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## Religious Experience and Modern Synthetic Religiosity

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I would like to begin by juxtaposing two quotations—the first from the American philosopher George Santayana, the second from a less familiar contemporary writer whose outlook nonetheless is emblematic of a burgeoning strand of socio-cultural ideology among the Western literati. Santayana wrote early in this century in his *Winds of Doctrine*:

The longing to be primitive is a disease of culture . . . When life was really vigorous and young . . . no one seemed to fear that it might be squeezed out of existence either by the incubus of matter or by the petrifying blight of intelligence. Life was like the light of day, some thing to use, or to waste, or to enjoy. It was not a thing to worship . . . In those days men recognized immortal gods and resigned themselves to being mortal.

Contrast this piece of homiletics from what Santayana himself dubbed "the genteel tradition" in American letters and learning with the neo-Gnostic illuminism and Promethean futurism of Peter Russell, author of *The Global Brain*:

What humanity urgently needs today are the means to bring about a widespread shift in consciousness. This will come about, not through a revival of any particular religion, but through a revival of the techniques and experiences that once gave these teachings life and effectiveness. We need to rediscover the

practices that directly enable the experience of the pure Self and facilitate its permanent integration into our lives.

Russell defines "religion" as "that which ties us again to our common source." His call for a "spiritual renewal" empowered by the growth of such religion entails "a widespread shift in consciousness along the lines experienced by the great mystics and proponents of the perennial philosophy."

Santayana, as we are all probably aware, was an unswerving partisan of classical rationality and an adherent to the modern faith in science and social progress. Russell, in contrast, represents the archaist and counter-historical sentimentality that Santayana diagnosed as the "disease of culture." Although the situs for Russell's visionary effusions is distinctly contemporary, its pedigree stretches back to the Romantic era in Western civilization. And it may be considered one among many variegated specimens of what I have catalogued as "modern Gnosticism" in my own book *The Interruption of Eternity*. One of the features of modern Gnosticism is "an unabashed antiquarianism which looks to the occult wisdom of the past for inspiration and disparages the 'modern' climate of opinion." From best-selling books like Huston Smith's *The Primordial Tradition* and Elaine Pagel's *The Gnostic Gospels* to the efflorescence of spiritual esotericism and deep psychic experimentalism in our culture, the message of neo-Gnosticism has been broadcast with mounting intensity.

The last great wave of neo-Gnostic—actually, a much more incisive term would be "illuminist"—ideology struck in the 1960s and was driven by the mass dalliance in psychoactive drugs during that period. Its peculiar *Weltanschauung* was certified and canonized in the writings of Theodore Roszak and Charles Reich among others. Throughout the 1970s the torch of illuminism was carried by the diverse habitues of California's Esalen Institute and the so-called "human potential movement." Since approximately 1979 it has been thrust aloft and ablaze by Marilyn Ferguson's "Aquarian conspiracy" with outsize financial backing from the Stanford Research Institute, some major oil companies, and the Tarrytown Group in upper New York state. If I may quote from Ferguson, whose writings and lecture tours can only be compared to a "post-Christian" brand of circuit-riding revivalism, when it comes to religion, "there is only the experience."

Ferguson, along with cronies such as Willis Harman, George Leonard, and Timothy Leary of "tune in, turn on" fame, are presently pitching for the "transformation" of homo sapiens from man to superman through the development of a "planetary spiritual awareness" founded on a diffuse, eclectic religious "consciousness" and primed, if not polished, by the "convenient means" (if I may devalue slightly Mahayana Buddhist nomenclature) of contraband pharmacology. As noted LSD researcher Jean Houston comments in the June/July issue of *The Tarrytown Letter*, which is devoted to a design for "new world spirituality" :

We're living in a 21st century technological world where it's a question of grow or die. The problem is we are about to acquire the powers of Genesis but with a psychology that is frankly more Faustian than godlike.

In Houston's view Adam is summoned once again to taste of the forbidden fruit, but the delicacy this time is those neurotransmitters in the brain that yield altered states of consciousness. Leary himself describes the process as "rejuvenilization," a backward plunge into the collective psyche of the race.

Whereas the omnibus "New Age" sensibility which many of the aforementioned intellectual trend-setters are now peddling has made something of a feathered fetish of "science," it commends only those theoretical models and investigative procedures that contribute to the enhancement of the sundry psychotechnologies and the manifestation of the cosmic "Self." The propogandistic efforts to which quantum physics has been put by Esalen affiliates is an egregious case in point. *Scientia* in the classic sense—the font of our tenured academic and "humane" values—has been eclipsed by a subtle frenzy for subjective satisfactions and ephemeral analogies.

I only proffer such historical hindsight and piecemeal glosses of sociology in order to array the problem of religious studies as a discipline in these disruptive intellectual times. Many of us are probably too enamoured and overly comfortable with the relative success of what remains a fledgling academic enterprise over the past two decades to entertain seriously the possibility of forthcoming trauma and a need for wholesale "revisioning." But both therapy and reconstruction are indispensable at this juncture. Therapy recalls the truth of our origins. Reconstruction throws into perspective the bona fide tasks and

challenges. Let me make brief mention of the therapeutic agenda before outlining what may be the formula for rehabilitation.

Therapy is always occasioned, if not immediately caused, by a fateful scission in the texture of identity and expectations. The scission itself arises from a shattering event or rattle of circumstances that expose the incipient contradictions beneath the surface. Our present need for therapy accompanies the sudden shift in the ideology of higher education itself. If one perchance is peering from the vantage point of the mainline Protestant clergy, a similar instance of cognitive dissonance occurs, although the rift is not between a specialized field and the academy, but between a venerable institution and civilization at large.

The reference, of course, is to the current preoccupation, which frequently borders on mania, with science and technology. The current preoccupation is decidedly different from what we remember as the business and "vocational" fad of the 1970s; and it even varies in great magnitude from the now distant post-Sputnik anxieties among educators in the Fifties. In the first case the threat to Religious Studies was stitched together with the general peril to the humanities. In the second example the danger was not even clear and present, inasmuch as the Sputnik paranoia led to a broad fiscal commitment to advanced studies that ultimately made room for our own *arriviste* discipline. The majority of us, to be sure, are cognizant chiefly of the more recent vocational rage and its still evident aftershocks. We are tempted to perceive the building "sci-tech" push in higher education as merely the second siege. Such a perception is gravely misleading, if not lethal. For the erstwhile competition from "vocationally relevant" programmes did not really penetrate to the bedrock of our own ideological assumptions. The "sci-tech" push does, in fact. Hence the preliminary requirement of therapy.

The regnant ideology of the general field of religious studies, as I argue and illustrate in a soon to appear essay in the *Council on Religious Studies Bulletin*, is a patent product of the 1960s and what has come to be known loosely as the "Aquarian" sensibility. In 1965 *Time* magazine printed its now famous obituary for the Judaeo-Christian deity. In 1967 there sprung full-grown from the acid-heads of San Francisco's Haight Ashbury the new gods of privatized mysticism and world historical syncretism, dredging out of the LSD-spiked collective

unconscious a ragtag pantheon of little known numinosities (in the Occidental context at least) which would coalesce into formal cult objects about five years later. My own personal vignette to underscore this somewhat obscure historical movement involves my effort to communicate with an acid-sloshed young emigre from a small town in Iowa at a coffee house in the "Hashbury" during May of '67. I was frenetically attempting to get him to answer a question about the whereabouts of a mysterious character who frequented the Haight named Joe Shalom. But instead of verbalizing, all he did was to gaze entranced at a slightly withered tiger lily and intone "Shiva, Shiva Shiva." At the time I was a first-year Presbyterian seminary student who thought Shiva might have been a car hop at the A & W back in Dubuque.

In a word, by the end of the Sixties Christianity as a formative power in American culture—and by extension the hoary disciplines of Christian theology, Bible, and Church history—was down on the mat and panting. What Jacob Needleman soon baptized "the new religions"—a strange illuminist zoo of protomythical and mystical fauna—had crept forth like toadstools from the sediment. The radical eclecticism enshrined the new religious "consciousness" of the late Sixties slowly, but inexorably became the leafy methodological pluralism fashionable throughout the AAR. With respect to what might be termed our field's consensual *ontology*, the dominant metaphysical preference shifted from theological argument to symbological and psychological explorations. Again, a personal reminiscence may be appropriate. When I entered the programme long named "Christian Theology" at Harvard in 1969 it was apparent among most of my confreres that the specialty in which we would be earning our doctorates was hardly viable any more from either a professional or a magisterial point of view. All the jobs and excitement were in the history of religions or what was loosely known as the "anthropological" approach to religious phenomena. Our departed mentor Herbert Richardson was doing strictly cultural analysis with a steep slant toward the avante-garde innovations of the period. We were obliged to imbibe Schleiermacher for our comprehensive examinations, but our closet passions were Mircea Eliade and Clifford Geertz. Feuerbach's dictum that theology must become "anthropology" was our common catechism. Robert Bellah's religious sociology proved to be our canon. The pith and marrow of our subject matter could no longer be seriously considered

some kind of Barthian *totaliter aliter*. It was the uniquely *human* and *personal* experience of what we with true Rabbinic reverence for the mysterious called "transcendence." Transcendence, on the other hand, had no real literary remains or doctrinal parameters. Moreover, it tended to be wholly immediate—the buzzword of the Sixties was "the happening"—rather than wholly other. It suffered no preponderance of history. Transcendence could manifest itself in, as Timothy Leary might say today, in an LSD joyride "through the strings of DNA", in the Hare Krishna group's *mahamantra*, in a Boulder witch's invocation of "the white goddess," or (This one was most consistently approved among Christian men of divinity who were too squeamish about admitting they no longer believed in the dogmas they had once defended) in poetry and the "imagination." If there was anything left of "salvation" it was by the backbrain alone. The triumphal social science establishment was the unspoken *ecclesia* of the age and Margaret Mead was its blessed virgin. When Roszak published his *The Making of a Counterculture* and David Miller—more specifically for the ears of our colleagues—*The New Polytheism*, the hermeneutic and apologia combined for the new quasi-departmental beast called "religious studies" had been set in amber. We should all muse for a little while on the shibboleths and rationales we used to make the move from sectarian to secular premises within the university. We requited the individual, and as it usually turned out, the *youthful* quest for the holy grail of "meaning." It did not matter much what, or why, or whence the meaning was.

Moreover, the "meaning" could only be meaningful because it was immune from rationality, scientism, and the number-crunching of computers. We were inclined to style ourselves as conservationists who preserved from the murderous dissecters in the white coats and from the juggernaut of *high technology* (In those days the adjective normally applied only to hippies) the spiritual treasures of the past which were sequestered, as it happened, in a plethora of "sacred texts" and in depth psychology.

Religious studies has drawn the majority of its clientele during recent years, I would submit, because it has served as something of a surrogate religious cultus for many in the "post-Christian" generation who no longer can adjust themselves to the "plausibility structure" (Peter Berger's term) compassing masses, doxologies, and *Te Deum's*.

Such a conclusion may be difficult to accept for us scholars who contend ardently that we are engaged in the strictly empirical and "objective" perusal of religious data. Positivism dies hard even in this tendentious era. Yet, if we factor out the permanent supply of FTE fodder who enroll in our courses because it fulfills the intractable general education and elective requirements, we must ask ourselves: why do students take our classes? How many, can it honestly be adduced, study religion because of a cool, cosmopolitan curiosity about the "sacred"? Not too many, I suspect. We ought perhaps to examine carefully our own predilections. When we offer courses in Buddhist meditation practices, Native American myths and rituals, or women in religion it is not simply because these subject areas have sometime less methodological gravity or subtopical import. It is because they, like religion itself since our prehistoric debut as a species, square with perspicuous existential concerns and dilemmas; and the *Existenz* in this case is the odyssey of alienated middle class culture that followed the shooting of John Kennedy.

When I spent my last sabbatical year at a distinguished Religious Studies department in California, I was constantly reminded that we had finally succeeded in liquidating "theology" from the legitimate Religious Studies curriculum. I recognize now that the tacit denotation was "Christian" theology, especially since there Eliade was held with the same reverence as Paul Tillich had enjoyed at Union twenty years earlier. And it was widely rumoured as well—though the allegation may just prove to be apocryphal—that a sizable group of students had contrived their own "church" which held services reciting the cosmogonic myths detailed in *The Sacred and the Profane* and intoning a liturgy which began with the words *in illo tempore*. I do not think it would be stretching the point to maintain that Religious Studies as a vocation, instead of merely a curriculum, has traded heavily on the yearning for mystery and sacrality in an epoch of immanence. In that respect our appeal to aging baby boomers may not be all that qualitatively distinct from the allure of Anglo-Catholicism to its forbears. In a powerful sense we have for the most part remained clergy. How else can one explain a curious blind-sidedness among our savants to the psychological ravages, if not the crypto-totalitarianism, of many of the so-called "new religions?" We perfunctorily eschew any association with Moral Majority-style Christianity, yet an increasing number of religious studies scholars evince no qualms about taking

trips, and even in some cases quietly proselytizing, on behalf of the Moonies. Better perhaps to throw in one's lot with a 1970s Korean Messiah, who once told a Denver audience Colorado was close to God because it had the Strategic Air Command, than to follow in the footsteps of an "outdated" Galilean rabbi. Not too long ago I was asked by an anxious *defector* from a prominent "new religion" who feared for his life—"why do you scholars in the field treat this 'cult' as if it were an authentic specimen of spirituality?" I replied: "Could Loyola distinguish between Paul's Christianity and the Inquisition?" Loyola, too, wanted to safeguard the "sacred."

I raise these issues, nevertheless, simply as a lengthy preface to consideration of what seems an obvious, albeit still enigmatic, sociological fact—the "sci-tech" tsunami sweeping through our social thought and behaviour as the leading edge of what has been baptized (actually, since the Sixties) the "information age." What is, or should, or can even possibly be, the posture of Religious Studies?

The first, and perhaps somewhat untoward, comment that should be made is that we no longer possess our prized monopoly on sacrality. There is just as much marvel, mystery, metanoia, and meaning in science today—I would cite once more an article of my own that appeared last autumn in *Zygon: A Journal of Science and Religion*—as there is the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Timothy Leary—who in retrospect may be considered the Saint Benedict of our latter day psycho-spiritual experimentalism—is making an impact these days again, and his pitch is straightforward: religion as we know it is extinct, science is the twenty first century's *sanctum sanctorum*. The August issue of Ferguson's *Brain Mind Bulletin* parades the hypothesis—crenellated by impressive neurological documentation—that all religious symbolism and consciousness is a product of melanin molecules in the brain. "As modern science penetrates more deeply into nature's mysteries," writes Ferguson, "it becomes ever more evident that we knew of these paradoxes through artistic insight and revelation, perhaps through the implicit memory of the melanin system itself."

Indeed, if one does an intimate exegesis of the now virulent New Age modes of thinking, one finds—especially since the close of the last decade—a volte-face with respect to technology. Technology, providing it does not pollute, is electro-magnetic, and can be attached somehow to the human nervous system, conduces to an eminently religious



purpose. Digital information systems suddenly have taken on a sacramental guise. A remark by Steward Brand, publisher of *The Whole Earth Software Catalog*, in a national news magazine dramatized this point. Said Brand: "Most of the (New Age) audience has accepted computers, more than any other age group. They've been using technology to mess with their consciousness since they were teen-agers I don't see a tremendous difference between the technology of drugs and the technology of computers, except that drugs are self-limiting and computers appear not to be."

The "instrumental" value which Needleman saw in the new religions—i.e., their capacity to generate new states of consciousness and to transform the personality—has perhaps been realized in the recent passage from the mystique of the archaic to the glitter of a high-tech future, in the barely perceptible, but palpable transit from an enchantment with altered states of awareness to the worship of artificial intelligence. Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman in their controversial, but well-researched boo *Snapping* have elucidated the dynamics of mind manipulation perfected to an art in cult recruitment. "America's religious cults and mass therapies offer an abundance of victims of information disease... (which) are becoming increasingly common consequences of American's runaway technology of experience," write Conway and Siegelman. Thus it is not too impertinent to conclude that the direct alteration of thought, perceptions, and emotions by such New Age psychotechnologies as "superlearning," suggestology, subliminal programming, and radio hypnosis—most of which you can find regular advertisements for in urban periodicals and street flyers—is but a natural evolution of our adventures with synthetic religiosity. The erstwhile Roszakian conflict between technology and the deep imagination was for the most part a whiff of internecine strife. For the Aquarian assault on science and technology was only against its corporate and bureaucratic deployments. The new "science of consciousness" that had its birth twenty years ago at Esalen has performed a kind of *coup de main* against religion as we know it without a shot having been fired. Before the computer only God was regarded as exempt from self-limitation. If we have really killed the Deity as Nietzsche suggested, then perhaps we are still left with his electronic shadow.

Yet there is a new trajectory we may adopt, if we are perhaps bold and timorous enough.