulse is not simply awe before the holy, but in Rudolph Otto's ([1917] 1957)³⁷ classic expression, fascination with it, and fascination is most decidedly not the attitude of fear and childish escape in Rorty's caricature. Even Western Christianity, the fundamentalist versions of which are as little ironic as it is possible to be, turns upon the ironic notion that the way to life is through death—that finitude is the first fact of human life. At their best, some Western theologies have been supremely ironic, most memorably Paul Tillich's summary of his ethical theory: "The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt" (Tillich 1952:190)³⁸

Christianity is far from alone in this. Harold Bloom, in his attempt to reconstruct the gnostic foundations of millennial religion, quotes the Jewish Kabbalah: "What makes us free is the Gnosis [inner, spiritual knowledge]/of wherein we have been thrown." Then adds in his own words:

"Thrown" is the most important verb in the Gnostic vocabulary, for it describes, now as well as two thousand years ago, our condition: we *have been thrown* into this world, this emptiness. Cast out, at once from God and from our true selves, or sparks, we live and die our sense of have been thrown, daily. Let us grant that there is an exhilarating dynamism in our condition, but this does not prevail, and it is not the norm of our existence. (Bloom 1996:241–42)

Though he cites a Jewish source, his reference is to the universal principle of religion. It would be hard to imagine what the appeal of religion could have possibly been over so many centuries and across so many cultural differences were it not that which adds to social life some compelling solution to its most disturbing riddle, How can it be that life is lived, whether alone or in company, against the end of life?

Typically, but in this case curiously, Rorty (1998a:33) puts greater stock in Dewey's pragmatic progressivism, while casting aside without so much as a comment the religiously derived political realism of writers like Reinhold Niebuhr (1932; cf. Lovin 1995), Jean Bethke Elshtain (1995), even Augustine.³⁹ What has become of Richard Rorty, the realist of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*? It was he who, in the latter book, defined an ironist as one who has "radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she uses." It is true that the entailment of Rorty's earlier idea of irony was, as he went on to say, that the ironist does not think her vocabulary is "in

³⁷ In *The Idea of the Holy* (especially chap. 6), Otto describes the fifth element of the *mysterium tremendum*.

³⁸ See also Tillich's famous definition of ethical courage: "The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self affirmation" (1952: 3). Tillich, by the way, is the only theologian who, so far as I know, has been published by a major sociological journal: Tillich (1937).

³⁹ For a more persuasive attempt to rescue left-liberal values that takes religion into account—see Katznelson (1996).

touch with a power not herself” (Rorty 1989:73–74). He meant to present a strong theory of epistemological contingency, on the one hand, while holding out for a politics consistent with a progressive ideal of social hope.⁴⁰ His rejection of ontological realism is the perfectly reasonable requirement of his rejection of foundationalism, of epistemological realism. But, is not political realism still another matter?

Is it possible, in real and complex societies, to have realistic hope if one is not a political realist? The problem with liberal hope, apart from its failure to deliver the goods equitably, has been its frequent lapses into a rhetoric of hope so broad as to be, in the fine expression Habermas revived, quasi-transcendent (Rorty 1998b:327–50). But rhetoric, even if it is the high-minded rhetoric of Rorty’s philosophy as textual criticism, is seldom, if ever, of precise value in shaping local political action. Whatever may have been true in the early days of modern philosophy, when philosophical work was done by courtly hangers on and, later, by bourgeois gentlemen, philosophy in the form Rorty proclaimed in his earlier writings must be philosophy in and among social differences. This, surely, is why the literary ironist must take over for the philosopher of essences. Whether explicit or not, the present state of complex societies is the social condition for Rorty’s critique of philosophy as a mirror of nature, just as it is for social theory. If this is so, then social theory must contend with the political reality that politics today is neither the art of courtly diplomacy nor the well-intended manners of the bourgeois gentleman. Politics today is the work of men and women, and very often of their children, who must contend with a social world in which, quite apart from the lack of a final vocabulary, there is no transcending power. It is a social world in which competing interests must come together over differences.

Even so, any reach for transcendence, however quasi, and whether philosophical or sociological, sooner or later runs aground on the facts of complex, late modern societies in which the artifice of normative consensus comes apart in the face of protests founded on real, not imagined, social differences. Sociological quasi-transcendentalists from Todd Gitlin (1995) to Alan Wolfe (1998)⁴¹ want to argue that these differences are not politically or sociologically real, that they are epiphenomena of what is so tiresomely called, usually with a sneer, identity politics. Social theorists who accept a responsibility for the empirical may be less inclined to worry about transcendental categories of being or understanding. But they cannot neglect the primary social fact of late-modern times that social differences are no longer merely disputes over values and manners, as the privileged had for a long time presumed. Whatever ordinary human foolishness may be done under the banner of identity politics (which is certainly not, on average, more foolish than the record of the earlier old and new lefts), the politics of social differences pose a challenge to the highest hopes of liberal social and political theory.⁴² We need not go back even as far as Talcott Parsons’s failed, but serious, attempt to contend with social differences in his own social ethic of the power of cultural values to maintain the patterns that, he hoped, would adjudicate competing interests. Nor must we stoop to rave as have so many otherwise brilliant social theorists like Gitlin and Wolfe. Richard Rorty’s so much more sensible and decent version of a similar, but liberal, quest for the transcending political values is just as symptomatic of the crisis of social and political thought provoked by social differences that won’t go away.

It seems entirely possible that what has happened in Rorty’s two-decade long project of reestablishing liberal hope on the weak foundation of the textual criticism of vocabularies

⁴⁰For a recent statement of particular interest to social theorists, see Rorty’s essay “Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy” in *Truth and Progress* (1998b:307–26).

⁴¹Which is to be distinguished in quality and seriousness from Wolfe’s *Whose Keeper* (1989). For an example of a quasi-transcendental sociology that does take social differences seriously, see Calhoun (1995).

⁴²I attempt to defend this line more completely in Lemert (1997b).

with no final word is that hope wanes when it is unable to consider the political realism of incommensurable struggles over interests and needs. It is one thing not to be able to *convince* the other. Quite another not to be able to feed one's baby. Political realism has to do with the latter. In this respect, reversion to the already implicated nineteenth-century dismissals of religion as child's play leaves Rorty exposed to the trouble in the project itself. It also raises the question of the value of religion, which then brings us back to the matter of human finitude.

Rorty's epistemological doctrine of contingency is no substitute for a political realism able to generate real, bread-winning liberal hope. I think it can be shown that the *might have been* of a more adequate political realism than Rorty's requires a more adequate theory of religion. The possibility that Rorty, surely the most important public philosopher at work today, might have tripped on the entailments of his own theoretical contingencies invites religion back in at least to the extent that the leading social theoretical controversy of the day is itself fraught with questions of irony.

That question is, of course, one of social differences and their transcendence—or, more analytically put, of the presumed incommensurability of a politics of recognition and a politics of distribution. Though the question is posed by many, from the serious to the half-serious, its most disciplined and focussed presentation is in the arguments among Judith Butler, Seyla Benhabib, and Nancy Fraser. Their exchanges in a number of places over the past years provide excellent documentation of the issues because, though they themselves would resist easy classification, they represent more or less the three important attitudes in the debate—the allegedly postmodernist (Butler), the frankly quasi-transcendentalist (Benhabib), and the vexed post socialist (Fraser). Though their numerous exchanges are set at a very high level of theoretical abstraction, the argument is at bottom over politics. There may well be clearer, more down-to-earth political formulations of the issues they consider. But it would be hard to find a more succinct presentation of issues that any and all social theories must, one way or another, confront.

It is not by accident that, in the last two decades, the debate over the fate of universal values in the face of multicultural politics has been carried forth by writers who, however they may think of themselves, are generally thought of as feminists. Though academic feminism's relationship to women of color is still, for the most part, uncertain and confused, it would be hard to deny that, more than any other concerted movement in the universities, feminism has well posed the question of universal values in politics and social thought. It has *because* of its own uncertain relation to the subjugations visited upon the oppressed by modernity's liberal ideals of subjecthood. This is why, though it is often repeated, Nancy Hartsock's complaint against Foucault still serves to illustrate feminism's interest in the debate over differences: "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" (Hartsock 1990:163) Though Hartsock herself wishes to dismiss what she takes to be Foucault's all too radical view of social differences, her identification with those previously silenced, in all their many differences, establishes the horns of the dilemma.

Nancy Fraser, for important example, has pursued her calling as the *tertium quid* of these debates by presenting an especially clear summary of the differences and possible points of communication between the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution.⁴³ What appears to be an elegantly obvious distinction turns out, upon inspection, to be a grab bag of theoretical and political confusions, which is why Fraser has set about to

⁴³See Fraser (1997), especially the lead essay, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of a 'Post-socialist' Age." See also, Charles Taylor's "The Politics of Recognition" (1994:25–74); cf. Young (1990).

organize them as best they can be. The politics of recognition refer to the new cultural politics which, in the rhetoric of debate, are commonly characterized as identity politics. Theorists of the left (both old and new) consider cultural things lesser than economic ones. They, thereby, dismiss identity politics as misguided—first, by misplacing values; and, ultimately, by emphasizing local interests in recognition at the expense of universal principles of social and economic justice.

Using a form reminiscent of no one more than Talcott Parsons, Fraser attempts to display the political possibilities that may arise in the differences between the two politics. “Imagine a four-celled matrix,” she says (Fraser 1997:27). Imagine, indeed, that the two supposedly incommensurable politics are analytically decomposed against two no less different axes of political possibility, affirmation and transformation. These latter represent of course the strategic choice between liberal reform (affirmation) and social revolution (transformation). By cross tabulating (if I may) the four against each other, Fraser generates what she considers the four properly leftist political choices in the present situation: (1) *the liberal welfare state* (redistributive affirmation), (2) *mainstream multiculturalism* (affirmative recognition), (3) *socialism* (redistributive transformation), and (4) *deconstruction* (transformative recognition).

Fraser proposes that the recognition-redistribution problem may be overcome by rejecting the first two of the four options (they being both weakly affirmative) and combining the latter two, transformative options. Why these two? Fraser claims that “socialist economics combined with deconstructive cultural politics works best to finesse the dilemma for the bivalent collectivities of gender and ‘race’—at least when they are considered separately” (1997:31). Why gender and “race” (race being marked to signal the analytic instability of the term)? Because these two among the boundary terms of the politics of difference (as distinct, that is, from class and sexuality) are those spheres of political and social encounter that demand, at one and the same time, *both* recognition and redistribution, both cultural and economic justice.

The degree to which Fraser’s third-force attempt to reconcile reputed opposites fails is evident in the responses of her rivals. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, the quasi-transcendentalists among the disputants in *Feminist Contentions* (Benhabib 1995)⁴⁴ simply ignore Fraser altogether. This partly, one supposes, because they detest her fourth cell, “deconstruction,” or, more likely, because, as Benhabib (1995:30) puts it (after the Hartsock line), “we as women, have much to lose by giving up the utopian hope in the other.” Deconstruction and postmodernism (those who detest these things tend to consider them the same) can at best teach some lessons in short-run skepticism. At their worst, they weaken the will for social utopia which alone can emancipate us from oppression which *au fond* is always class-specific and, thus, a matter of economic injustice.⁴⁵ The assumption is that emancipation requires a universal principle of justice. So much for Fraser’s attempt to reconcile the quasi-transcendental, postsocialists with those she considers the cultural politics people.

Fraser’s view that gender and race—and neither class nor sexuality—are the pivotal “bivalent collectivities,” does not sit well with Judith Butler. Butler, in her exchanges with

⁴⁴The book is organized around four previously presented essays by the four disputants. Drucilla Cornell is the fourth along with Fraser, Butler, and Benhabib. The book concludes with commentaries by each of the four on the other three essays.

⁴⁵Benhabib’s position is so grave that she is willing in its name to say the most astonishing things, as: “The fact that the views of Gilligan or Chodorow or Sarah Ruddick (or for that matter Kristeva) articulate only the sensitivities of white, middle-class, affluent, first-world, heterosexual woman may be true (although I even have empirical doubts about this). Yet, what are we ready to offer in their place?” (1995: 30). Why the doubt in the parenthesis? If true, then true. The lack of an alternative is no justification for the failure. For an alternative, see Collins (1998).

Fraser in both *Social Text* and *New Left Review*,⁴⁶ attacks the redistributive left's crude characterization of queer politics: "Queer politics is regularly prefigured by the orthodoxy as the cultural extreme of politicization" (Butler 1998:38). Butler then, in effect, attacks Fraser's scheme as typical of the cultural politics of the left orthodox. Even though Butler's essay turns out to be a futile attempt to show that sexualities are as much economic as they are cultural (hence as eligible for orthodox attentions),⁴⁷ she makes a particularly telling point about the typical misunderstanding of identity and difference:

New political formations do not stand in an analogical relation with one another, as if they were discrete and differentiated entities. They are overlapping, mutually determining, and convergent fields of politicization. In fact, most promising are those moments in which one social movement comes to find its condition of possibility in another. Here difference is not simply the *external* differences between movements, understood as that which differentiates them from one another but, rather, *the self-difference of movement itself*, a constitutive rupture that makes movements possible on non-identarian grounds, that installs a certain mobilizing conflict as the basis of politicization. Factionalization, understood as the process whereby one identity excludes another in order to fortify its own unity and coherence, makes the mistake of locating the problem of difference as that which emerges *between* one identity and another; but difference is the condition of possibility of identity or, rather, its constitutive limit: what makes its articulation possible at the same time what makes any final or closed articulation possible. (Butler 1998:37. Italics in original)

If Butler is right, and I think she is, the argument between, as Fraser calls them, the cultural recognitionists and the socioeconomic redistributionists is grossly misplaced. Cultural politics, in any of its forms, including identity politics, when viewed historically, is more the "constitutive rupture" of political change than the beginning of another wave of excluding factions. It is far too early to tell what these new movements will become in the wider scheme of things.

Given the sad history of new and old left factionalization, it is not surprising that those with legitimate interests in renewing left politics want to avoid the kind of excluding differences with which they are so familiar. Nor is there any reason to doubt that already in its short history cultural politics have served, in some instances, to factionalize the political whole. The proper issue, however, as Butler begins to suggest, is the conditions under which new political formations arise. Little gain is made when the short-run failures of any of the lefts is allowed to confuse thinking aimed at long-run political change.

The issue, therefore, is not, how does one choose between or reconcile the cultural and economic? The question with which social and political theory must contend is, rather, *How is justice to be understood in the moral space created by the collapse of the welfare programs of the liberal-left and the appearance, almost at the same moment, of the new cultural politics of difference?*⁴⁸ It is surely at least possible that these new cultural politics are, in Butler's words, the source of "mobilizing conflict" appropriate to the present situation. If possible, then why the preemptive strike by the older new left against the

⁴⁶Butler's (1998) "Merely Cultural" and Fraser's (1998) "Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism" advance points against each made in their contributions to *Feminist Contentions* (Benhabib 1995).

⁴⁷In this respect, Butler's attempt to take the ground from under the socialists is as little convincing as is Fraser's attempt to reconcile all comers. Fraser, in her reply (1998) has little difficulty dismissing Butler. One of the most striking features of this exchange is how aggression is so thinly disguised behind polite expressions of mutual respect.

⁴⁸The phrase "cultural politics of difference" is from West (1990).

cultural left?⁴⁹ No answers will come from such aggressions any more than they will come from projects like Fraser's recategorization strategy. "The redistribution-recognition dilemma is real," she says (Fraser 1997: 31). Real, yes. But in what sense?

What is the underlying reality between the need for universally distributed socioeconomic justice and the need for social and cultural recognition? Charles Taylor has proposed an answer. In his essay on the politics of recognition, Taylor begins (1994: 26) by challenging the notion that these are a frivolous politics: "Misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need."

But, Taylor goes on (in keeping with the general themes of *Sources of the Self*) to show how cultural recognition is embedded in the history of modern ideas about the moral self that emerged in the eighteenth century (adding importantly what is usually ignored: that the moral self was always a dialogic self). The charm of Taylor's philosophy for sociologists is that he aims, implicitly, to be sociologically responsible. He, thus, locates the modern self in its modernizing social conditions beginning with the Enlightenment, as he situates today's politics of difference in their own social and moral framework.⁵⁰

In the end, and apropos of the recognition-redistribution dilemma, Taylor offers an almost out-of-the-closet nod toward religion⁵¹ from which he draws the conclusion to his essay:

There is perhaps after all a moral issue here. We only need a sense of our own limited part in the whole human story to accept the presumption. It is only arrogance, or some analogous moral failing, that can deprive us of this. . . . What it requires above all is an admission that we are very far away from the ultimate horizon from which the relative worth of different cultures might be evident. This would mean breaking with an illusion that still holds many "multiculturalists"—as well as their most bitter opponents—in its grip. (Taylor 1994:73)

Taylor, here, is as far short of developing the idea of religion he proposes as he is ahead of those who cannot but see the dilemma in all too limited, and theoretically unstable, terms. Not even Fraser's well-intended but impossible attempt to reconcile by the grace of her categories leads where Taylor's comment might.

In one sense, the question of justice in a multicultural age is relatively simple: *Are we able to recognize the humanity in others who, being different from us in nontrivial ways, demand their fair share of "our" goods?* Like all such summary statements, the query is loaded. What is humanity? What is a nontrivial social difference? What is a fair share? What is fair? Who owns the goods? Who has a right to the goods? Yet, however charged, this is the practical question that gives rise, equally, to the mobilizing conflicts of new politics as it does to any coherent, transcending commitment to social and economic justice. The full answer is not so easily arrived at, to be sure. But it is the answer that must be sought if ever there is to be a way out of the dilemma social and political theory is now in—that is, a way out that issues in well-distributed bread.

⁴⁹And how the new left opponents of the new cultural left forget. See, for example, Todd Gitlin (1987:438): "We strain to foresee, but history refuses to purify the results of our efforts in advance."

⁵⁰For example: "The politics of difference grows organically out of the politics of universal dignity through one of those shifts with which we are long familiar, where a new understanding of the human social condition imparts a radically new meaning to an old principle" (Taylor 1994: 39).

⁵¹Notice also that Taylor's *Sources of the Self* ends similarly (1989:521): "There is a large element of hope. It is a hope that I see implicit in the Judeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history), and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided."

Taking the clue that Taylor himself, being committed (like Rorty) to liberal hope, cannot pursue, religion may promise something of value. If, as Taylor says, the current dilemma has to do with an arrogant unwillingness to accept “our own limited part in the whole human story,” then must we not be political realists about the limitations of the human story itself? Religion, as understood by the Greek supplements to Durkheim which I presented earlier, may well be the most important source of political realism. Religion, thus, and most elementally, is the form of social life in which people together, whatever their differences, understand themselves as doubly finite. As individuals, we cannot transcend the social relations that form us. As members with *all* others, we cannot escape the limitations of our humanity.

Though the answers to all questions of recognition and redistribution may well be a long way off, any realistic hope of their attainment lies in distinguishing between the humanity of our hope and the finitude of our efforts. Those so wedded to various versions of the left or liberal hope (*that by their own efforts they will produce the transcending principle of social justice*) might well be chastened by the daunting reality of just how much bread must be grown, baked, and fed before the utopia comes. Utopias are different from heavens, they being the liberal dreams of human aspiration. Heaven, by contrast, is the metaphoric expression of the human ideal that, being commonly limited, we are bound to all others, even to those different in social kind. Human justice will come, perhaps, when we recognize that we, among all others, have no greater or lesser need for recognition or for our daily bread.

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