

Returning to Religion

Why a Secular Age is Haunted by Faith

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1

RELIGION AND PARARELIGION

The Religious and the Secular

'Cometh the man, cometh the hour' reads an old portrait postcard of David Beckham. Alcoholics Anonymous, widely regarded as offering one of the best programmes for mastering addiction, claims to serve 'the ultimate authority – a living God as He may express himself in our group conscience'. A management consultant in personal growth advertises himself as 'one of life's runaway experiments who goes around scaring people until they either ascend to a higher level of consciousness or flee naked into the desert screaming, "The horror, the horror" '. The Princess of Wales's death in a banal street accident takes on a sacrificial meaning, causing parts of London to be carpeted with flowers and Cellophane. A blockbusting novel and film are concocted from a clever counterfactual to the standard history of Christianity. 'Saint' Bob Geldof, as he is called in the press, stirs his fellow-musicians to try to give a new impetus to Third World aid. A more highbrow musician, the revered concert pianist Gregory Sokolov, waits till the audience has settled down and stopped coughing and snapping their handbags, before the lights dim and he prowls onto the stage, then seems to lift the whole of the Barbican concert hall out of earthly time with a Beethoven sonata. Yes – and politicians accuse their opponents of reciting 'mantras' or being 'true believers' or 'not singing from the same hymn sheet'. The vocabulary of religion and its imagery and overtones have spread across our society's secular institutions. Is this just a matter of surface vocabulary, or a sign of deeper infiltration? Has religion become a metaphor for everything but itself? And what do we mean by the 'religious' and the 'secular' anyway?

Thirty years ago, the 'secularization thesis' dominated sociology. It was a catch-all thesis with a number of variants. It could mean that secular spheres

differentiate from religious norms and institutions, and gain ascendancy over them. It could mean that religion is marginalized or becomes a purely private choice. It could mean that religious beliefs and practices decline: this is sometimes called ‘disenchantment’ or ‘desacralization’. It could mean that religions come to be seen as human creations. It could mean that religious movements adapt to the here-and-now world rather than otherworldly aspiration. It could mean that religions have to compete in a market of consumable ideologies. It could mean that correct practice rather than belief is emphasized – sometimes called orthopraxy as opposed to orthodoxy, or pejoratively (disregarding the view that good behaviour has moral value in itself) as ‘formalism’, that is to say adherence to outward observances at the expense of what are claimed to be their inward spirit and meaning.

I use the past tense because ‘secularization’ is no longer a buzzword: we might indeed call it a plonk-word. Social scientists taught, thirty years ago, that the main markers that divided people were class, ethnicity, gender, age, language and political ideology. Few of them predicted such events as the Islamist revolution in Iran, the *Satanic Verses* controversy in 1988, the important contribution of the Roman Catholic Church to defeating Soviet communism, the revival of the Orthodox Church in Russia, the continuing power of the religious Right in the USA. It is now commonplace to warn that – along with the risks of global warming, the precariousness of the financial system, and pandemic diseases – the risk of a clash of religious civilizations is one of the greatest facing the world, much to the disgust of most academic analysts, who despise the theory either as simply misguided or as possibly becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There is some degree of truth in many plonk-words. All the aspects of secularization mentioned above are observable realities in various contexts; but this is tricky territory to argue on. Formal, regular religious observance is far more widespread in the world’s leading industrial nation, the USA, than in Europe. It has been argued that Britain and western Europe, not the USA, are the world exception with their pronounced secularizing trend, especially among the young. But even in England – where only some 10 to 15 per cent of the population regularly attend Christian churches, and the ‘established’ State church faces financial pressures with dwindling congregations and a top-heavy hierarchy – it has been estimated that at least 80 per cent of funerals still include some kind of religious service. This book does not aspire to compete with many distinguished texts in the sociology of religion that have argued against simple versions of the secularization thesis. Any study of American religion has to take account, in particular, of the synthesizing force of Robert Wuthnow’s publications, especially his analysis of the transformations of religion in the United States since the Second World War. He emphasizes the accelerated social experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s that resulted from the State’s expansion of higher education

and threatened the authority of traditional denominations; the political polarization (between conservative and liberal) of the traditional Christian churches; and the continued role of religion in fostering community spirit and compassion. The social experimentation which Wuthnow describes included a new spirit of tolerance and egalitarianism, freer life-styles and an awareness of civil rights – and a spate of new religious movements. Whereas religious conservatives reacted, sometimes fiercely, against these trends, ‘liberal churches and liberal religious periodicals, in contrast’, Wuthnow writes, ‘have been much more likely to ask what can be learnt from the new religions’. If California was the capital of social experimentation in the 1960s and 1970s, a comparable restructuring of religion may be observed in most industrial countries. Whereas it is common to write of religious affiliations as obeying market forces, we must also note an element of convergence as different suppliers compete to offer rather similar products.

We have adopted here a well-trying manoeuvre of cultural anthropology – following a number of writers on religion rather outside the sociological mainstream – which is to set out to unsettle prior assumptions; in particular, about the definition of religion. It is, I suggest, only through recognizing that it cannot be precisely defined that we can begin to understand it.

Secularization is sustained by many intellectual trends. Darwinism in particular is perhaps the only ‘big idea’ of the nineteenth century to have survived relatively intact, confirmed and refined by the advance of genetics, and it is a guiding force behind modern biology. The Roman Catholic Church made a fuzzy peace with Darwinism many years ago, but Pope Benedict XVI has been too intelligent not to put out signals that he recognizes serious problems of compatibility between Catholic doctrine and natural selection as applied to human beings. (One problem is that, according to Catholicism, no animal has a soul, but if I am descended from hominid and primate ancestors, at some generational point in time God must have intervened to grant them one.) Many American Protestant churches, supported by some other Christian affiliations, promote creationism or the more euphemistic ‘intelligent design’ as an alternative to the disruptive threat of Darwinism. Some Muslim intellectuals have made their point more rawly and view Darwinism as the main obstacle to faith and spirituality, on the grounds that it elevated a ‘bestial postulate’ to the status of dogmatic truth. I have seen an Islamist shop window in Istanbul wholly devoted to posters in various languages denouncing Darwinism as responsible for all the ills of the twentieth century including Stalinism and nazism.

The word ‘secular’ (in French, *laïque*) stands for everything that is not religious, and all of us know what religion is. But do we? Originally, the distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ was a distinction within Christendom between the monastic orders and extra-monastic churches and priests. A growing body of research suggests that whereas everyone knows

what he or she means by religion, it is more of a 'folk category' than an objective term. (Much would-be-subtle discussion of the relationship between the secular and the religious could have been avoided if it had been grasped that, just as the word 'religion' has changed its precise meaning in different times and places, so the word 'secular', basically its antonym or opposite, has mirrored the changes.) A number of linked arguments have been put forward that should make one feel nervous when using the term.

First, precise definitions of religion are leaky. It is often claimed that religion necessarily entails belief in a divine being or beings. But Buddhism does not entail such a belief. Ritual is probably an essential component of religion – albeit pared down and mistrusted by some groups such as the Quakers – but it is also essential to many other spheres of life such as warfare, law and the arts, all of which have historical links with the sphere of religion but are now, in industrial societies, largely autonomous.

Second, the definition of religion is political. It is a legitimating claim, a discursive strategy. For instance, is Scientology a religion? No according to the Charity Commissioners in Britain, as we will see in Chapter 2, but yes according to the tax authorities in the USA, while the authorities in France and Germany are actively hostile to it. The same ambiguity applies to the Brazilian fusion of popular Catholic and west belief systems, Candomblé, to the syncretic Vietnamese movement, Cao Dai, to the Falun Gong in east Asia and to many others. Defining the limits of religion – as against 'cults' and 'sects' and 'superstitions', with their pejorative overtones – is to exercise a form of power. Religion used to be an intrinsically coercive activity, as its Latin etymology, 'binding', suggests, and the emphasis on subjective spirituality as the presumed essence of religion is relatively recent in history.

Third, it is owing to the specialization of roles and discourses in the West that 'religion' has come to occupy a defined sphere. In medieval Indian temple sculpture, for instance, religion and aesthetics and eroticism seem to have been inseparable from one another. The thirteenth century Surya Temple at Konarak on the east coast, probably the centre of a Tantric cult, is embellished by a multitude of filigree sculptures of men and women in couples, whose erotic physicality cannot be separated analytically from their spiritual significance as symbolizing ecstatic reunion with the divine. The concept of Hinduism as a singular religion is only a few centuries old, borrowed from the Arabic name for India (*al-hind*). The concept of religion is indeed peculiar to language families influenced by Latin, and has no exact equivalent elsewhere. The European concept of privileged institutional religion, after being imposed as a consequence of European hegemony on countries such as India, China and which it did not fit exactly, has now come to be accepted as operative on a global scale. Yet many Muslims contend that Islam is not 'merely' a religion but also a seamless whole encompassing

politics, economics and morality. Judaism, too, is often seen as culture rather than religion.

Fourth, Christianity, especially in its Protestant forms, and much of mainstream Islam, attach more importance to belief, as an essential of religion, than, say, Judaism (which emphasizes particularly the moral law) and Confucianism (which emphasizes the proper exercising of social roles). The Catholic Church enjoins assent – to its own institutional tradition, the ‘magisterium’. This is close to one of the dominant connotations of the Arabic noun *islām*, i.e. submission to the will of God – and does not necessarily imply that believers have explored for themselves every item of their creed.

It has even been argued that religion has no valid existence as a concept outside the academic discipline of Religious Studies, and that the term should be avoided completely. The ingenious argument may be put that there is no such thing anyway as strictly analytical categories: according to this view, analytical categories are merely the ‘folk’ categories of a particular group, i.e. in this case academic students of religion. This however is a counsel of despair. It is an illusion to think that extreme precision is indispensable or even possible when one is discussing the subtler aspects of human experience. Nor can one escape the problem of definition by substituting for ‘religion’ other words such as ‘faith’ or ‘spirituality’. These terms import their own problems: to start with, both exclude the institutional aspects of religion. Indeed, when citizens of advanced industrial societies say, as many of them do, that they are by inclination spiritual, but not religious, I argue that those who feel affinity with the former as opposed to the latter are merely saying that they would like to decant the pure essence of religion from its institutional sediment. (In fact, new institutions emerge to compete with the more established ones.) It is a fallacy to think that by defining words precisely one can guarantee lucidity of thought, for thoughts are expressed in sentences rather than words. Most non-European languages had no word exactly corresponding to our ‘religion’ until the nineteenth century.

Moreover, contrary to the view of some religious apologists that questioning of religious dogma began only with the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the anthropologist Jack Goody has shown that a ‘kernel of doubt’ can be detected in diverse historical traditions. These include not only some of the Sophists and Sceptics of the ancient classical world, but also the Sanskrit *Rigveda* of the second millennium BCE:

Non-being then existed not nor being:
 There was no air, nor sky that is beyond it,
 What was concealed? Wherein? In whose protection?
 And was there deep unfathomable water?

According to Goody, gods can only be described in language, and doubt about their existence is built into the language used to describe them. The historian Georges Minois has even argued – though his selection of data is limitingly Christocentric – that atheism, since the origins of humanity, was ‘one of the two big ways of seeing the world: a world without the supernatural, a world where man stands alone to confront himself and a nature ruled by immutable laws. The atheist detects the subterfuge behind the concept of God, and denounces it’.

The problem here is to convert the ‘folk category’ of religion – which always means different things to different people – into an analytical category; in other words, to borrow the jargon of anthropology, to turn an ‘emic’ (insider) category into an ‘etic’ (outsider) category. I think this can be done, and attempt to do so in Chapter 2.

The Religious Inclination

The starting-point of this book is that a ‘religious inclination’ is essential for the functioning of any society. Many writers from different viewpoints have argued this. (It may be that this inclination is biologically determined, but such a view is speculative and my argument does not depend on it.)

Erich Fromm (1900–80) was both a psychoanalyst and a member of the Frankfurt School of critical social theorists. However, unlike nearly all his distinguished colleagues, he was sympathetic to religion. If every society, he thought, needs what he called a ‘framework of orientation’ or ‘object of devotion’, the consequences, when traditional objects of devotion are withdrawn or disappear, can be disastrous – leading to such aberrations in the twentieth century as nazism and Stalinism. He described this condition in a figurative way as a form of ‘necrophilia’. Other examples of this, for Fromm, were worship of false gods such as megamachines, or treating people as things, or reckless consumerism.

For Clifford Geertz the anthropologist, it is an intrinsically human trait to try to make sense of our lives and to ward off the threatening experience of meaninglessness:

Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it.

All schools of Marxism have adopted a reductive approach to religion, which is held ultimately to reflect economic relations of domination, though on occasion to provide opportunities for challenging domination – as in the historical cases of the English nonconformist churches or Latin American

guerrilla priests. Neo-Marxism uses a powerful intellectual tool when it claims that the ruling class represses – in the psychoanalytic sense – what determines it, that is to say economic relations of domination. This applies not only to religion as such but to all ‘ideology’, in the pejorative Marxian sense, that is to say systems of ideas that make the interests of the ruling class appear to be in the interests of all. It is possible to apply this insight not merely to traditional capitalist societies but to communist and post-communist societies, which in practice are equally stratified. But according to neo-Marxism, all analysis eventually comes back to the primacy of political economy over ideas. Neo-Marxism considers ‘idealism’ – in the technical philosophical sense of non-acceptance of materialism, not the other, popular sense of a quest for perfection – to be an intellectual fallacy.

However, I would like to turn this argument on its head and suggest that the ‘religious inclination’ is repressed in a secularizing society. Freud used the metaphor of energy displacement to account for the flow of individual emotions. We may feel a surge of unexpected anger, directed against another person, when – as Freud has made it easier for us to see – the real cause for it may well be found in some emotional frustration of ours that has nothing to do with that individual. Freud conceives the psyche as a system of underground water pipes under pressure. Borrowing the structure of the Freudian metaphor but not the content, I suggest that the religious inclination is like a hydraulic system. If the taps are turned off at one outlet, and if the water finds a weak point in the pipes, it is likely to well up unexpectedly somewhere else. Or as Wuthnow puts it, ‘Religious sentiment does not simply wax and wane; it changes clothes and appears in garb to which we are sometimes unaccustomed. It may well be all around us, and yet we have not trained ourselves to recognize it’.

We may call these outlets or overflows parareligions. Other names that have been suggested are ‘quasi-religions’ or ‘religioid forms’, or ‘analogical’ or ‘implicit’ religion. The word parareligion has sometimes been used with pejorative intent to characterize ‘cults’ or ‘sects’ of which the writer disapproves, but I try to use it with strict neutrality, to mean movements or institutions that have some but not all the characteristics of religions in a stricter sense.

For the sake of this analysis, consideration of the truth-values of religions (or parareligions) will be sidestepped. This is the only tenable starting point for social scientists, because the aim of social science must be to find common ground for discussion. As a leading sociologist of religion, David Martin (though himself an ordained Christian), has observed, it is not feasible to ‘give a systematic account of the divine activity in our world’; so a kind of methodological agnosticism is necessary for social research. Clearly, the various religious doctrines disseminated in the world cannot all be true, but we can put in brackets for the time being the question of whether any

particular one is true. On the other hand, we do not need to assert that any particular religious doctrine is false. Even a doctrine that may appear far-fetched or implausible may be defended as an expression of a metaphorical or oblique truth. Nor, taking an agnostic position, do we need to argue, as some philosophers do, that the burden of proof ought to lie with religious believers rather than with atheists, atheism being according to this argument considered as a default position. Methodological agnosticism is, admittedly, a difficult position to maintain consistently – as will become clear later in this book when we come to consider parareligious phenomena that are widely considered to be contemptible or even evil.

Choice of any religious commitment is strongly influenced by social determinants as well as individual preference. A religious choice has two aspects. First, a choice of narrative, which may variously be characterized as a divine revelation, a prophecy, a historical record, or a myth (again, not in any pejorative sense). Second, an aesthetic choice. By aesthetics we mean in part the arts and ceremonies that have always fortified religion, and have often succeeded in stretching official doctrine into new and original shapes. But at a deeper level we equally mean all the acquired, embodied dispositions included in the sociological term ‘habitus’. Habitus has been well defined by an anthropologist as:

the self-developable means by which the subject achieves a range of human objects – from styles of physical movement (for example, walking), through modes of emotional being (for example, composure), to kinds of spiritual experience (for example, mystical states).

The concept of habitus therefore has both objective or observable, and subjective or phenomenological, aspects. One might suggest commonalities between the physical deportment of religious dignitaries across a range of cultures. Typically, they walk at a deliberate and slow pace, and allow themselves to smile or frown only in a restrained way, never to break into laughter or anger in public. Unless acknowledging or bestowing a greeting, they look straight ahead of them, as if lacking peripheral vision; and they wear special clothes indicating their status. By contrast, mystics and visionaries are expected to display signs of social marginality such as unkempt hair, a more rolling gait, a roving gaze, and contempt for finicky detail. (Jesus was evidently humorous by nature, especially when dealing with hecklers.) These may however all be ‘fronts’, in the nature of assumed theatrical roles, and deceptive as to the person’s state of mind. Subjective states of mind are continuously and no doubt necessarily brought into being by representations of other persons and their respective habitus: parents and siblings, friends and lovers, teachers and pupils, exemplary figures, such as

the Buddha or Jesus or Muhammad, whose behaviour in life the faithful seek to emulate.

Detours of the Religious Inclination: the Communist Period

Let us take a simple example of how the religious inclination finds new outlets when under compression: the life-cycle rituals and similar ceremonies developed in Russia and Bulgaria during the atheistic communist period. These hark back to the short-lived calendrical experiments of the French Revolution, with a series of annual holidays, the *sans-culottides*, dedicated to Genius, Labour, Noble Actions, Awards and Opinion – this last an intellectual saturnalia permitting unrestricted criticism of public figures.

In the 1970s Bulgaria was among the other socialist countries that copied the Soviet Russian system of ‘socialist holidays and rituals’. Ethnographers and folklorists helped a National Commission for Socialist Holidays and Rituals to introduce guidelines and a calendar based on Marxist theory, intended to cover all aspects of Bulgarian social life. Rituals associated with the ‘sphere of material production’ included, for instance, special days for the shepherd or the construction worker. The ‘sphere of familial consumption’ included a name-giving ritual instead of baptism. Emphasis was placed, according to a German scholar who analysed the system just before the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, ‘on the mother, on the local community and on the “Bulgarian fatherland”’. The room was decorated with flowers and the national colours, and the female officials might wear “elements of stylized national costume”’.

The narrative promoted by the Bulgarian State was the creation of a new humanity superseding Christianity, coupled with patriotism. Used to the elaborate sensorial appeal of the ceremonies of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, with its exaltation of the person of the priest as God’s representative, the population failed to respond whole-heartedly to these civic rituals, and their efflorescence was short. After 1990 the church soon regained its supremacy – albeit weakened by schism on account of the Patriarch’s record of alleged compliance with the communist authorities.

The Bulgarian communist example is one of attempted top-down imposition of parareligion on the people in the aid of a political ideology, with the help of pliable scholars. The nazis had attempted something similar, for instance trying to replace Christmas by a ‘winter festival’. But it would be a mistake to think that all such detours of the religious inclination are entirely top-down.

During the earliest phase of the Soviet regime, 1917–23, the Bolshevik leaders introduced new names for towns and streets, new forms of address (‘Comrade’), new flags and badges, and also new calendrical and life cycle ceremonies, often borrowing some of the ‘folk’ features of the past. A

sensitive chronicler of the ceremonies of these years, Christopher Binns, comments that they had ‘a fresh, spontaneous, improvised quality and an atmosphere of chaotic enthusiasm and communal feeling...’.

For instance, the May Day demonstrations of this period evoked not only the French Revolution with red banners, scarves and armbands, but also the Orthodox ‘Way of the Cross’. ‘In the early years country people often mistook Bolshevik processions for religious ones; the untutored peasants of one remote village, according to a contemporary report, “took off their hats and devoutly crossed themselves” on seeing the approach of people carrying colourful banners and portraits of august bearded figures’, in fact of Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders. The Komsomol (Union of Soviet Youth) activists organized ceremonies such as ‘renaming the factories’. After speeches and singing indoors, and the presentation of a banner,

... the crowd of people filed out of the shed, preceded by the banner, into the dark, autumn night and carrying firebrands, walked round the whole huge area of the Putilov works, stopping at the gates. To the accompaniment of singing and blows on an anvil the old sign was taken down and the new one put up. The procession moved on, stopping at the various workshops and sections. At other factories they carried a portrait of the new factory manager instead of a banner.

Trotsky argued that anti-religious propaganda alone could not satisfy ‘man’s desire for the theatrical’ and ‘his strong and legitimate need for an outer manifestation of emotion’, and predicted that over the decades new customs would develop through a process of natural selection, ‘without bureaucratization, i.e. compulsion from above’.

It was not to be. During a second Soviet phase, after the death of Lenin in 1924 till 1928, Trotsky began to be discredited and the carnival aspects of ceremonies were replaced by strict discipline. Meanwhile Lenin came to be deified. During a third phase, 1928–53, that of terror and punishment, numerous festivals were introduced but the cult of the leader, Stalin, came to be the principal embodiment of the hopes of the nation. Anti-religious propaganda was muted between 1941 and 1954, when Khrushchev resumed it and a new panoply of life-cycle rituals was introduced, but without the communal enthusiasm of the early Bolshevik period. Binns, writing at the end of the 1970s, showed how, though the framework of the ceremonies was imposed from above, the introduction of such institutions as ‘wedding palaces’ was highly popular and allowed for considerable regional and personal variation, sometimes incurring complaints from the Soviet press about extravagance: ‘It is sweet indeed for once to be treated with warmth and politeness by Soviet officials and to savour briefly the regal splendour of

these Palaces ..., where the carpeted staircase and elegant halls make the cramped fifth-floor flat seem far away'. In the post-Stalin period the effort to instil the glum doctrine of Marxism-Leninism among the people – whatever its appeal to intellectuals – proved a failure, and in Binns' words '...whatever the regime's intentions of extending its ideological control into family life and leisure, the actual conduct of these ceremonies has given expression to, and thereby encouraged, pluralism, individualism and consumerism, which undermine a centralist ideology'.

Detours of the Religious Inclination: Limiting Cases

A clear example of religioid activity avidly supported by the people is football, by which is here meant soccer – the dominant version of the game except in the USA, which is resistant to colonization by non-American sports. Huge financial interests dominate the game and the head of the much-criticized controlling institution, FIFA, has the influence of a head of State. Popular susceptibilities are undoubtedly manipulated by FIFA as much as by successful political movements. However, the extraordinary success of football as a transnational, transcultural movement evidently has the deepest roots. It is now a commonplace that football has some of the characteristics of a religion: demigods, hymns, ritual vestments, ecstatic experience, tribalism, visible praying by the players (with the palms joined for Christians, raised in the air for Muslims). In Glasgow, football still overlaps with Scottish Christian sectarianism in that one of the two leading clubs, Celtic, is still associated with Catholics and the other, Rangers, with Protestants. Like religion, football both unites and divides. At the time of the World Cup, a visiting Martian might be forgiven for inferring that Goal had replaced God. In Britain, football results are announced at the end of virtually every television news bulletin.

But if football has some clear religioid characteristics, and many of its supporters would claim that it does offer a kind of spiritual uplift (indeed it is known as 'the beautiful game'), it is clearly lacking in others. It cannot be said to offer a moral code or to enjoin altruism, for instance, though its bosses take some hesitant steps in this direction. Nor does it try to explain human beings' place in nature or help us come to terms with death. Its rules and folklore do not amount to a doctrine. It also belongs to the wider category of 'sport', which is both a major sector in the economy and part of the sphere of 'leisure', the antonym of 'work'. Another example would be the Olympic Games, with their opening fire ceremony and their historical roots in Ancient Greece, and the efforts by the movement to introduce a politically progressive and human rights dimension. So football and the Olympics are limiting cases. Is there any way that we can discuss parareligions more carefully?

Commerce and industry offer many examples of the religioid. Take the chorus of the IBM Rally Song of the 1930s:

EVER ONWARD – EVER ONWARD
 That's the spirit that has brought us fame!
 We're big, but bigger we will be,
 We can't fail, for all can see
 That to serve humanity has been our aim!
 Our products now are known in every zone,
 Our reputation sparkles like a gem!
 We've fought our way through – and new
 Fields we're sure to conquer too
 For the EVER ONWARD I.B.M.

Company songs are now out of fashion. However, today's extremely successful multi-level marketing (MLM) companies, which while being perfectly legal have a similar hierarchic structure to pyramid schemes, display religioid characteristics. Here is some of the wisdom of Mary Kay Ash (1918–2001), revered founder of the Mary Kay cosmetics company, which now has a global sales force of 1.6 million Independent Beauty Consultants, and an associated charitable foundation devoted to fighting cancers and ending domestic violence:

Do you know that within your power lies every step you ever dreamed of stepping, and within your power lies every joy you ever dreamed of seeing? Within yourself lies everything you ever dreamed of being. Become everything that God wants you to be. It is within your reach. Dare to grow into your dreams and claim this as your motto: Let it be me.

Another large MLM corporation, Nikken, specializing in magnetic therapy and other 'wellness' products, announces the Five Pillars of Health: a healthy body, a healthy mind, a healthy family, a healthy society and healthy finances. Amway (short for American Way), with more than 3 million distributors worldwide selling a range of products from dietary supplements to scouring sponges, has had to fend off charges of milieu control, pseudo-science, suppression of critical thinking, 'love-bombing' new recruits (with displays of group affection), and mafioso methods of dispute resolution and control.

These are also limiting cases of the religioid, and we lack useful tools for discussing them. But why should this matter?

Making Sense of Parareligion

Some movements, such as Scientology, lay claim to a religious status that is widely denied it by outsiders. Others, such as football, lay no claim to such status but they may appear to outside analysts to have several of the characteristics of religion. Again, other organizations, such as Mary Kay or Amway, appear to be deliberate attempts to mimic the more hierarchic forms of religion for purposes that are mainly commercial, though sometimes tinged with philanthropy.

Of special interest are those movements and organizations that may believe themselves to be motivated by purely rational considerations, whereas the truth is that their would-be rationality is haunted by the shadow of the irrational. The question also arises as to whether religion is fundamentally rational, as Pope Benedict XVI contends on behalf of Catholicism, and hence presumably wholly compatible with science, or fundamentally irrational, as Kierkegaard contended, or somewhere between the two. It seems unarguable, however, that even if Pope Benedict's controversial position is accepted, the rational is constantly apt to be undermined by the irrational.

To establish this point we can go back a hundred years to a lecture that Sir James Frazer gave to mark his appointment to the first chair in social anthropology in Britain, in which he wrote:

The smooth surface of cultured society is sapped and mined by superstition. Only those whose studies have led them to investigate the subject are aware of the depth to which the ground beneath our feet is thus, as it were, honeycombed by unseen forces. ... The surface of society, like that of the sea, is in perpetual motion; its depths, like those of the ocean, remain almost unmoved.

Frazer was thinking however of the 'grosser beliefs' of 'the vulgar' and assumed that scientific progress would eventually displace superstition and magic. For instance, he discussed in his great work *The Golden Bough* the supposed curative properties of mistletoe:

Whereas the Druids thought that mistletoe cured everything, modern doctors appear to think that it cures nothing. If they are right, we must conclude that the ancient and widespread faith in the medicinal virtue of mistletoe is a pure superstition based on nothing better than the fanciful inferences which ignorance has drawn from the parasitic nature of the plant, its position high up on the branch of a tree seeming to protect it from the dangers to which plants and animals are subject on the surface of the ground. ... As mistletoe cannot fall to the ground because it is rooted on the branch of a tree

high above the earth, it seems to follow as a necessary consequence that an epileptic patient cannot possibly fall down in a fit so long as he carries a piece of mistletoe in his pocket or a decoction of mistletoe in his stomach. Such a train of reasoning would probably be regarded even now as cogent by a large portion of the human species.

Indeed mistletoe traditions survive in the broad European folk memory, as well as being a focus of modern druidism. Mistletoe extracts are a widely used form of complementary medicine today, believed to have a value in strengthening the immune system against cancer and other diseases, though clinical tests so far have been inconclusive.

For a modern anthropologist, Alfred Gell (1945–97), the truth is more vertiginous than for Frazer. Gell argues that irrationality or magic haunts our most seemingly rational activities like a shadow. For Gell, magic is a way of getting something for nothing. He wrote of the ‘technology of enchantment’, which pervades our modern technology so that the two can be hard to distinguish. It includes mind-control, all the arts and creeds, advertising, public relations, ‘spin’. This is an extremely broad category, then, which includes not only most of the things that make life worth living, but also all the mechanisms – short of brute coercion – whereby people can be enslaved. Gell’s personal philosophy is that we can protect ourselves from this enslavement by means of play, willing submission to enchantment, and humour.

The proper disposal of human remains – almost a cultural universal – is a clear example of ‘magical’ defiance of brutish mortality, as if this could be defeated by the murmuring of sacred texts or the donation of wreaths. Reason tells us that what separates human beings from animals is precisely – short of some future extraordinary discoveries by neurobiologists – the elusive stuff, whether it is poetry or electronic bank transfers. So our cherishing of our loved ones’ perishable remains becomes one of humanity’s weakest points for ideological manipulation. All the major recognized religions prescribe funerary ceremonies. Insofar as these depend logically on explicit doctrinal premises, they cannot fairly be called ‘irrational’: for instance, the Eastern Orthodox Church and Orthodox Judaism require burial and forbid cremation as it defies the doctrine of the general resurrection of the body (the Catholic Church having somewhat relaxed its position on the matter). However, it is also clear that much contemporary concern with burials and bones is closely related to nationalism, for instance with the televising of military funerals, or the demands for repatriation of the bones of indigenous people such as the Maori from Western museums where they had been preserved as scientific specimens. The case of Israel, strongly committed towards repatriation of Jews for burial in the Jewish homeland, is

merely an extreme example because of the Zionist movement's need to vindicate what has been called the 'will to rebirth of this old–new people in its old–new land'. Even in the secularizing West, indifference to the proper treatment of dead bodies or body parts is generally condemned as an outrage, regardless of any specific religious beliefs.

Death is widely 'brushed under the carpet' in Western consumer societies, where the prolongation of youth is a major industry that includes cosmetics and perfume, plastic surgery, dieting and exercising. Arguably, keeping old age, decay and death at bay with the aid of this huge industry is a means of confronting death through its negation, and therefore has a parareligious aspect, with Elizabeth Arden the beautician and Pierre-François Guerlain the perfumer exemplifying a line of prophets.

Public concern for the proper treatment of a dead body, even among those who practise no formal religion and count themselves unsuperstitious, is one example of magical thinking in Gell's sense. We may also argue that when groups of mourners gather at a funeral to pay respects to the memory of someone we respect and love, we are capable of rising to a height of moral awareness that few other occasions inspire. We willingly submit to a ceremony that acknowledges the irrational in all of us in its concentration on mortal remains, according to the aesthetic preferences with which we feel socially comfortable, while the mourning ritual does its work not for the dead but for the living in stimulating cohesion and empathy.

The same is true of an institution that is deeply vulnerable to criticism on purely rational grounds, and incorporates a marked element of magical thinking: monarchy. Rationalist arguments against it include the following. Monarchies emerged in hierarchic societies based on the hereditary principle, and are anachronistic in our contemporary meritocracies. In traditional monarchies, the throne was closely associated with the State religion – as it still is in Buddhist Thailand or Muslim Morocco, and still was in Britain when Queen Elizabeth II was anointed as the sovereign in 1953 – and it begins to be less sustainable in secularizing, multicultural societies. It is hard for a child crown prince to be brought up in the media spotlight of celebrity worship without psychological risk. The bounty of monarchs is a confidence trick, as their money is not actually earned in the normal way. And so on. However, a monarch who well understands his or her role, as do Queen Elizabeth or even the Emperor of Japan (though his powers are sharply circumscribed as a result of the Second World War), is sometimes able to underwrite political stability, and many believe that the value of this makes all the disadvantages of monarchy tolerable. A major part of that role is one of responding to magical thinking and maintaining the aura of majesty while also embodying a commitment to cohesive moral values. A similar role is fulfilled in republics: in the United States or France by the rhetoric of freedom, human rights and democracy; in Indonesia, by that of *pancasila* or

religious tolerance. These are on the face of it more rational political values than those of monarchy, but are no less liable to be used to obfuscate political and economic relationships of domination.

Europe's surviving monarchies do not seem to be under threat. In the Ancient Near East, gods had the characteristics of kings, but they did not only inspire fear and reverence: they were also seen as defenders of the disinherited and downtrodden. It would be a mistake to sentimentalize this role, for one of the penalties of occupying a throne is the risk of becoming a scapegoat when things go wrong, or even of being sacrificed – as Frazer famously described in *The Golden Bough*, and as the beheadings of Charles I of England and Louis XVI of France exemplify. In a limited monarchy such as the British, the incumbent is wise to allow ambitious politicians to aspire to the sacred status of sovereignty, rather than seeking to monopolize it for the throne itself, because eventually the politicians are likely to overreach and be deposed. Political power is always closely allied to the numinous.

It is no part of my argument to belittle the importance of science and scientific method. Science is the application of reason, but reason must include the rational study of the irrational. This is not to glorify the irrational – which leads to aberrations such as fascism that wilfully exploit violent human emotions – but to seek to understand it rationally. Moreover, claims to rationality are frequently used as bludgeons in an argument – just as much as invocations of God, Nature or human rights. Some anthropologists, such as Paul Rabinow, have devoted much of their careers to studying expressions of modernizing rationality – whether urban planning or laboratory science – with a similar method to that which more traditional anthropologists have applied to exotic societies. Yet the aim of anthropologists such as Rabinow, on the whole, is not to undermine science but to enrich it by exposing how its practice is influenced by power relations and metaphysical complacency.

The next chapter will propose a more precise way of discussing religion and parareligion, accepting that total precision is impossible.