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## Segerstedt on We-Feeling: A Refinement of Comfort-Challenge

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The article focuses on "we-feeling" — a concept which blends aesthetic and sociological elements — as an index to a prime function of religious institutions. Employing Torgny T. Segerstedt's suggestions regarding "we-feeling," it assesses and refines the proposals of a recent study, *To Comfort and to Challenge*, by American authors Glock, Ringer, and Babbie. From both standpoints it contends that "we-feeling" is an indispensable characteristic of religion. It argues that groups retain a religious identity to the measure that they sustain "we-feeling" in the other functions in which they might also be engaged.

On several recent occasions, and in a manner which provocatively interweaves gleanings from social psychology, aesthetics, and linguistic analysis, Torgny T. Segerstedt, the distinguished Rector of Uppsala University, has called new attention to the concept of "we-feeling" in articulating dimensions of interaction in the social order. In his address to the International Congress on Aesthetics in August, 1968, for example, Dr. Segerstedt talked about "we-feeling" in assigning social and cultural tasks to the artist.<sup>1</sup> The artist, he said, is one who makes "we-feeling" conscious, and provides the ingredients for a future awareness of "we-feeling." Similarly, in his book, *The Nature of Social Reality*, a work which approaches a full-scale "morphology of society," Segerstedt places the concept of "we-feeling" in an intricate, larger schematic framework.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, my interest in Segerstedt's proposals is partial. I am not simply concerned about the place "we-feeling" might occupy in social theory per se, in the school of symbolic interactionism, or even in the so-called Uppsala School. Instead, I would like to extend the concept beyond the contexts of its origins, and consider "we-feeling" as a bridging term of potentially large resourcefulness. I am especially interested in the way in which the concept is formed by a combination of sociological and aesthetic elements. And I am intrigued by the prospect that this socio-aesthetic alignment might shed new light on the complexion and function of religious institutions in given societies. It strikes me that Segerstedt's portrayal of "we-feeling" contains certain keys which enable the analyst of the functions and roles of religious institutions to say much better and clearer what has already been pointed to from a variety of other standpoints. In short, I shall suggest that the investment in the aesthetic category gives the concept a clarifying sensitivity to the social functions of religious institu-

tions. In utilizing that scheme to make those functions more precise, I would also like to entertain the possibility that religion is indeed "we-feeling" of a refined sort. If these assumptions are sound, they lend force to the contention that a religious institution maintains its identity as "religious" to the measure that it sustains "we-feeling" in the socializing, reproductive, and productive functions in which it is engaged. But instead of listing such suggestions in abstract and naked fashion, I should like to place Segerstedt's proposals against the background of the fundamental contentions of the recent book *To Comfort and to Challenge* by the American scholars Charles Y. Glock, Benjamin B. Ringer, and Earl R. Rabbie.<sup>3</sup>

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As indicated earlier, Segerstedt's conception of "we-feeling" belongs generally to the so-called symbolic interactionist school in social psychology. In his Introduction to *The Nature of Social Reality*, Segerstedt acknowledges his kinship with this school and the similarity between his views and interests and those of George H. Mead, Charles H. Cooley, W. I. Thomas, Jean Piaget, and other frequently-cited representatives. Indicating, however, that his interests go in a number of additional directions, Segerstedt also notes that his position has been stimulated by the writings of Willard V. O. Quine, R. H. Braithwaite, F. H. Bradley, and Ernst Cassirer. On previous occasions, he has acknowledged the large presence of Axel Hägerstrom as the key precipitant of the Uppsala manner.<sup>4</sup> He is quick to add, though, that none of the aforementioned sociologists, philosophers, language analysts, and symbolologists are responsible for his views. From all of this, however, the reader can anticipate that Segerstedt will approach social theory by turning first to the symbolic or communicative aspects of human behavior:

... the starting-point for sociological science is the social anthropological observations that people behave habitually in certain situations, and that this habitual behaviour varies from community to community in such a way that it is hardly probable that the variations have biological causes. In addition, one might call attention to the common experience that people cooperate and influence each other mutually according to a fixed behaviour pattern. It could even be asserted that everyday observations establish the fact that there are different degrees and types of understanding and contact between people in interaction.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Segerstedt is interested in signs as determinations of social roles, social interactants as carriers of symbols of belief and attitude, and communication both as an agent and as a diagnostic indicator of social change and stability. For Segerstedt, Hans Zetterberg, and a variety of others, all of these interests focus on the group structures which emerge from the symbolic levels of human interaction. The symbolic levels have this formative ability because they are composed by group reaction-to as well as perception-of reality. As he has written in another place:

It is mainly through the linguistic inheritance that our image of reality grows forth and becomes structures. The emotional reaction towards the object is part of this structural growth. Our perception of reality, colored by various evaluations, is thus associated with our verbal habits and determined by the group and culture of which we are members.<sup>6</sup>

Words, therefore, are symbols which denote both the object of perception and behavior toward that object. Determination and reaction belong to the same inter-communicative act.

In the main, then, “we-feeling” is a token of the presence of a common symbolic environment.<sup>7</sup> Segerstedt states that the common symbolic environment is necessary if the common goals of a group are going to be realized.

The aim of all socialization is to create such a common social medium; without a common medium stratification is impossible; if there are no common symbols we do not have strata but different groups.<sup>8</sup>

And, it is out of this common symbolic environment that the work of the artist takes form. Presumably, the artist is able to articulate “we-feeling” because he is gifted with a special kind of access to the symbolic levels of human interaction. He knows how to summarize, to draw together, the group’s symbolic inheritance, and he has the capacity to symbolize the lineaments of present group commonality. Similarly, because of his sensitivity to the common symbolic environment, the artist also has a feel for the shape of things to come. He is able to articulate present “we-feeling,” and can cultivate the art of facilitating future “we-feeling.” Or, in other words, in addition to being able to make present “we-feeling” conscious, the artist is party to the creative process by which consciousness of group identity is formed by reactions-to and determinations-of new situations. The artist has this two-dimensional role because symbolic interaction serves to effect social stability and to instigate social change.

It should be said that application of Segerstedt’s conceptions of the symbolic environment to the discussion of the way in which religious factors register in the social order must be done by extrapolation. The author of *The Nature of Social Reality* makes frequent references, when citing examples, to religious phenomena. But his few scant clues about the way in which his proposals can be referred to religious institutions are left largely undeveloped. Someone else must make the applications.<sup>9</sup> Yet there are some clues.

Segerstedt first mentions the concept of “we-feeling” in his book when he attempts to sort out the several *functions* of social institutions. He sees three possible functions: 1) reproduction; 2) production; and 3) socialization. Institutions like the family and other kinship groups exercise a reproductive function. Schools and other educational organizations bear a socializing role. Such cultural phenomena as factories, trade unions, employer’s organizations, and the like, represent productive functions. Furthermore, such groups or social institutions reflect *goals* in addition to functions. Segerstedt distinguishes two kinds of goals: 1) operational, and 2) emotional. Emotional goals have reference to the manner according to which the group achieves and maintains its own identity and cohesiveness. Operational goals coordinate the activities of the group members, and point them toward something outside the group, namely, toward that which the group is endeavoring to effect. Emotional goals, on the other hand, are to be found inside the group, and refer to the group’s bond of togetherness.

The use which can be made of these sketches of functions and goals derives in large part from Segerstedt’s attempt to weave the two schemes together. He cautions that the relation between function and goal is very complicated. And yet the two sets of distinctions can be correlated. Segerstedt believes, for example, that an operational goal is an expression of the productive function of a social organism. In the same way, the emotional goal belongs to the socializing function. And, it is by reference to this precise correlation of categories — the emotional goal with the socializing function — that a basis is laid for the concept of “we-feeling.” “We-feeling” is described as a “feeling of mutual interdependence, that is, a feeling that all members belong to the same social medium.” In another passage Segerstedt writes:

The cohesiveness of a group may be said to have a value in itself. Its great importance is above all demonstrated if the group or the goal of the group is in danger. The best example is when a nation or state feels itself threatened by an outside enemy; all internal disputes about operational goals are put aside and the members are united in a common cause to save the values common to all.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, one can find in this paradigm the terminology which would enable Segerstedt to assign the artist a specific role: potentially, the work of the artist can express the content of the group's "we-feeling." The artist, like the educator, is party to the explication of the group's underlying awareness of cohesiveness. This, of course, is another way of speaking about the disclosure of the common symbolic environment. In bringing that level of interaction into corporate consciousness, the painter, sculptor, musician, or dramatist becomes a key practitioner of the socializing art. And here also, it seems, lies the social occasion for religion. Religion, too, has an investment in the common symbolic environment in which reaction and determination of reality is effected. Religion, too, is formed by the instrumentation and content of "we-feeling."

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I shall turn to an example about which much has been written already and much more promises to be written, namely, the contentions of Glock, Ringer, and Babbie in the book *To Comfort and to Challenge*. As is already well known, on the basis of a detailed statistical survey of the activities in which several New England Episcopal churches were engaged, the authors observe that religious institutions (i.e. churches) attest to two functions. The conflicts between these two functions form the "dilemma of the contemporary church" (as the subtitle of the book phrases it). To the function of comfort belongs the provision of rest, quiet, or support to those who face the uncertainties and instabilities of human life. In that context the church functions as the agent of comfort. Through its graces, for example, it conveys forgiveness of sins, reaffirms a basis of human hope, and gives promise of eternal life. To the function of challenge belong the efforts to stimulate the group to instigate social change and to take constructive action in the world. Under this rubric the church serves to better and update the conditions for society's general and specific well-being. It seeks to eradicate injustices, and to redress economic, political, and racial imbalances. Through comfort a certain confirmation is given to the status quo; through challenge the status quo is placed in judgment. And, in the acceptance of the status quo is a tendency to accept (and perpetuate) things as they are; in the threats to the status quo is a tendency toward instigating change and upheaval. Put together, comfort tends to regularize permanence while challenge projects goals which have not yet been fulfilled.

It is obvious from the dichotomies that comfort and challenge are not functionally compatible. The authors note that those churches which tried to place their highest priority on challenge were not always successful in concretizing that aspiration. Not only were some of them less than effective in promoting social change, but, along the way, they also relinquished many of their native capacities to serve as a locus and provender of comfort. The analysts detected that the controlling interest in bringing about social change carries certain residually-destructive powers. They argue, however, that comfort and challenge should not be looked upon as mutually exclusive motivations. They hold out some hope that the churches will be able to honor both comfort and challenge without allowing either to cancel the other. A full and total commitment to challenge would find the church losing its grip on the very resources out of which its social influence is composed. On the other hand, total unqualified commitment to comfort leads to a debilitation of the other kind.

Thus, the juxtaposition of comfort and challenge is very complex. The religious institution which seeks to maintain a mooring point which is not threatened by the vicissitudes of life cannot very well assimilate into itself the disposition for reconstituting the entire social and cultural fabric. Because comfort and challenge are contrary movements, their association together can virtually split the agency which tries to contain both of them. This, very briefly, is the general thrust of the findings recorded in Glock's, Ringer's, and Babbie's provocative book.

However, their conclusions would carry more force, it seems to me, if their fundamental distinction were sharpened and embellished by the language Segerstedt cultivates in describing "we-feeling." On the surface, at least, the Glock-Ringer-Rabbie report seems to say that comfort and challenge are incompatible dispositions, and that social involvement can put the identity-establishing interests of the church in jeopardy. But, looked at through Segerstedt's schema, that conclusion may be construed in two different ways. It may mean (1) that the productive function (challenge) of a social organism is incapable of providing a basis upon which religious group identity and cohesiveness can be maintained. In this regard, the analysis may be saying that the aspirations and achievements of socialization and production are not the same, and that emotional and operational goals are composed of different kinds of ingredients. Clearly, from this standpoint, the social institution called the church belongs first of all to the socializing-emotional complex rather than to the productive-operational. Thus, the statistical evidence in the Glock-Ringer-Babbie report calls attention to the wrenching which occurs when the church tries to reconstitute itself on a productive-operational basis.

But the report may also be indicative of a discrepancy, an oversight, perhaps a fundamental structural weakness in the framework from which Glock, Babbie, and Ringer interpret their findings. When one compares the survey of churches with Segerstedt's theoretical account, he recognizes that both of them deal with the way in which group consciousness is achieved, fostered, and either maintained or lost. From this perspective, the roles which have been assumed by the church in the Glock-Ringer-Babbie survey are very similar to those Segerstedt assigns to the artist. Both serve to make "we-feeling" conscious with respect to both given and envisioned social environments. On the part of both the artist and the church, there is a positive recognition of the status quo; there is also an inclination to supersede the status quo. But there are notable differences in approach. The Glock-Ringer-Babbie report chronicles a dialectic — a movement from comfort to challenge — through which identity consciousness meets the threat of self-destruction. Segerstedt, on the other hand, describes two distinguishable stages in an ongoing creative process. The one account finds the first state to be in conflict with the second; the second account attests to a continuity between a present manifestation and its future reconstitution. The difference between the two perspectives is that Segerstedt's account reflects a schematic substratum — a continuum of symbolic interaction — which is not reflected in the Glock-Ringer-Babbie report. Because of that continuum, Segerstedt can distinguish several aspects of a corporate behavioral pattern without making them discrete. The survey report does not possess these cohesive abilities, since it has no underlying frame of reference in which the contrasts implicit in significant distinctions can be mediated. The differences between the two accounts, then, may be predominantly formal. It may be that Glock, Ringer, and Babbie assign challenge to a disposition which is in fundamental contrast to that responsible for comfort because they lack the conceptual apparatus for blending them together. Or, it may also reflect a failure on the part of churches to recognize that the apparent opposition between the two dispositions can be mediated by a common symbolic environment. When that symbolic environment is sustained, the difference between comfort and challenge is more a difference between time tenses (between what "is" and what "ought") than between differently oriented functions and

goals. As it turns out, the church is involved in both comfort and challenge because like Segerstedt's artist, it is required to be a kind of steward of the common symbolic environment (which, in proper language, must be the world of myth and ritual).

From all standpoints, the survey reinforces the fact that religion itself — the experiences which are denominated as being "religious" — is fundamentally tied to an awareness of "we-feeling." One can elaborate. The comfort derived from the presence of the religious institution in society, one might suggest, stems from that organism's procurement of a group consciousness whose reality reaches beyond the present moment and the present social order. In a word, what Segerstedt says about the socializing function in general can be applied specifically to the task the religious institution has been called upon to perform in the social matrix. Religion has its roots in the emotional resourcefulness which is built out of a consciousness of significant individuality and justifiable community (or "we-feeling"). Any endeavor to reconstruct a basis for that consciousness out of activities, projects, campaigns, or exercises which are productive-operational (rather than socializing-emotional) will lead to a loss of individual and corporate religious identity and cohesiveness. The loss occurs, and "we-feeling" is dissipated, in the attempt to transfer the group's *raison d'être* to something other than socio-aesthetic grounds. This need not imply that the religious institution can never successfully challenge the present status quo, or, by the same formula, that the artist is incapable of anticipating a future reaction-to and determination-of reality. But it does indicate that lasting success in this respect will come only if the socializing-emotional basis of "we-feeling," together with the symbolic environment from which it draws its life, can be maintained. As stated earlier, a group retains its identity as religious to the measure that it sustains "we-feeling" in the productive, reproductive, and socializing functions — whatever they are — in which it is engaged.

#### NOTES

1. See forthcoming *Proceedings of the International Congress on Aesthetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969).
2. Torgny T. Segerstedt, *The Nature of Social Reality* (Totowa, New Jersey: Bedminster Press, 1966), p. 81.
3. Charles Y. Glock, Benjamin B. Ringer, and Earl R. Babbie, *To Comfort and To Challenge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
4. Segerstedt, "The Uppsala School of Sociology," in *Acta Sociologica*. Vol. I (1955), p. 85.
5. Segerstedt, "The Nature of Social Reality," in *Acta Sociologica*. Vol. IV, No. 4 (1959), p. 3.
6. Segerstedt, "The Uppsala School," *op. cit.*, p. 95.
7. In addressing himself to "we-feeling," Segerstedt is obviously employing terminology which has been used by others in the symbolic interactionist tradition. For example, Charles Horton Cooley gives much attention to "we-feeling" in his writings, particularly in *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922) and *Social Organization. A Study of the Larger Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1927). In a very illuminative passage, Cooley writes: "The group self or 'we' is simply an 'I' which includes other persons. One identifies himself with a group and speaks of the common will, opinion, service, or the like in terms of 'We' and 'us.' The sense of it is stimulated by co-operation within and opposition without. A family that has had to struggle with economic difficulties usually develops solidarity — 'We paid off the mortgage,' 'We sent the boys to college,' and the like. A student identifies himself with his class or his university when it is performing a social function of some kind, especially when it is contending in games with other classes or institutions. 'We won the tug of war,' he says, or 'We beat Wisconsin at football.' Those of us who remained at home during the Great War nevertheless tell how 'we' entered the war in 1917, how 'we' fought decisively in the Argonne, and so on" (*Human Nature and the Social Order*, *op. cit.*, pp 209—210). One can find similar contentions in George A. Lundberg, *Foundations of Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), especially on pp. 316—317; J. F. Markey, *The Symbolic Process and Its Integration in Children* (New York: Harcourt, 1928), especially chapter X; and Ellsworth Faris, "The Primary Group: Essence and Accident," *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. XXXVIII (1932), pp. 41—50,

among others. See the bibliography in Lundberg, *op. cit.* pp. 325—333, and the discussion of the symbolic interactionist position, together with bibliography, in Alfred R. Lindesmith and Anselm L. Strauss, *Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) and Don Martindale, *The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1960).

In addition to the affinities which one can find between Segerstedt's views and those of others who have been associated with the school of symbolic interaction, there are basic similarities between the concept of "we-feeling" and Max Scheler's treatment of "fellow feeling" (in *The Nature of Sympathy*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954) translated by Peter Heath, as well as Ferdinand Tönnies development of the distinctions between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* (in *Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung* (Berlin: Springer, 1922).

8. Segerstedt, *The Nature of Social Reality*, *op. cit.*, pp. 177—8.
9. An interesting extension of the discussion of symbolic environments to religious studies is to be found in the article by Sven Wermlund, "Religious Speech Community and Reinforcement of Belief," in *Acta Sociologica*. Vol. III (1958), pp. 132—151.
10. Segerstedt, *The Nature of Social Reality*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.