

## The Role of Religion in the World Today

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I'm very pleased to be invited to participate in this symposium here in Tromsø, and I wish to bring greetings from the University of California, Santa Barbara, to everyone who is gathered here, and particularly to those who have exercised leadership in the establishment of an academic program in religious studies here in the northernmost university in the world.

I have had a productive time thinking about the topic "The Meaning of the Religions in the World Today and Tomorrow." In fact, in preparing my remarks for this occasion, I was quickly taken back to the first years at Santa Barbara, when we were in process of establishing a department of religious studies. To make the academic case for including religious studies within the regular curriculum of undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, we employed a rationale that included the language of description as well as the language of meaning. We asked the skeptics, critics, would-be detractors, and those who might have been simply suspicious, (Friedrich Schleiermacher would have termed some of them "cultured despisers" ) to consider the composition of current social, cultural, and political events. Against this background, we advanced the proposition: *it is impossible to understand the history of the world, or to understand contemporary*

*events in the world without really knowing something about the nature and function of religion.* Then, when it was time to offer examples in point, we would remind our defenders, detractors, and supporters that it would be impossible to understand developments in China, India, Japan, the Middle East, northern Ireland, or, closer to home for us, within the United States, without understanding the influence and role of religion within each of these frameworks.

So today, here in Tromsø, we turn the proposition in the other direction: *what do we know about the world because we understand the role and function of religion; or, put in another form, what role and function is religion playing in the world today?*

The comprehensive answer is that religion is playing a variety of roles. In much of the world, religion continues to be a **stabilizing force**. It grounds beliefs, attitudes, behavior, ideals, and aspirations in both individual and collective senses. As Clifford Geertz said now nearly thirty years ago (in that well-cited definitional study, included in Michael Banton's Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, 1966)<sup>1</sup> religion functions to provide an authentic perspective on reality, and lends appropriate legitimacy to this perspective so that adherents take it to be a trustworthy basis of action. Religion was doing this centuries ago; religion is doing this now; religion will always function in this capacity.

It is important to add that religion is also exercising a **destabilizing force**. There was a late 1960s' book, published in the

United States, by Charles Glock, Benjamin Ringer, and Earl Babbie, entitled To Comfort and to Challenge, which explored the twosidedness of religion. From the one side, religion aspires to uphold the status quo, that is, the determinative lineaments of the social or cultural order. And, from the other side, it challenges the social and cultural status quo. The authors noted that individual religious institutions can function in each of these two ways, and individuals are drawn to such institutions on the basis of the function that is being exercised.

We have employed the comfort/challenge study to illustrate the twofold role of religion. Their examples are both American and Christian. But similar examples can be found in other locales. Using Jewish biblical sources, for example, one need only cite the contrast between *priestly* and *prophetic* traditions, the former dedicated toward maintaining stability and the second dedicated to calling stability (sometimes false or presumed stability) into question.

Of course, one finds the stabilizing and de-stabilizing functions being exercised throughout the world today. Almost wherever one looks, one can find opposition and conflict between those who are seeking, as it is said, to strengthen or reestablish the eternal values (sometimes also called "permanent verities") and those who are motivated, as it is said, to establish something new, for example, a new world order, a more progressive orientation, or an understanding of the faith (whatever the specifics of this faith might be) that is more inclusive, or more resilient, or with a wider range of application than in previous

formulations or expressions. If the comfort/challenge paradigm fits, one should be able to detect the conflict between the stabilizing and de-stabilizing strands within every religious tradition, probably at all times, though it must certainly also be true that there are moments and periods when, over all, one of the two forces is stronger than the other.

I'd like at this point to attach this rather general analysis to some rather astute commentary on what is happening with religion in the world today. Recall Mary Douglas' observation, made approximately a decade ago, that the reassertion of conservative religion has taken the religious studies profession "by surprise."<sup>3</sup> Most scholars are intent on looking for new or novel items of interest, Professor Douglas observed, so, to an extent, they were blindsided by the turn back, or the return, to a reassertion of tradition, thus, conservative religion. And, of course, Professor Douglas is here referencing **the rise of fundamentalism** on a global scale -- a series of events that did indeed take the religious studies profession by surprise. Even after the surprise occurred, there was considerable reluctance to take the phenomenon seriously, and there was a certain amount of scrambling before appropriate methodological procedures could be identified, cultivated, and employed. Of course, in the end, the development helped stimulate the very fine multi-volume and multi-authored study, The Fundamentalism Project, organized and subsequently edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, and produced by University of Chicago Press.<sup>4</sup>

I'd like to supplement Professor Douglas' observation with

one registered by Ernest Gellner, who teaches philosophy in Great Britain, and, just recently, became director of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism in Central European University in Prague, in the Czech Republic. Gellner too talks about surprises, but, for him, the first surprise is one that didn't occur, and the second is the one that occurred in its place. The event that did not take place was the extension of a strong Marxist orientation throughout the world. In fact, what happened in this connection, as we all know, was the apparent failure of Marxism in the very Soviet Union with whose expressed aspirations, form of government, and way of life it was most closely identified. In noting this fact, Gellner has directed his attention toward assessing the future of socialism, and, in my judgment, has offered very provocative analysis and interpretation, particularly in his most recent book, The Conditions of Liberty,<sup>5</sup> which, without question, take into account the changing social, cultural, and political situation within the eastern bloc countries that, until recently, were under Soviet domination. Gellner does not expect that American style democracy will be extended to every nation of the world, and given prevailing circumstances, would not even wish for this. Rather, as the title of his book illustrates, the author is intent upon identifying the "conditions of liberty,"

Numerous questions are raised by these analyses, not least one concerning the relationship between the role of religion and that of ideology. It is apparent that when religion functions as a stabilizing force it also lends authenticating

support to the prevailing ideology. On the other hand, when religion functions to destabilize, ideology is one of its primary targets. This, by the way, is why it is difficult to differentiate religious and ideological components within fundamentalism. It also helps explain why fundamentalism bears such close resemblances to nationalism, and why fundamentalism is often assigned the role of carrying neo-nationalistic causes forward. For example, Islamic fundamentalism is always linked integrally with Islamic nationalism. Christian fundamentalism in the United States strengthens American nationalism. And so it goes: fundamentalist movements are frequently and appropriately identified as neo-nationalist movements. This is also why it becomes appropriate to treat Marxism, which qualifies first as an ideology, as a religion (or quasi-religion) as well. Regarding this equation, Gellner has this to say:

[Marxism] was the first formally secular belief system to have become a world religion and a state ideology in a considerable number of polities, some of them of great importance, and one of them a superpower. (p.30).

And, then, wishing to interpret the significance of the fall of Marxism in these terms, Gellner adds:

[Marxism's] fate is of enormous interest from the viewpoint of determining what can or cannot be done with nominally non-transcendent, this-worldly belief systems. Of course, the fate of Marxism on its own is not strictly conclusive. The failure of one secular religion cannot absolutely establish, for instance, that secular faiths in general cannot ever be socially effective. Others may yet succeed in the future where Marxism failed (p.30).

In approaching the question as to whether a this-worldly, secular faith can satisfy humankind's religious needs and spiritual desires, Gellner offers some tantalizing equations: the Society of Jesus, established by Ignatius Loyola, he suggests, was both a religious order and a political party. Moreover, Marxism, a secular faith, was suited to the Russian soul because it enabled the Russians to catch up with western scientific development while sustaining the messianic utopian "longing for a wholly uncorrupted world, a harmonious society, of man at one with himself" (p.36). Gellner's analysis, as I have indicated, stands as fascinating commentary on the dual stabilizing-destabilizing social and political functions of religion. If Marxism offered itself as a more effective faith than the supernaturalistic faith the Russians had had before, it could claim to be the basis of social, cultural and political stability in the midst of pervasive and profound destabilization.

But, to bring the narrative up to date, how shall the fall of Marxism be interpreted, that is, in these terms? In social or cultural terms, why did the event happen?

On this point, Gellner draws one lesson that exhibits full clarity: "Human society does not...lend itself to the simple application of blueprints worked out in advance by pure thought" (p.34). Gellner adds that Marxism suffered both from eliminating the *transcendent* from religion, and by "over-sacralizing the *immanent*." In his judgment, the second of these failures was more serious than the first. He explains:

It has been said that society cannot make do without the sacred; perhaps it needs the profane as much. By sacralizing all aspects of social life, notably work and the economic sphere, Marxism deprived men of a profane bolthole into which to escape during periods of lukewarmness and diminished zeal (p. 40).

Put in other words:

...the world's first secular religion failed not because it deprived man of the transcendent, but because it deprived him of the profane. Marxism claimed to liberate man from religion, from seeing his life through the distorting prism of fantastic notions. By forcing him to endow concrete reality with its full importance and weight, it also made it intolerable....By sacralizing this world, and above all the most mundane aspects of the world, it deprived men of that necessary contrast between the elevated and the earthy, and of the possibility of an escape into the earthy when the elevated is temporarily in suspended animation (p.42).

Gellner's conclusion: "the world cannot bear the burden of so much sacredness" (p.42).

Now, I have followed Gellner's argument with some care in order to make some sense of the role of religion in the world today. It is very interesting that some of the most significant developments in both religion and philosophy are occurring in those places in the world that have witnessed and experienced the loosening of the domination of the Marxist orientation. Again, following Gellner's lead, I wish to concentrate on recent occurrences in Prague, following the "velvet revolution" of 1989, and the great success of the Vaclav Havel-led movement to bring

about significant social, cultural and political change by what is properly referred to as a "revolt of the human spirit."

I cannot go into sufficient detail in this paper. But, in brief scope, Havel and his associates gave normative status to conviction that worldviews cannot function top down. They do not work well deductively. In this regard, Havel would agree with Gellner's observation that "human society does not lend itself to the simple application of blueprints worked out in advance by pure thought." Understandably, therefore, Havel repeatedly criticizes the dogma that "operating from theory is essentially smarter than operating from a knowledge of life." In another place, he comments, "social life is not a machine built to any set of plans known to us." In fact, when one looks for the theoretical foundation of assertions of this kind, one can find them in the writings of Edmund Husserl (who, as we recall, was a Moravian) and his concept of *Lebenswelt*. Havel takes some poetic liberties in identifying *Lebenswelt* with "the flow of life which is always taking us by surprise," but he insists that he learned this concept from Husserl, as rephrased by the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka.

Once again, I have an obligation to keep track of the lines of argumentation I am putting forward. I recognize that I have taken my hearers/readers down a number of paths, without fully reaching final destinations in any of them. I ask for your patience.

We began, you will recall, with some rather general observations about the traditional roles of religion in the world. Then,

in wishing to offer examples, we got ourselves involved in a discussion concerning the resurgence of conservative religion in our time, primarily in the form of fundamentalism. We extended this point to include the provocative observation of Ernest Gellner regarding relationships between the resurgence of fundamentalism and the downfall of Marxism, both of which entities, he proposed, can be approached, analyzed, and interpreted as religion. Next, in extending Gellner's analysis of why Marxism fell -- and we noted that he was approaching this question in structural terms -- we gave some limited consideration to a response to Marxism's fall by certain thinkers, writers, and (now) governmental officials in the Czech Republic who have developed impressive post-ideological intellectual reconstruction. We noted that this response is directed by the insight that life does not flow from thought, that engagement of the world does not occur top-down from some preconstructed theoretical orientation, and that the task of life is not to discover what Havel calls "a universal theory of the world, and thus a universal key to unlock its prosperity." The alternative, Havel says, is an orientation to life that has its roots in the world of lived-experience, or that fundamental human environment within which "the flow of life" is most fundamentally honored. In his view, in sum:

Communism was not defeated by military force, but by life, by the human spirit, by conscience, by the resistance of Being and man to manipulation. It was defeated by a revolt of color, authenticity, history in all its variety, and human individuality against imprisonment within a uniform ideology.

Now, where does all of this leave us with respect to the subject that is being addressed in this paper, The Role of Religion in the World of Today and Tomorrow? The answer is that the religion of the future, like the religion of the past, will continue to play both stabilizing and destabilizing roles. With respect to context and content, we can be more specific: there will be no more great religions of the world. The ones there are are the ones that will be. They are all already here, and were already on the scene more than one thousand years ago when Christianity was brought to Norway. What we can expect to change -- and we can treat this as a constant -- are attitudes toward them. Here I am venturing the expectation that the religions will be approached less and less in top-down theoretical fashion, or, thus, as candidates vulnerable to the criticism against dogmatic, ideological systems. Rather, the religions of the world will function more to inform "lived experience," which experience, in my judgment, will come more and more to be regarded as normative. This means that insights from the major religions of the world will be utilized in a highly eclectic and even syncretistic fashion. Adherents will be less interested in testing isms for legitimacy than in living lives of intention and purpose. As Havel put it:

In a world of global civilization, only those who are looking for a technical trick to save that civilization need feel despair. But those who believe, in all modesty, in the mysterious power of their own

human Being, which mediates between them and the mysterious power of the world's Being, have no reason to despair at all."

And the corollary would be that within the world of collective "lived experience" all of the religions of the world are potential contributors. I cite, in this regard, the request recently issued under UNESCO auspices to request leaders and representatives of the major religions of the world to offer assistance toward building an era of world peace. I had the privilege of participating in a similarly-motivated undertaking a few years ago, when His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, addressed a public audience, and participated in a panel discussion, on the subject of "Human Happiness." The organizer of the conference explained that all of the religions of the world have something to say about "happiness." He thought the time had come to bring representatives and spokespersons for some of them into the same room to enable "the public" to hear their views. If they had something valuable to offer, the audience, he was certain, would recognize it.

Such requests and events, given the ideals and aspirations of the religions, seem entirely appropriate. And this, clearly, is a call to religion to draw upon its most fundamental qualities to function, if possible and where appropriate, as an instrument of stabilization. After having participated in such an event, I have come to the firm conviction that the religions do indeed share common ideals and convictions. That is, there is compelling

shared religious understanding across the traditions. No, I am not proposing (as some have suggested) that a Hindu, qua Hindu, is worshipping a Christ he doesn't yet fully know. And I'm not very fond of the elephant analog, the one that proposes that we are all people without sight, who, by touch and other sensibilities, encounter an elephant, and, of course, disagree about the likenesses the various parts (the arm, the leg, the trunk, the ear) of the elephant evoke, because each part reminds us of something with which we are more familiar. But I do believe that all of the great religious teachers of the world have discovered agreement on some matters, such as the indispensability of human integrity, the supremacy of life over dogma, the "higher responsibility" we carry toward one another, that there is no substitute for honesty, that the only vice, sin, or misdeed that is unqualifiedly condemned or denounced is *self-righteousness*, and that human beings are such that our attitudes and actions should be motivated by compassion.

In a somewhat roundabout way, I am making the case that "lived experience" is fast becoming both the category as well as the criteria in terms of which the fundamental tenets of the religions of the world are being tested. If this be true, I suggest that the founders would be pleased, for all of them affirmed the truth to which assent is given is less significant than truth by which lives are guided. Again, we quote Havel:

There exists deep and fundamental experience shared by the entire human race, and traces of such experience can be found in all cultures, re-

ardless of how distant or how different they are from one another.

As we look ahead, we can be sure that religion will continue to perform both stabilizing and de-stabilizing roles in the world of the future. It has been this way for centuries. It will be this way for as long as time shall last. And the stabilizing/de-stabilizing syndrome will express itself in rather complex ways. All of this is rather easy to predict.

What is not so easy to identify is the role religious studies (the academic study of religion) will play in shaping the future course of religion. Some will look to religious studies to play a prescriptive role -- to guide religion in a certain direction. In my judgment, this would be a gigantic mistake. Religious studies should not be assigned prescriptive religious functions. It should be encouraged to develop on its own according to the most rigorous research methods, and the highest standards of objective scholarship. But this does not mean that it has no role at all, or that religion will develop entirely independently of religious studies. For example, in the United States today there is great clamor for prayer in the schools. Citizens concerned about the absence of moral values, or about what is called "the vast naked public square," wish to fill the vacuum with voluntary school prayer. Some progressives have countered that it is more important to provide school lunches than to institute school prayer. But the response that I would prefer is one that recommends the study of religion. There is no reason why the study of the teach-

ings of the religious traditions of the world cannot be undertaken in the schools. To date, this educational practice is not very widespread within the United States, though I am pleased to learn that it is a relatively common practice within the schools of Norway.

In short, what the positive future of the world requires is increased understanding of our social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity and higher regard for what we as human beings have in common. Yes, we are all members of the same human family. In the long run, we will sink or swim in the future together. To gain the kind of understanding we need, we should encourage the study of religion. For one of the inevitable and predictable consequences of the study of religion is increased and heightened religious understanding. We will attain such heightened understanding not when we transform religious studies into prescriptive programs, but when we do religious studies properly. Those of us who teach also bear responsibility for recognizing that the subject we study belonged to others before it became ours. It is still theirs before, after, and while we are studying it.

By now, the intentions that drove the content of this paper should be apparent. I was asked to speak to a gathering of scholars on "the future of religion," as part of the inauguration of a new program of studies at Tromsø University. I said what I could, in brief scope, about the general tendency of religion in the world, namely, that it has played and will continue to play

both stabilizing and de-stabilizing social, cultural, and political roles. I offered the opinion that, given recent social, cultural and political developments, religion will find itself attached more to life-views than to ideology, and the former conceived and constructed in highly inventive, syncretistic ways, which ways will encourage the participation of virtually all of the religious traditions, to the extent that they feel qualified, and, more crucially, to the extent that their advocates and exponents are willing to submit their cherished viewpoints, attitudes, and moral precepts to this kind of assessment and evaluation. I also indicated that the monitoring of these developments belongs to the proper work of religious studies. Indeed, religious studies is there to make certain that religion will be acknowledged when attempts are made to make sense of significant cultural and social events and developments, whether in historical or contemporary form. In so doing, religious studies contributes the kind of understanding that allows such events and developments to be understood in greater depth. And with the increase in understanding of religion comes an increase in religious understanding. And, thus, in a roundabout way, the study of religion is in something of a position to influence, at least in part, the future direction of religion in the world today. Religious studies does this worst when it attempts to do it deliberately. Religious studies does this best when it simply strives to do its own work well.

My remarks, of course, are offered in tribute to the transforming power of education. Of course, I believe that religious studies belongs intrinsically to the work of the humanities and

social sciences. Regretably, not every institution acknowledges this, but the University of Tromsøe does.

Therefore, I congratulate you on your perceptiveness. My colleagues and I in Santa Barbara will watch with keen interest as you cultivate an understanding of a universal subject in a highly distinctive manner -- a manner shaped by the magnificence of this place, and by the compelling collective character of those who have lived their lives here.

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1 Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Michael Banton, ed., Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion (London: Tavistock 1966), pp. 1-45.

2 Charles Y. Glock, Benjamin B. Ringer, and Earl R. Babbie, To Comfort and To Challenge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

3 Mary Douglas, "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change," in Daedalus. Winter, 1982, pp. 1-19.

4 Ernest Gellner, Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

5 Vaclav Havel, "Politics and Conscience," in his Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965-1990, Selected and Edited by Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 249-271.

6 Vaclav Havel, "What I Believe," in Summer Meditations, translated by Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 60-79.