

Appendices

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Notes Concerning the Power of Religious Ideas

by

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I would like to begin by relating an incident that took place during my undergraduate years and which represents what for me is the question we are addressing at this conference.

It was at the start of my first philosophy class. I had spent the previous summer reading one philosophy text after another and had made the difficult decision to change my major field of study from science to philosophy. I still loved science, but what I had gotten from my first year of studies bore little relationship to what I had dreamed it would be. The facts and theories were exciting and challenging, but--although I did not put it this way to myself then--they no longer seemed to touch me. A friend had handed me a popular history of philosophy and immediately I felt quickened with hope.

Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? or the life of mankind on earth? Who or what created the universe and how could I come to understand--to know--this source of creation? These were my questions--and here I discovered that they had been asked and pondered for

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thousands of years by minds far greater than my own. I hadn't known that--or, rather, I hadn't felt what it meant that such self-questioning was a central trait of mankind, and not only my own personal preoccupation.

Here I was then in my first philosophy class. The instructor was a well-known scholar and had handed out a reading list that made me tremble with excitement: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Russell, Whitehead. These were the very names I had been reading about and struggling to understand. Now I would really be able to get into things!

The opening class discussion began with the professor asking us what we expected from the course. I was the first to raise my hand and I said, as though speaking not only for myself, but for the whole of mankind:

"I want to know the meaning of life!"

I will never forget the silence that followed. At first, I simply did not understand it; I assumed the teacher was waiting for me to say more, and so I went on, talking very rapidly while dimly beginning to suspect that something was not quite right.

I don't remember anything of what I said, only that it was all centered around the question, "Why are we here?"

Then, suddenly, I noticed that the teacher was smiling. I almost said "sneering," but that would probably be an exaggeration. It was definitely not a friendly smile.

At the same time, I noticed my classmates shaking their heads and I heard some snickering as well.

I stopped cold.

"Go on, go on," I was told.

Bewildered and frightened, I did try to go on and speak about all the questions that had been troubling me, but my voice was hollow and I soon had to stop.

After another terrible pause, the teacher said (and this I remember precisely):

"Yes--well, that is exactly what philosophy is not about. You are not going to get psychiatric help here (great laughter), or religious guidance (more laughter). No, you are going to be taught what it means to think clearly and well, to examine your presuppositions, to criticize and argue. That is philosophy."

Now, even after making every allowance for the romantic sensibilities of youth, I trust most of us will agree that such an answer and the attitude toward the fundamental questions of life that may lie behind it can no longer be given and must no longer be given in our academic work with young people. Were it not so, I do not think we would be having this conference. But what is the alternative? Are we instead to take up the role of preachers or gurus? Must we change from being representatives of intellectual discipline to being therapists of our students? I do not think so. In fact, even to

put the matter in this crude either/or fashion has been one of the chief factors that has caused so much damage. There is quite another alternative, a whole world of alternatives.

At this point I should state that, from the point of view of the issue of this conference, I am not making a fundamental distinction between the teaching of philosophy and the teaching of religion. Having worked in both areas for the past fifteen years, I have found that most of my students come to these two subjects with the same motivation as I had when I entered my first philosophy class: as part of the search for meaning in life.

The import of this fact about the motivations of young students of philosophy and religion and the difficulty of a proper response to it were brought home to me the very first time I myself stood at the lecture podium in front of a class of beginning students. Sure enough, as I was describing the various branches of philosophy, I was interrupted by one student who asked: "Which part of philosophy tells us how to live?"

To my surprise, I saw myself reacting in almost the same way my own first professor had reacted. "I'm sorry," I said, "that's not what we're here for. You'll have to go elsewhere for that." It was the safe answer, sanctioned by all the unwritten rules of the modern academic transaction. And it was, I told myself, the only

"honest" answer I could give. How could I tell him how to live, after all?

But this was San Francisco in 1962, not Cambridge, Massachusetts of 1953. The class did not look askance at this young man. Quite the contrary; and he, for his part, simply refused to accept my answer. Instead, he replied: "Well, then, where should I go for an answer?"

How do you respond to such students? I found myself saying:

"Well, if you are willing to stay with us a few months and work hard, you may find something happening.

"That does not mean," I went on, "that you will find your answer. But you may discover something happening to your question. It may begin to deepen, to be connected with many other ideas and aspects of life which you don't now see. But for that to happen, you will have to work very hard both at thinking and also at holding on to your question at the same time."

I do not know whether this in fact took place with this particular student. But my reply was far wiser than I knew--perhaps because his question had found me unprepared and had produced in me the shock of seeing my first knee-jerk reaction of turning away from the really existential element in the student.

Under such conditions one sometimes does learn from oneself. As the years have gone by, I have come to see

that this is exactly what can be offered to students whose motivation is in part (whether they know it or not) something that we might call "religious," in the sense of a search for answers to the fundamental questions of living.

What I am saying is that we who teach courses in religion and in certain areas of philosophy, whether we know it or not, are the medium by which special kinds of ideas are communicated to young people. For many of our students, their courses with us are perhaps the first time in their lives that they have been exposed to such ideas. And these ideas have a very distinct action on a human being. If I were to put it in one word, I would say of these ideas that their unique effect is to evoke and then to support the state of self-questioning. And to my mind this state is the very root and foundation of what could be called the religious impulse, the Search.

I would like roughly to characterize how I am using this term, "ideas." I believe we need to make a rather sharp distinction between ideas which evoke self-interrogation and theories which offer explanations that satisfy the mind or open areas of external research by promising to bring a variety of phenomena together under one distinguishing concept. Almost every academic course deals quite naturally with theories--theories of economics, theories of perception, theories of biological process, theories of history, etc., etc.--including theories about

religion. Such theories--or perhaps we could call them theoretical ideas--are not intended by their creators to still the mind and awaken that special emotional intelligence that appears when one's sense of oneself and one's own existence is suddenly relativized, put into question. These theoretical ideas are a crucial element in the survival and development of any civilization--they are our great tools for organizing the world and living in it effectively. But the ideas I am speaking about, call them if you wish "contemplative ideas," do not have that aim, in my view. They were meant by their creators, or formulators, to guide an individual in the quest for real, not imaginary, self-knowledge, to help him discover directly for himself the truth about himself. They are not explanations. And historically they have been so formulated--for example in the language of myth and symbol--as to resist man's treating them as explanations and as to make them accessible only to an individual in the psychological state of spiritual need; one might say they are geared to what the Sufis call "the intelligence of the heart."

I believe that we as educators in the field of religious studies are dealing uniquely in these contemplative ideas. When we teach courses involving the presentation of the contents of religion--whether in the form of metaphysical ideas, accounts of ritual practices, studies

of scriptural texts and commentaries, studies of traditional forms of myth, art, architecture--we are, to some degree exposing our students to such ideas. In this respect our situation could be likened to experts giving courses in the theory and practice of preparing the various foods of the world to students many of whom are desperately hungry, or in any case in a condition of malnutrition. I would prefer to use a less homely example, but perhaps that adequately conveys the point I am making--that, as educators in the academic field of religion, we are handling ideas which could be said to be the carriers of a special kind of energy, which has the power to ignite the heart and mind of any serious person.

Could there be any more significant goal of education than this "ignition" of the search for Truth? If someone objects that such ideas can be extremely disturbing to young men and women, may we not reply by asking: "Where is it written that real education is for the purpose of confirming the values automatically conditioned into us by our cultural milieu?"

Of course, this point in essence has little to do with the legal issues surrounding the teaching of religion in the schools. It is clear that what we are speaking about here has nothing to do with persuading or preaching, nothing to do with our assuming the role of guru or therapist or priest. Nor are we speaking of imposing values

on young minds. It is solely a question of recognizing that some ideas have a very special kind of power, and that these ideas have been the heart of human civilization since the beginning of history. If we send our children to be educated about human civilization, then we must be prepared for their coming into some kind of contact at least from a distance with the special energies that have in fact moved human beings throughout all time.

But having seen this, I am now brought, as an educator, to a new problem, and a very difficult and painful problem. What I wish now to say touches on the whole question of the origins not only of modern educational philosophy, but indeed of modern, Western culture itself and the present crisis in which it finds itself.

The present influx of Asian religious teachings into America allows us direct witness to a process that, in part, has been going on in the West for at least a hundred and fifty years. Anyone who has observed the new religions movement at close hand cannot but conclude that in many, if not most, cases what we are seeing is a drama in which ideas and methods that in their original setting required extensive moral, social and psychological preparation before being given out are now being made available to anyone simply for the asking. As a result, the question has arisen whether these ideas and methods are in fact being used for purposes that are even antithetical

to the purposes for which they were originally intended. It is a question that is quite unavoidable, for example, in the movement among modern psychotherapists to make use of Eastern spiritual ideas for purposes that could be characterized as strengthening something in human nature, the sense of social personality or ego, that these very ideas and methods were meant to weaken or even destroy. The problem facing our society with respect to such movements as the Unification Church may also exhibit this problem from another side--only here it is a question of the emotional energy generated by bringing unprepared people together for long periods of time and under unusual conditions of living that have the effect of creating certain poorly understood states of consciousness by freeing a psychic energy which then combines with impulses of whatever sort--in this case, perhaps, of loyalty to a leader. Time does not permit exploring this particular issue here; I only mention it as one possible example of the many kinds of problems generated when fragments of a complete tradition are made available to unprepared human beings without the necessary guidance and knowledge of what to do with the energy that these fragments generate. I believe an interesting study of the history of religious wars could be made from this point of view--namely, a study of the pathology of enthusiasm.

through this process of making all ideas available to

In the West, the liberal education movement arose in the last century with the avowed purpose of widening the scope of human inquiry through making all ideas and teachings available to everyone. At a constantly accelerating pace, published material of every sort began to become available and the literacy level of modern man began its spectacular rise.

Prior to that time, the common man was considerably more in emotional contact with the specific traditional teaching in which his life was immersed. Although his acceptance of religious authority was perhaps uncritical, he nevertheless retained in some measure the will, the emotional force to live according to great ideals and values. That is to say, he was more in relationship to his body and feeling.

As the modern era progressed, such a state of affairs began to be regarded as constricting and blindly accepting. It was thought necessary to develop the intellect of man. But how to develop the intellect of man without unwittingly creating a buffer between the mind and the heart?

What was not seen was that for certain ideas a definite preparation of the emotions and the body is necessary if these ideas are to have their intended beneficial action upon a man. Nor was it considered that through this process of making all ideas available to

everyone (without exact knowledge of the conditions under which such ideas need to be presented), men and women were being drawn more and more into their thoughts, and moving further and further away from the life of feeling and natural instinct, wherein reside the most powerful energies of the human being.

Widespread questioning of authority accompanied the stimulated appetite for mental information and explanations, having its immediate effect on political authority throughout the Western world, and soon reaching to the areas of religious and family life as well. Above all, this process was fueled by the development of modern science with its specific canons of knowing and its particular view of reality. Everyone can and should know everything, can and should pass judgment on everything--from the nature of the universe to the actions of the king to the decisions of the father and the mother.

That this right and ability to know and evaluate demanded a harmonious development of all the parts of the human structure was completely ignored--or, at best, acknowledged only in theory.

In our time this process has finally produced such massive dislocations of human life and such external crises that there is no longer much belief in external or piecemeal solutions to the problems of the world. It is clear to many that the only way out is to bring man back into

contact with the sources of moral power within the self, and that this cannot be done in any of the familiar, conventional ways.

Nowhere is this need to bring values and great ideals into relationship with the life of feeling and action more apparent than in the minds of many of the students in our courses on religion and philosophy. Is this not what often lies behind the question about the meaning of life--how to transmit the great truths to the whole of our being?

In my opinion, this issue is the substance of the spiritual drama of the present era and underlies much of what is now taking place in the form of extraordinary changes and movements within the fields of religion, education, the sciences, art and even, in part, in economics and politics. I have already mentioned one reflection of this issue in the field of psychiatry, but it is really quite pervasive: this search for a way to bring transcendent ideals and values into an active relationship with all the parts of human nature.

It is not surprising then that, in the present era, religious studies influence religious life. The question I put to you and to myself, as educators in this area, is whether we will only be part of the process by which great contemplative ideas are turned into theories, or whether we wish also to be instruments by which the search

for meaning is supported and strengthened. How to find our way between the scylla of pseudo-gurudom and the charybdis of bloodless intellectualism? How to recognize the special nature of the ideas we are dealing with without pretending we are able or obliged to create the conditions under which such ideas can be a guide to the spiritual disciplines in which they were originally embedded? On the other hand, how to maintain a sound, academic rigor and program of intellectual training without crushing the student's search for meaning by translating all contemplative ideas into theoretical concepts?

I hope there will be time in our discussion to go into this question. Here I only wish to indicate in one or two sentences how I see the direction. We need, I think, to be able to recognize in our students the two kinds of motivation that bring them to our courses. On the one hand, they want information, theories, career preparation, good grades, etc., etc. On the other hand, for some--not all--there also exists this other impulse to find a connection with something higher and more universal in life, call it "meaning." I believe that as educators in this field our difficult and necessary task is to be able to distinguish these two kinds of motivation which correspond to the two natures of man himself, and to realize that it is only in the act of self-questioning that these two impulses are for a moment brought into

relationship. The demand for academic rigor and impartiality in no wise contradicts or impedes this kind of self-interrogation; quite the contrary; however, the challenge we face is to satisfy the first kind of need without stifling the second kind, and at the same time to recognize that through satisfying the need for theoretical knowledge about religion, we are sometimes going to be instruments by means of which self-questioning arises.

Perhaps we need to understand more fully the nature of self-questioning in ourselves, that is, to see more clearly the twofold nature of our own relationship to sacred ideas. However, that is not merely an academic, professional challenge; it is the challenge of the meaning of our own lives. And it is in any case an issue which I am neither able nor expected to answer. Were I to attempt that, I would quite simply put to all of you the same question that I asked 25 years ago in my first philosophy course--"What is the meaning of life?" I am still asking it.

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