

# Culture and religion

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## CULTURE AND RELIGION

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For everyday purposes, we all know, or we all assume that we know, just what is meant by “religion” and by “culture”. We use the words often enough, and need no precise and formal definitions. In practice, what we mostly mean by these terms can often be given much more concrete specification. We equate “culture” with that of our own society, and often with the higher forms and the positively evaluated aspects of its intellectual and artistic creativity. By “religion” we generally have, at the back of our minds, the religion of our own society, and perhaps even of a particular variant of the broader tradition to which our religious inheritance belongs. Sociologists, of course, would like to broaden the assumptive basis of discussion, and might well seek to encompass in their use of the generic terms all species of religion as found in all societies, and all variants of culture, since sociology is a generalizing discipline which has not – or has not yet – had occasion to disavow the search for universal propositions such as those which characterize the natural sciences. Let me confess at once that I have considerable doubts about the attainability of such elevated goals. But, in any case, I confine my reflections on culture and religion to occidental cultures and to the religious stream that may be designated Judeo-Christian-Islamic. In what degree generalizations may be made concerning those cultures and those religions, I leave as an open question which awaits further exploration: my own purpose is more narrowly conceived.

I take the culture of a society to be a more or less integrated system of taboos and interdictions, of injunctions and prescriptions which together shape social life. The negative boundaries are of more powerful determining force than the positive prescripts, since they set the limits on behaviour, and provide the contours of control. What “shall not be done” establishes the framework of social and moral order (Rieff, 1966, 234). The raw empirical facticity of social reality is re-worked by an evaluative imprint represented by a variety of symbolic depictions, which carry implicit meanings, evoke responses, and summon resources in the creation and recurrent re-creation of social life. Although it can easily be said that the culture espouses a set of over-arching values that might, at their most coherent, be held to constitute a system, it is the determination of just what violates those values which confers on them their sharpest articulation. It is in normative *proscriptions* that a society’s values are most readily to be discerned. Such *proscriptions* make most apparent the dispositions and attitudes,

the styles of doing things, the patterns of acceptable conduct, that prevail among a settled people. The system of constraints dictate the ways in which man's biological and psychological needs are to be met. It is in restraining the impulses to meet those needs, and in channelling the energy that those needs stimulate, that the culture does its determining work in organizing man's animality into the realization of his humanity. That humanity is a social product, capable of realization in widely variant ways, but invariably dependent on structures of constraint. What those structures produce we may collectively label as the society's culture.

If this depiction of culture be accepted, it cannot be surprising that one must accord to religion a primal role (if, today, no longer the principal role) as the agency most responsible for having produced (and for having for a long time sustained) that culture. The extended definition of a culture that we have offered would be difficult to wrest free from religious language and religious assumptions, since human societies have all been forged originally in the crucible of religious ideas of one kind or another. In primitive contexts, religious orientations may have been so deeply implicit in social order as to be scarcely distinguishable from other social concerns – at least by those involved, even if subsequent and external investigators have readily recognized various modes of thought and action as conforming to their better-established analytical categories as “religious”. As the term is being deployed here, what is meant by “religion”?

Again, permit me to offer no more than a tentative working definition adequate for this discussion. Religion I take to be the social apprehension of a super-empirical sphere of activity and order with which human beings seek at least from time to time to come into communication, on which they recognize some dependence, and towards which they engage in specified patterns of behaviour. One need not hypothesize that men in all societies distinguish natural from supernatural, any more than one need suppose religion to be recognized as a distinct department of life. All one needs posit is that intimations of a super-empirical order are entertained and that they exert their influence on social life. In this sense, all human societies may be said to have, or have had, religion, and that in their pristine circumstances (however they may be conceived) intimations of the supernatural formed an integral element of their *Weltanschauung*. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of primitive social order or of traditional societies, without early and direct allusion to the supernatural orientations which those societies espoused. Belief in super-empirical entities and forces appears to have been endemic in human society, and in the least developed societies of which observation and record have been made some sort of organization – however rudimentary – has functioned to sustain, promote, or mobilize supernatural power. To harness that power, stipulations have always

existed, intimating what was – and more emphatically, what was not – to be done. The taken-for-granted nature of the supernatural, and of the appropriate orientation towards it, namely, religious belief and action, was implicitly built into social order. The assumptions of the naturalness of the supernatural, and the positive evaluations accorded to it, have given religion a premium, and made it difficult for men to abandon those presuppositions. Religious premises were embedded in linguistic usage, and the terms in use assume the facticity of all that is religious. The words indicative of non-religion are not merely neutral: almost of necessity they have inherited a negative connotation. “Theism” appears normative; *atheism* as some sort of denial of truth; “belief” is positive, whilst *unbelief* carries the stigma of negativity; similarly with “faith” and “faithlessness”; “god” and “godless”, which carry the pejorative connotations of departures from normative order.

Religion, then, has been a traditional vehicle of culture – shaping the ways in which, by aspirations towards some transcendent reality, human order has been transmuted, raised above the purely instinctual impulses of man’s animality by a pattern of constraints that have had to be learned and which have needed constant servicing by social agencies. Perhaps nowhere can the culture-creating role of religion be so readily discerned as in the system of interdictions and (somewhat less significantly) injunctions embraced in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The supreme supernatural authority was here invoked to produce a morality by divine command, which defined in elaborate detail just what men and women were not to do.

It might be hypothesized – although it is an untestable proposition – that without religion a culture could not have come into being; and it might be further suggested, with rather more certainty, that without culture there would be – could be – nothing that we should recognize as society, nor creatures that we should acknowledge as being human. Man differs from the animals in having a culture, in restraining himself – more accurately, in learning in society certain social constraints that are essential for the maintenance of social order, for preserving society from descent into the law of the jungle, preserving it from nature itself, as it is said, “red in tooth and claw”. But whatever might have been the role of religion in creating culture, does religion today sustain culture, and is it capable of re-creating culture, of transforming the social order and, more specifically, of creating new value-orientations and of disseminating them? Today, it is perhaps part of conventional sociological wisdom, Marx to the contrary, that religion has been a repository of values which at certain propitious historical moments could be activated to produce new patterns of culture. If the Protestant ethic thesis is the most spectacular of the cases that have been investigated, it is surely not the only putative example.



To say this is certainly not to suggest that religion is the only nor even necessarily the normal source for the re-creation or the transformation of culture. Indeed, I shall shortly turn to the obverse case, of the culture becoming the source of the transformation of religion, but even in a world in which, in developed nations at least, secularization has certainly advanced, there are instances, conspicuously in less-developed regions, in which it is sometimes claimed that religion retains the capacity to transform culture. Such instances are certainly not all equally profound, and some of the most dramatic processes of religiously-induced transmutations of culture may be relatively superficial, or may be attributed to very unusual and transitory circumstances. The effusion of Islamic fundamentalism, and its effect on, for example, the cultural life of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini, is one such dramatic instance (Zubaida, 1987, 46–7). The cultural implications of the fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran and the active canvass of Sharia law affected much of the public life of Iranian society, but whether the imposition by a republican state of draconian laws of moral rectitude could possibly match the slowly inculcated self-restraint to which Calvinists in eighteenth-century Scotland were socialized, may be doubted (Marshall, 1980). Politically inspired attempts at cultural change through the consciously constructed agencies of social control may be expected to be both relatively short-lived and insufficiently rooted in individual conscience to become the pervasive and penetrative values that sustain an enduring pattern of social life.

In societies in which the systems of thought do not yet approximate the rational structures that have been attained in the modern West, and have not yet produced an indigenous technological transformation of the facilities of everyday life, religion may still be seen as the source of solutions for social ills. Such solutions may operate with differential success over time: perhaps at first offering illusory, almost magical, palliatives for social distress and disorder, but, given the right circumstances and the flux of time, having the potential steadily to work a transformation of attitudes which might result – much as the Calvinist ethic is purported to have resulted – in a cultural transformation. The first phase of such an espousal of religion may be induced by aspirations not unlike those of Melanesian cargo cultists, who expect an encompassing salvation that will be initially (perhaps totally) symbolized in the miraculous bestowal (from who knows where?) of valued material goods and the assurance of social well-being. Alternatively, in this phase, the new or revitalized religion may offer sanctuary, and may do so by guiding initial steps towards a rational provision of mutual assistance for the impoverished in a community created apart from the disorder of the prevailing social system with its confused and inadequately communicated cultural intimations. Dispossessed classes – dispossessed of culture as well as of its material artefacts – may then seek

refuge in religiously defined communal space. Such was the case with newly emerging evangelicals in various countries in Latin America (Lalive d'Épinay, 1970).

But can religion still infuse a culture with new values and bring about its transformation, as we are led to believe that it once did? Ostensibly, Latin America represents perhaps the most plausible contemporary evidence of what religion might still effect in disseminating a new culture. In the past few decades, in one Latin American country after another, there has been a rapid growth of Protestantism, and more particularly of Pentecostalism, both in the effective missioning of American sects, but also in the growth of indigenous Pentecostal movements (Martin, 1990). The close association of the state and the Roman Catholic Church and the, perhaps less justifiably assumed, association of church and people, has been breached. The impress of Catholic culture has been effectively challenged, specifically at the grass-roots, by the proliferation of the new sects and their rapid spread especially among the less advantaged populations of countries such as Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru.

The spread of Protestantism has gone on for some time, but its widening impact is increasingly recognized, even by the popular press (Ostling, 1991, 2; Robinson, 1991, 54–5). The early growth of Protestantism in Latin America was the subject of scholarly comment from the late 1950's. Then, as one of the propelling factors, it was noted that in Brazil, there was one priest for every 5'393 Catholics, but one Protestant pastor for every 434 protestants (Cloin, 1959, 228; see Read, 1965; Willems, 1968a; 1968b; Lalive d'Épinay, 1970). Today, it is believed that some 20% of the population of Brazil is Protestant, with a similar figure for Chile and Nicaragua, and more than this for Guatemala (Martin, 1990, 50–1), whilst Roman Catholic authorities concede that the number of Protestants in Latin America as a whole has grown from four million in 1967 to eight in 1975, and thirty million by 1985 (Bravo, 1991, 617). The figures may even underestimate Protestant influence since Protestant converts are likely to be committed rather than nominal adherents of the new faith, while the residual population is counted as Catholics merely because they have undergone infant baptism. Such a process of Protestant growth, occurring as it does largely among the poorer sections of the population, must have some cultural consequences, even if only in sapping the machismo of traditional culture and the hierarchic principles embodied in the Catholic Church. Does it, however, amount to a latter-day transmission of the entire culture of the Protestant ethic to a new geographic sphere?

Certain features of Latin American Protestantism certainly differ from the characteristics of classical Puritanism. The new Protestants are not an urban

business class, but rather are recruited from the deprived and the marginal within their societies. There may be less direct concern for self-help and more emphasis on the system of networks for mutual support, perhaps even with echoes of the older patronage system. Their religion abandons the inner-worldly ethical concerns of traditional Calvinism and espouses ecstatic utterance, which betokens a commitment to expressive religion rather than to instrumental goals such as were the focus of concern for the early Puritans. The Pentecostals are, of course, a much larger movement than were the Puritans, but they are less strategically placed to dominate the societies of which they form a part. The basis of their influence is not that of a well-established elite, but represents rather a groundswell of grass-roots activity and dedication, and their numerical success alone makes evident the impact that they must exert on social life, once they are mobilized in support of a cause. But one must ask just how readily they might be mobilized. Their conventicles are small, their pastors often self-made evangelists, and their organization rudimentary. If cultural transformation were their aim – and it may be only very indirectly so –, then they have as yet to reveal a strategy directed towards that end, and to evolve the means by which to achieve it.

In some respects, the Protestants are in the business of calculated change but, typically of evangelical religious endeavour, the change they primarily seek is of the individual believer. The new religion becomes a licensed means by which individuals can escape the obligations of a traditional culture in which they were previously enmeshed. They perhaps perceive the wastefulness of the costly *fiesta* system which kept the poor in poverty. They are perhaps relieved to escape the traditional obligations of the *compadre* institution with all its attendant particularistic corruption. They are prepared to enter into a more regulated and ordered way of life – a way of life in which alcohol and gambling are abandoned, and in which regular control of sources, a commitment to work and discipline, honesty and self-esteem all form essential characteristics. The explicit goal is of course to seek salvation, but the contingent consequences are recognized and their value understood, even if they are perceived in an essentially atomistic and individualistic frame of reference. Inevitably, since the prospect of post-mortem salvation remains beyond empirical experience, it is these tangible fruits of faith which become recognized as in themselves constituting a form of salvation. And, indeed, such it is. Protestant cultivation of individual virtue becomes the touchstone of proof for a saved life – whatever the afterlife consequences might be.

In this sense, then, there is a possibility of religion working through a social system and providing it with new cultural perspectives – perhaps, if the movement is well-enough grounded and gains more adherents and a stable organizational

structure, it might find its way towards re-shaping the values of whole societies. Those most committed to the theory that culture may determine social structure, that values may arise as independent and autonomous entities which shape the infrastructure, may take Latin America as a laboratory test for their thesis. Yet, it is not inappropriate to enter a caveat: the case is not yet proven, and the model on which the theoretical assumptions rest is not one that lies all-square with the case of the Protestant ethic, if that is taken as the prototype for religion determining culture, and culture re-shaping society.

The divergence between these cases can be touched upon only briefly here but subsist in the differences between the spirit of seventeenth century Calvinism and the (Holy) Spirit invoked by contemporary Pentecostalism (Wilson, 1991, 19ff). Calvinism communicated austere and ascetic principles. It embodied a spirit of sobriety, conscientious concern, and intense moral scruple based on rigorous and regular self-examination. It encouraged the cultivation of a self-regulatory system of restraint and the internalization of ethical imperatives. Pentecostalism is different. It promotes free expression and a certain self-indulgence of display leading to ecstatic utterance and movement. Whereas Calvinists learned to repress spontaneous response, to curb exuberance, Pentecostals learn – sometimes quite literally learn – how to externalize their concerns, vocalize their anguish, and set constraints aside. The moral acerbity of Calvinism was of a piece with the style and comportment of its votaries and with the austerity of its soteriology. There is no such congruence between the ecstasy stimulated by Pentecostalism and those same moral commitments that are supposed to link this movement with its Puritan predecessor. Is it possible that the internalization of conscience might be no less effectively wrought by emotionally expressive exercises of the Pentecostal type? An essential element of the Calvinist syndrome was a commitment to rational behaviour in the service of a god who demanded sustained, systematic, single-minded endeavour towards clearly-defined externally prescribed transcendent goals. But Pentecostalism exudes a spirit quite alien in style to the spirit of rationality: yet, without that commitment to rational procedures, what would the original Protestant ethic have achieved?

There are other aspects of the Latin American case which complicate the argument that this is an instance in which religion transforms culture. The sub-continent has many cultures and peoples at very different levels of economic and political development. Pentecostalism is assimilated to these diverse groups in necessarily differentiated ways. Whilst it may offer a reintegration of social and cultural values for those dislocated in the process of social change, it may also be an agency of disruption for such relatively integrated cultures as still remain. Since new religious and revivalist movements do not achieve an equal



impact on all their potential individual recruits or among all their targeted societies, the new values that they canvass may, in some circumstances, lead less to a total transformation of an old culture into a new one than to cultural disintegration. Unlike Catholicism, which, in Latin America, has generally taken a relaxed attitude to indigenous custom and even towards local magical practices, Protestants and, in particular, the fundamentalist Pentecostals, have seen their mission as the eradication of all such pagan folkways. In consequence, the very process by which transformation might occur must initially be fraught with tensions and conflict.

Perhaps no less disconcerting and potentially disruptive for any effective socialization to traditional Protestant values is the ease with which the exercise of the Pentecostal gifts of the Spirit might, in some contexts, be assimilated to indigenous ecstatic practice. The superficial continuity of cultural forms has certainly at times led to a confusion of purposes. Pentecostals, who, years ago, were overjoyed when their Toba Indian converts in Argentina so readily took to dancing in the Spirit, were eventually disillusioned to discover that what for them was an evidence of the liberating influence of the Holy Ghost had, for the Toba, more immediate lascivious implications (Nida, 1961; Loewen, Buckwalter and Kratz, 1965; Reyburn, 1956). Similarly Pentecostalism, despite its rejection of all magical practices, none the less reposes firm belief in wonder-working, most conspicuously in miracles of healing, as well as in the more commonly experienced so-called miracle of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the exercise of various Spirit gifts. These phenomena, too, show a certain continuity with local folk beliefs: oracles and miracles, spirits and spiritism, are all ubiquitous in Latin America. Christian healing is not far from magical curing; glossolalia is not very distant from traditional trance-performance; the Holy Spirit is not so distinct that it cannot be assimilated to local spirits. Given such cultural affinities of form, and such easy misunderstanding of purpose, one might ask to what extent such practices fulfil similarities of function. Yet, somewhere in its repertoire, Pentecostalism carries the panoply of moral restraints inherited from traditional Protestantism, ill-conjoined as these interdictions may appear to be with the extravagant exercise of ecstatic performance. Given this emotional orientation, just how good a vehicle might Pentecostalism be in re-socializing a people and transforming a culture?

In such circumstances, and given that it is the lower classes that are the usual recruits of the movement – in Europe and North America as well as in Latin America – Pentecostalism may not be the most effective agency of total cultural transformation. It might inculcate the values of integrity and order, but it might also compromise these orientations by its charter commitment to the primacy of emotional and ecstatic experience. Other derivatives of Protestantism –

Adventists, Mormons, or Jehovah's Witnesses – might, were they sufficiently attractive to a similar constituency, more consistently communicate values and dispositions of a more totally transformative kind, as they have done elsewhere (Vogt and O'Dea, 1953; Wilson, 1974; 1978). The sheer enthusiasm of ecstatic Pentecostal performance might be an essential ingredient of appeal to the newly urbanized and impoverished peoples of Latin America, but it might also be one which bears too much similarity to aspects of indigenous cultures to be a totally effective agency of cultural transmutation.

The relation of culture to religion is not, however, a one-way current, and whilst it can be plausibly contended that in times past religion was a powerful determinant of culture, today one perceives that the culture of modern societies draws increasingly on other sources and becomes steadily alienated from religion. As religion has lost its presidency over the operation of the social system, and seen its erstwhile social functions taken over by other agencies, so its capacity to infuse culture with its own distinctive orientations has manifestly waned. Indeed, responding to these new influences, contemporary culture brings pressure of its own to bear in gradually affecting the intellectual content, the values, and the style of religious belief, practice, and institutions.

The process has been many-sided, and no more than a few illustrative examples can be offered here. Chief among the instances of religion's loss of influence has been the diminishing recourse to the supernatural in all areas of public life. Once invoked to legitimize authority, religion has been superseded in that role by the growing authority of the democratic body politic. Although monarchs – in those societies in which monarchy still lingers as a remnant of the *Ancien Regime* – may still be invested with authority by virtue of some supposed supernatural endowment, even in monarchic politics, real power is conferred by mass political choices. Again, whereas social control was once sustained by reference to supernatural sanctions, and social order was conceived as an extension of divinely instituted natural order, today, in our immensely more complex patterns of social relationship and communication, control is increasingly put into the hands of specialized agencies of the state – the law, the police, and such mechanical and technological devices as traffic lights and data retrieval systems which impose externally a pattern of discipline on man's movements and motivations. Whilst processes of moral socialization are still required to ensure that basic orientations and dispositions are adequately internalized, the balance shifts from dependence on religious injunctions and interdictions to the purely utilitarian and pragmatic mandates of rational and instrumental control (Davies, 1975, 3–4; 1990).

Such changes in the ways in which power is legitimized and social control exercised diminish the impact of religious teaching. As it becomes less useful,



so the trappings of religion – its mystique, its symbolism, and its paraphernalia – lose their relevance in society. One has only to recollect, as a conspicuous if in itself apparently trivial, symptom of this change, how the clergy have largely abandoned clerical dress. The mark of office, of separation from the world, and of commitment to things supernatural, has been relinquished for mufti, presumably in recognition that clothes which once commanded reverence for their wearer, and which symbolized a potent, if at times arcane, culture, have today become little more than fancy dress. Priests, and monks and nuns, may still be there (albeit in smaller numbers), but the spiritual culture which their garb once proclaimed and which was held in reverence by society, is no longer proclaimed with pride by this most obvious device.

The clothes of the clergy may appear as a trifling item, but this change in sartorial style is an evidence of a process by which the long-established religion of Western societies has been deculturated. Christianity has become an increasingly peripheral feature of social life with diminished influence and a presence increasingly hidden. Of course, the great monuments continue to exist, but cathedrals become museums, open to tourists as much if not more than to worshippers – and this, not by deliberate decree as in the Soviet Union where churches were often converted into institutes of science and atheism, but by the greater distance of a growing proportion of Western populations, and particularly of the younger element in those populations, from all that these buildings represent. The rich symbolic inheritance embodied in stained glass windows, in the iconography of pillars and pulpits, gargoyles, misericords, ornaments and vestments is no longer a readily comprehended aspect of cultural life. Guides, rather than priests, are needed to expound even the most obvious symbolic embellishments of places of worship. What was once the re-creation, in stone or bronze, glass or cloth, of well-understood myths or symbols now becomes mere decoration. These things belong to a society's present culture only as treasured relics of a spiritually richer past.

The same tendency is exemplified in the implements and devices that are now produced within our changing culture. Whereas once tools and ships, ploughs and harnesses, furniture and house walls, were all taken for granted as items that should be invested with religious power, or used to remind men of the symbols of their religion as invoked by carving or painting, today – perfunctory post-modernist gestures notwithstanding – instrumental functionalism requires that all such embellishments be jettisoned as wasteful and irrelevant excrescences. Contemporary culture pays no current tribute to religious intimations, ignores claims to spiritual potency, and values the residue of yesterday's religious cultural commitments only as leftovers of another cultural epoch.

These visible evidences of disregard for religion in our contemporary material culture reflect the diminished attention paid to religious knowledge in modern society. People in general now know less about religious ideas, the Christian heritage, or biblical material, even though, without such knowledge, all manner of insights into history, literature, and the arts are also lost. The appreciation of traditional high cultural forms declines as acquaintance diminishes with so much of its inspirational sources. Much of the knowledge that religion purveyed has come to be recognized as false: one needs think only of the dubious cosmological, anatomical, biological, and geological implications of much biblical literature. And where such matter is not actually seen as false, it is none the less equally regarded as irrelevant to contemporary public life. As the content and method of scientific knowledge has proved itself pragmatically, so in many areas it has superseded belief in or recourse to supernatural sources. The credibility of the remaining elements of religious teaching – doctrinal, devotional, and moral – suffers from the loss of credibility of the testable but falsifiable accounts of the physical and social world as the Bible presents them.

Modern culture derives its impetus largely from secular sources. Our ways of thinking, our moral perceptions, our values, and our emotional repertoire are formed under the influence less of specific ideologies than in response to the structure of the social order which, with increasingly sophisticated techniques, we have devoted our energies to creating. Again, it is possible to do no more than to illustrate such a thesis by a few examples that touch the issue at various points. Let me allude first to the process of industrialization and technologization of modern life, and attendant urbanization. Modern economy organizes individuals into role systems. Work is structured by increased specialization, and the role becomes the means by which diverse specialist skills are coordinated. Wide areas of social life are arranged in such role relationships, and each individual contributes in his role to the creation of a rational structure in which men play segmented parts, and in which all personal attributes and dispositions are as far as possible set aside. Relationships become de-personalized. Our megacities with their frantic commuter traffic, and the intense growth of communication (of all kinds, from fax machines to modern tourism) all intensify the process. In large areas of their lives, men learn to live in desiccated contexts of machine-like order, and only here and there squeeze out a little of the lubricating oil of human emotion to reduce the aridity and the stress of so much dehumanized interaction.

Given such a context, spiritual values and religious perspectives find little public space for their expression. The Christian religion, like other religions, seeks to operate with total persons and to transform man's relationships by promoting human dispositions and by stimulating bonds of mutual sympathy.

When roles replace people there is little possibility of introducing religious orientations, since these are alien to the rational patterns of action which role performances epitomize. What Weber said of Catholicism in regard to capitalism might stand in considerable degree for all religions and all modern technological systems, capitalist or socialist. He wrote:

*The typical antipathy of Catholic ethics, and following that of the Lutheran, to every capitalistic tendency, rests essentially on the repugnance of the impersonality of relations within a capitalist economy. It is this fact of impersonal relations which places certain human affairs outside the Church and its influence, and prevents it from penetrating them and transforming them along ethical lines.*

(Weber, 1961, 262)

To turn to a different facet of contemporary society, the communication of values, norms, lifestyles (one can scarcely any longer say "customs") is now effected through mass media of simultaneous transmission. Their influence is more instantaneous, societally encompassing, dramatic, and technically assured than all earlier modes of communication. The media, by virtue of their technological sophistication and the resources that they can command, are themselves glamorous and prestigious. They are accorded authority, believed as authentic voices which somehow transcend normal human processes of debate and discourse. Compare their technological brilliance with the lacklustre performance of many clergy: consider their resources in contrast with what the churches can provide by way of modern equipment. In accordance with their concern with individual redemption and interpersonal reconciliation, the clergy rely on direct contact and personal presence: in consequence, they reach few people at any one time, and often do so as relatively ineffectual communicators, scarcely to be compared to the skilled professionals of the mass media.

The media are not merely communication agencies of a technologically advanced kind engaged in the transmission and diffusion of information. Because of the powerful institutions which they have evolved, they have, willy nilly, created a culture of their own, with its own values and priorities, heroes and, no less equally accepted, villains. They operate impersonally in perfect congruity with the increasing depersonalization of the role-articulated social system. But they also imitate communal culture and manipulate the symbols of a more intimate and personal world. The media create synthetic identities and bogus communities which caricature social reality. For some of their public, these creations command an interest and respect which rivals that accorded to real persons and real relationships. So influential is the mirage that is produced that

the actors in TV dramas (who in a double sense are themselves merely role-players) become celebrities because of the parts that they play. Their private lives and characters become subsidiary to the fictional cast, and they become identified as a type of public property bound up with the synthetic characters of entertainment performances. The home-video has taken the development further in catering to those preoccupied more with images than with the reality of events and relationships. These devices permit people to distance themselves from the real world by making experience subordinate to recollected representations. The woman who insisted that her daughter's marriage ceremony take place a second time because she found that her video machine had failed to work, was only expressing commitment to the new cultural values in which the image is esteemed higher than the actuality.

In reinforcing the depersonalizing features of modern culture, the influence of television also functions to render traditional religious values otiose and incongruous. The assault is unintentional, but no less emphatic for that. Consciously, television authorities sometimes seek the goodwill of the Churches by providing, voluntarily, commercially, or because required by governments to do so, time for religious programmes. Just what might happen to the intrinsic religious quality of religion when it uses television as its medium is illustrated by the American experience. Television preachers become preoccupied with the need to raise money to pay for programmes, for time on the air, and for the staff who service the operation. Who would say that the American experience of television religion had resulted in the enhanced spirituality of that nation, of the sponsoring organizations, or even of the viewing public? But, even were religion not to be intrinsically affected by the use of the medium, the time allotted to it in itself derogates from its mission. It becomes just one among many competing presentations, allocated short time-slots at unpropitious hours between rival programmes, almost all of which are technically superior and of wider public appeal. The voice of religion – which once had a near monopoly of authorized communication of cultural values – becomes just one among many, and a weak and unappealing voice at that.

If the changing technological structure of modern society has cultural consequences which in various ways are inimical to received religious values, so, more directly, has the changing character of the economic order. Christianity was a creed which interpreted the common experience of scarcity, hardship, and the struggle for survival in terms of its own theodicy. It attributed much of man's misery to his inherent sinfulness, and it promoted asceticism as the appropriate course by which salvation might be approached. This world was a place of trial, a vale of tears, a probationary ordeal determining prospects for an infinitely longer afterlife to which far more importance was attached. For



centuries, the Christian Church depicted social life as an arena in which self-restraint was to be cultivated, and the other-regarding virtues of longsuffering, forbearance, conciliation, and charity were to be practised. The representation of this world as corrupt, a place in which people suffered, conformed to man's general social experience. Asceticism was well-attuned to conditions in which men struggled to wrest a livelihood from a recalcitrant and parsimonious nature which jeopardized man's existence with recurrent drought, famine, flood, plague, and pestilence. The values which Christianity infused into the culture were the values of austerity and self-denial, well-adapted to societies in which scarcity prevailed as a common condition and in which over-consumption was a constant threat. Economics and ethics were in harmony: religion decreed exactly the restraints which economic circumstances demanded, and these were restraints entirely congruent with the general interdictions which formed the basis of the culture.

Accelerated technical advance, industrialization, followed by agricultural and electronics revolutions, have transformed the economic realities of Western society. Heightened and easier productivity has rendered scarcity a marginal phenomenon in these societies, and has opened the way for the emergence of a leisure culture. Ever-rising living standards have eviscerated the economic *raison d'être* of the old Christian asceticism. Relative abundance and unprecedented affluence render the counsels of virtuous austerity not only incongruous but even potentially disruptive of economic well-being. The emphasis has shifted from the demand that gratifications be postponed, savings made and capital accumulated, to the need to induce high levels of consumption, and indeed of conspicuous waste (think only of agricultural policies of "set aside"), so that demand continues to consume all that is produced. The ascetic ethic is abandoned and, indeed, overturned. Hedonism is consonant with the economy's needs, but hedonism has no religious endorsement. The entertainment culture of our times propounds a doctrine of perpetual enjoyment – radio and television perform all day and most of the night. We have a huge and elaborate industry engaged solely in the purported production of pleasure. To augment its efforts, an advertising industry, commanding vast wealth and enormous capacity to influence the masses, has grown up to promote the new values and to use entertainment as its lure with which to persuade people to spend, to buy, to indulge themselves as fully as possible.

The road from Christian asceticism to commercial hedonism has been quickly traversed. The new values are now in place and are canvassed incessantly by voices and techniques far more powerful than any which the Churches have ever commanded. Pleasure is a virtually unchallenged right (and we live in an age when human rights are given far greater prominence than human virtues,

or even than human duties). The relinquishment of the ascetic ethic has seen the sharp decline in the religious contribution to culture. The culture – without any conscious recourse to explicit secularism – has been effectively secularized, since hedonism is essentially a humanist man-centred teaching which replaces the old God-centred conception of the norms of human comportment. Nor has the process been confined solely to the realm of consumption and consumerism. With the abandonment of interdictions related to economic matters, other restraints have also been swept away: the relinquishing of ascetic virtue in one area has inevitably led to its collapse in others. The entire system of proscription of what was not to be done – not to be done by divine command – has been undermined. The requirements of the Decalogue are almost all ignored, and the injunctions of the New Testament are heeded almost as little. The religious underpinnings of traditional culture have largely disintegrated, leaving us with a different set of values, disseminated by different agents, operating in a society increasingly constituted on quite alien lines.

If, as I have argued, modern culture has wrested itself largely free of religious influences, can religion hold itself aloof from the influence of contemporary culture? The answer must surely be that it cannot. The shift to the vernacular in the Roman church mass; the introduction, in Anglicanism, of a prayer book in modern, not to say vulgar, English, were conscious attempts to recover what was seen as religion's loss of relevance for modern society. Prosperity Theology is another development which illustrates the influence of secular values – in this case, consumer values – on contemporary religion: the “name it and claim it” gospel adds a quasi-magical religious endorsement to the secular concern with the enjoyment of affluence.

Perhaps more telling than any of these conscious endeavours to modernize religion has been one that was unplanned. Paradoxically, the very style of contemporary religiosity that has been hailed by some as an agency of cultural reformation (along more spiritual lines) in Latin America might, in more advanced societies, be invoked as an evidence of the transformation of religion by secular cultural currents. I refer to the espousal by many Churches of charismatic renewal. This movement embraces radical features of contemporary culture. Emerging contemporaneously with the 1960s hippy culture, it shared the demand for instant experience, informality, loose and spontaneous expression, anti-intellectualism, and the implicit threat to structural institutional order, all of which characterized the hippy movement. It set aside the centuries of religious culture – the learning, the artistic symbolism, the eloquent language of liturgy, and the embellished musical tradition. If the Holy Spirit might speak to any and all individuals directly, without mediation, then the role of the priest and the counsel of the pastor might well be considered redundant. The charismatic



could be self-sufficient, and although many devotees were unaware of the implications, and although the logic of the case was never pursued (logic not being a strong point for charismatics), the institutional Church itself was implicitly under assault. Much of the style and mood of the charismatic movement were secular in inspiration, embracing the spirit of de-structuration of all established forms and institutions, and the denial of the religion-led culture of the past, and all this in the endeavour to create a religious expression congruent with contemporary secular culture. Despite its ecstatic religiosity, paradoxically, charismatic renewal might be seen as a secularising force.

The dominant response, in both Christianity and in Judaism, to the process of cultural change in Western societies has been an effort in some measure to adapt even at the risk of relinquishing fundamental values. A subsidiary response has occurred in the so-called privatization of religion, the confinement of religion to the arena of private life as a matter of individual choice (Bellah, 1985, 228). Nowhere has that development been more evident than in the growth of evangelical fundamentalism, especially in the United States where so many proclaim themselves to be “born-again” believers. This individualistic, if not, indeed, atomistic, form of religious expression (much influenced by televangelism) amounts to the abandonment of the religious endeavour to exert direct influence over culture. Religious practices might be largely privatized, but by definition there can be no private culture, any more than there can be a private language (Rieff, 1966, 11). Privatized religion might continue to provide personal reassurance and solace, but the culture would go its own way, guided by forces not at all concerned with the conciliatory and humanizing concerns with which religion informed the culture of the past.

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