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Religion as Critique and the Critique of Religion: The Problem of the Self in the Modern World

by
Douglas Sturm

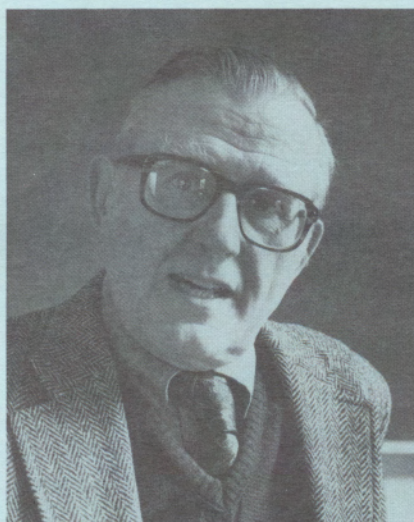
The enormity of our undertaking during this conference cannot be gainsaid. Selfhood, sociality, and religious traditions in their inner connections with each other: that as a topic seems well-nigh all-encompassing, particularly if sociality is extended, as it must be in our day and age, to embrace the entire community of being. The topic seems, as well, of intense importance given the conditions of life in the modern world.

Clearly, diverse procedures are possible as an entree to that topic. I shall take as a clue to my approach a quotation from Aloysius Pieris, a Jesuit priest and director of the Tulana Research Center in Sri Lanka:

I submit that the religious instinct be defined as a revolutionary urge, a psycho-social impulse, to generate a new humanity. It is none other than the piercing thrust of evolution in its self-conscious state, the human version of nature's thirst for higher forms of life . . . this revolutionary upsurge can be sidetracked to regressive states of inertia. Revolution could turn reactionary, religion irreligious. But . . . it is this revolutionary impulse that constitutes, and therefore defines, the essence of *homo religiosus* (1983, 134).

Let me repeat Pieris' main theme: the religious instinct is a revolutionary impulse to generate a new humanity. That theme is daring and tendentious. But I would have us ponder that theme for a while and consider what its implications might be.

In pondering that theme, I would have us begin with where we are, denizens of the modern world, confronted with the question of the self and society as an issue of practical thought, or *phronesis*, in Aristotle's language. I would have us begin with the question of the anguish of the self and the fate of the self as an issue in social practice, but also as a



Douglas S. Sturm was awarded an A.B. degree from Hiram College in 1950 and his D.B. (1953) and Ph.D. (1959) degrees from the University of Chicago. He also completed post-doctoral studies at the Harvard Law School in 1964-65. He joined the faculty at Bucknell University in 1959, where he is currently Professor of Religion and Political Science. He has received several prestigious teaching awards, and was named *Alumnus of the Year* at the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1988.

proper claim upon—and therefore an accusation against—religious communities. I shall begin, that is, with the matter of justice which is, as John Rawls would have it, the first virtue of social institutions, for justice, in its various permutations, addresses the question of the self, its circumstance and destiny. Moreover, justice is a force intrinsic to the religious spirit in its multiple expressions and might, as a matter of internal

critique, be turned back upon religious traditions as a mode of engaging the entire discipline of *Religionsgeschichte*.

More particularly, I shall set before you five propositions. First, the problem of the self, revealed dramatically in moments of suffering, is a problem of relationship; self and other, that is, are correlative terms. Second, religious traditions are both resource and obstacle in responding to the problem of the self. Third, justice names that quality of relationship through which the self might flourish; justice, in this connection, is both a receiving and a giving. Fourth, justice is a perspective from which the vast religious plurality of the human world might be susceptible to interpretation and evaluation. Fifth, in its depths, justice, as I am rendering the term, is expressive of a communal cosmology which as such generates visions of a new social world in which and through which the prospects of human flourishing might be greatly enhanced.

Proposition #1: *The problem of the self, revealed dramatically in moments of suffering, is a problem of relationship; self and other, that is, are correlative terms.*

Lest we become too lost in abstraction, I would present you with an instance of suffering, an instance taken from Albert Camus' *The Plague*. In that masterful novel, you may recall, the bubonic plague had overcome the town of Oran, a French port on the Algerian coast during the 1940s. Several persons were deeply engaged in struggling against the plague, including Rieux, an agnostic but compassionate physician, and Paneloux, an honest but deeply devout priest. At a key moment in the story, these two with others witness the long, excruciating death of an innocent child, despite the use of a newly developed serum to combat the disease.

They had already seen children die . . . but . . . they had never had to witness over so long a period the death-throes of an innocent child.

And just then the boy had a sudden spasm . . . and uttered a long, shrill wail. . . . From between the inflamed eyelids big tears welled up and trickled down the sunken, leaden-hued cheeks. When the spasm had passed, utterly exhausted . . . the child lay flat, racked on the tumbled bed, in a grotesque parody of crucifixion. . . .

All were waiting. The child . . . seemed to grow calmer. His clawlike fingers were feebly plucking at the blanket over his knees, and suddenly he doubled up his limbs, bringing his thighs above his stomach. . . . For the first time he opened his eyes. . . . In the small face, rigid as a mask of grayish clay, slowly the lips parted and from them rose a long, incessant scream . . . filling the ward with a fierce, indignant protest, so little childish that it seemed like a collective voice issuing from all the sufferers there. . . . Paneloux gazed down at the small mouth . . . pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind. He sank on his knees, and all present found it natural to hear him say in a voice hoarse but clearly audible across that nameless, never-ending wail:

"My God, spare this child!"

. . . And now the doctor grew aware that the child's wail . . . had fluttered into silence . . . the fight . . . was over . . . the end had come. . . . His mouth still gaping, but silent now, the child was lying among the tumbled blankets, a small, shrunken form, with the tears still wet on his cheeks (1948, 192-193).

In the presence of the agonizing death of a child, who can fail to be moved? But what, in Camus' rendition, does it signify? What did Camus intend to convey through this story, particularly, through this scene? To some critics, Camus has captured the perennial character of the human condition. Death and suffering constitute our lot, whether or not deserved, and that is a reality that causes us to pose difficult questions, including, in Western religious traditions, the question of theodicy.

To other critics, Camus' story is an allegory of the vicious spread of Nazi Fascism throughout Europe and into North Africa, a social pathology whose degenerative consequences threatened the utter decimation of whole populations. I have appropriated the story to symbolize what Johann Baptist Metz calls the "history of suffering" especially in its modern form, that is, in a time during which we have presumed to take historical destiny into our own hands. The irony of the modern age is located precisely in that presumption. We took hold of history, through our technology and our associations, in order to reduce suffering and to enhance human life, but, instead, in Metz's formulation, "Unhappiness and depravation, misery and evil, oppression and suffering have remained and intensified and in-

creased to planetary proportions" (1980, 124).

The history of suffering is therefore not the result merely of so-called "natural evil," although that is a factor not to be ignored. The history of suffering is perhaps now more than in prior epochs attributable to the quality of relations between self and other, even where it may seem to be the result of natural causes.

That is a thesis that underlies Richard Rubenstein's grim study of the modern age as an "age of triage." Triage, in medical usage, means the allocation of treatment in times of disaster to optimize the number of survivors. As such, its purpose seems most laudable. But its reverse side means the consignment of some persons to sure and certain death. Triage, in its socio-political application, means the implementation of policies whose impact, more or less deliberately intended, is to assure the elimination of whole populations, albeit ostensibly for good reason. To some, triage is another word for genocide.

The prime case of genocide in the twentieth century is the Nazi holocaust, the results of a deliberate policy to exterminate the Jewish people. The sheer horror of the event has brought us to treat it as an aberration. But, Rubenstein argues, it is not unique; it does not stand alone; it is not *sui generis*. It is part of a pattern initiated long before and continued since.

In the instance of Great Britain, often considered among the most civilized of nations, Rubenstein demonstrates how the enclosure movement of the 16th and 17th centuries, the poor laws of the 18th and 19th centuries, the emigration policies and the Irish famine of the 19th century can be compellingly interpreted as moves, designed and enforced by governmental policy, to dispose of unwanted populations. In the 20th century, similar cases are evident: the Armenian massacre by the Turkish government, Stalin's treatment of peasants and diverse ethnic and religious groups, and, more recently, practices of the Cambodian and Vietnamese governments. But Rubenstein does not spare the United States government from his critique; if one pursues the social consequences of recent policies respecting matters of welfare, employment, taxation, and education, one is driven to conclude that they constitute at least a modified form of triage. Taken altogether, they are productive of a massive underclass within the social system, an underclass enmeshed in a condition of psychic hopelessness and physical suffering.

The age of triage, Rubenstein asserts, was made possible by the triumph of instrumental rationality in the modern world. Instrumental rationality enhanced humankind's powers of knowing and doing. It infused all disciplines of investigation and it promoted new methods and means of production and organization. It introduced a utilitarian calculus of means and ends and it advanced efficiency as a paramount norm in social

practice. But it also enabled policy-makers to consider the humankind as simply another resource or liability to be weighed in the balance. Conjoined with social Darwinism and possessive individualism, instrumental rationality forms, for classes in positions of power and privilege, all the delineaments of a "viable religion." That is,

it provides an overarching structure of meaning in terms of which a group's experiences and values can be comprehended. It enables its adherents to believe that their social location, way of life, and fundamental values are cosmically grounded. . . . In a time of acute socio-economic crisis, . . . [it] could provide decision-makers with the legitimating ideology for political decisions that would spell disaster to millions of their fellow citizens (1983, 222).

In Rubenstein's judgment, to counter the policies and practices of the age of triage, supported as they are by the deep religiousness of modernity, we stand in the need, ultimately, of a religious transformation. We are in need of an inclusive structure of meaning in which no person can be considered surplus, in which the fate of one's neighbors is more than a prudential calculus, in which relations between self and other are governed by considerations of decency and concern. Under current world conditions, such a religious transformation must be informed by a new, encompassing vision:

it must be an inclusive vision appropriate to a global civilization in which Moses and Mohammed, Christ, Buddha, and Confucius all play a role. We can no longer rest content with a humanity divided into the working and the workless, the saved and the damned, the Occident and the Orient. Our fates are too deeply intertwined. . . . In truth, we must be born again as men and women blessed with the capacity to care for each other here and now (240).

The capacity to care for each other: that single phrase encapsulates the quality of the self-other relation which Rubenstein sets over against the age of triage and which constitutes the centerpiece of a post-modern social vision and the foundations of a social policy in which the alleviation of human suffering would be the first order of business.

Yet that phrase—the capacity to care for each other—may be too simple. Tzvetan Todorov, in his powerful study of the "conquest of America" as a paradigm for the modern era, asserts that the relation to the other consists of several dimensions. He distinguishes three. First, an axiological level: one may love or hate the other; one may find the other good or evil; that's an evaluative question in Todorov's terms. Second, a praxeological level: one may treat the other as identical with the self, as inferior or superior to the self, or one may be indifferent to the other; that's an actional question. Third, an epistemic level: one may know and understand the other in varying degrees of detail or intimacy; that's a cognitive question (1984, 185-186).

As Todorov presents the case, distinguishing the varying attributes of the conquistadores in their relations to native Americans, these levels are not necessarily correlative. One may, in some sense, love but lack detailed knowledge about the other. Conversely, one may possess an intricate and intimate understanding of the other, but not love. What, then, might one envision as an appropriate relation? Perhaps this: one loves the other. One knows and understands the other. But one also accepts and supports the otherness of the other and engages in that kind of intercommunication in which both self and other find themselves enhanced by the relationship. If that is what caring means, then the capacity to care for each other is the critical component of a social policy that takes the history of suffering seriously and of a religiousness that is worthy of our commitment.

Proposition #2: Religious traditions are both resource and obstacle in responding to the problem of self.

Throughout history, religious traditions have been subjected to critique—as an inhibition to creativity, a falsification of reality, an agent of injustice. The critique ought not to be ignored, for it contains, in its various forms, significant insight into the peculiar risks of religious commitment. Whether religious commitment and the practices it engenders do in fact represent, in Pieris' terms, "a revolutionary urge to generate a new humanity" is a question that needs pondering.

Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, in his brief treatise on *The Anti-Christ*, sets Christianity and the conditions of genuine happiness as diametrically opposed to each other. "Christianity," he writes, "has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted, it has made an ideal out of opposition to the preservative instincts of strong life." In contrast, he avers, "I consider life itself instinct for growth, for continuance, for accumulation of forces, for power: where the will to power is lacking there is decline. My assertion is that this will is lacking in all the supreme values of mankind—that values of decline, nihilistic values hold sway under the holiest of names" (1968, 117-118). This contrast is connected with Nietzsche's infamous doctrine of the *Übermensch*—the genius who stands out above the mass and whose life gives witness to the will to power. Whatever our judgment about the *Übermensch*, however, we should not forget Paul Tillich's transmutation of the will to power into the power of being. Without the power of being, the power, that is, of creative self-expression, the self is nothing. Can we deny that religious traditions have, in many times and places, stifled creative self-expression in the name of the divine?

Consider, secondly, Sigmund Freud's critique of religion which concentrates on its illusory foundations. Religious understandings, he argues, are "fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind." Such wish-fulfillment explains

the strength and durability of religious faith. In Freud's construction, the subjection of the self to divine powers is a repetition of the child's deep dependency on the father:

As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place (1964, 47-48).

These are, Freud admits, honorable concerns. But, given these concerns, better to respect the reality principle, to confront the tragic limitations of life for what they are, and to take on the tasks of civilized life courageously and deliberately than to assume through faith that some heavenly agent controls all details of the universe to our ultimate benefit. Can we deny that the psychodynamics underlying religious motivation oftentimes detracts the faithful from direct confrontation with the problem of the self?

Consider, thirdly, Karl Marx's critique of religion as a construct of consciousness, emerging out of the concrete realities of historical existence. To understand the meaning of religious doctrine and practice, one must uncover the social struggles and class antagonisms out of which they arise. Religion, in this sense, is ideological in character. As such, it may be the product of false consciousness, constructing an imaginary world and thereby concealing the actual dynamics and contradictions of historical life. Yet it may also be a force productive of change. Religion may function therefore in diverse ways: legitimating the intention of the powerful to perpetuate their position of privilege, responding to the prayers of the sorrowful to find solace in their pain, but also, in some cases, such as primitive Christianity and the Left Wing of the Reformation, motivating the yearning of the dispossessed to press for revolutionary action. But in any case, religious sentiments, while products of the imagination, are never wholly out of touch with the actual conditions of life, however, much they may cloak them in supernatural terms. Thus Marx writes:

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as

the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness (1978, 54).

Can we deny that the mythologies and rituals of religious traditions are susceptible to the hermeneutics of suspicion, that, if we would penetrate their full meaning and significance, we must uncover their interaction with the social tensions that constitute their historical context, that they may, despite their elegance and grand promise, function to sustain structures of oppression?

In short, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx—each of his own framework of interpretation—presents a compelling critique of religion from the standpoint of the problem of the self. But there is another side to the equation.

A few years ago, Robert Ackerman proposed that the discipline of philosophy of religion turn away from its traditional textual and analytic approach to religious thought in order to investigate instead "religion as critique." "Religions," he noted, "have arisen as legitimate protests against societies and ways of life, providing in the process the overpowering foundations for laying down one's life to improve the lot of humanity" (1985, ix). By juxtaposing an ideal world to an actual society, a religion breaks the bonds of cultural hegemony. It is a resource for distancing oneself from inherited routines. It enables one to look afresh at the institutional and historical context of one's life and to hold it up to critical scrutiny. It is a source of dissonance and, through its vision, it furnishes the makings of social reconstruction.

Ackerman does not claim that religion is nothing but social critique, but he does insist that religion is a constant source of critique. Moreover, he asserts that a religion without critical edge "is already dead" (1). A living and vibrant religion gives rise again and again to the "power of disruption" (3). As such, religion, in Ackerman's rendition,

is a source of pictures of how the world ought to be, pictures that can be repeatedly reinterpreted to evaluate new and even unexpected social patterns. The longevity of religion is related to its continuing ability to adapt its highest level pictures to new situations and to new forms of critique (5).

The Judaic concept of the covenant is an instance of this dynamic. The covenantal relationship is, in Ackerman's judgment, "sheer religious genius": the constant personal relationship between God and the people signified by the covenant is a source of continuing critique not only of other societies, but of Judaic social practice as well.

Now, we might ask, is there any point of convergence, an isomorphism between the critique of religion and, on the other hand, religion serving in its function as social critique? I believe there is. The point at which these movements converge is where each addresses the problem of the self, the history of suffering, the question of that quality of association in which and through

which self and other in their linkage with each other both flourish because of their interaction. The point of convergence acknowledges the ambivalence of the religious enterprise.

This point of convergence is keenly illuminated in the reflexive dialectics of the feminist movement. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, for instance, affirm at one and the same time that "religion is deeply meaningful in human life" and that "the traditional religions of the West have betrayed women" (1979, 1). Thus from the perspective of women's experience, an extensive internal critique and reconstruction of religious tradition has been initiated to purge the tradition of its sexism and all the suffering sexism entails in its violation of the selfhood of women. But it pursues this reconstructive work in a manner that sustains the deepest insights and resources of the tradition itself.

Riffat Hassan, for instance, is unremitting in her critique of Muslim societies in which Muslim women, presumably on grounds of Islamic authority, "have been kept for centuries in physical, mental, and emotional bondage and deprived of opportunities to see themselves as fully human" (1987, 97). Hassan, a Muslim originally from Pakistan, declares that the women's revolution is, in Muslim countries, "a terrifying reality that threatens to shake the world of Islam from within" (98). But the foundation of Hassan's critique is the most sacred text of Islam, the *Quran*. Through close textual and linguistic analysis, she demonstrates how verse after verse of the *Quran* has been mistranslated and misinterpreted to favor the oppression of women. Where traditionalists find male hierarchy, she demonstrates a principle of reciprocity; where traditionalists affirm inequality, she discovers equality. Where conservatives find authority for opposing family planning, Hassan asserts that "in this day and age there can be no doubt that a woman who has no control over her own body or who is compelled by social and religious pressures to play the part of a reproductive machine becomes less than a fully autonomous human being" (107). Over against the long standing practices of Muslim societies, she affirms "the basic intent of the *Quranic* statements of women's status as autonomous human being capable of being righteous as an act of choice" (198). Aware of a long history of oppression, Muslim women are asking for their rights, "rights given to them not by an Islamic government but by Allah" (109).

Proposition #3: Justice names that quality of relationship through which the self might flourish; justice, in this connection, is both a receiving and a giving.

I have adopted as a theme Pieris' proposition that the religious instinct is a revolutionary impulse to generate a new humanity. I have suggested that we begin by acknowledging our participation and complicity in a modern world confronted with the question

of the self and society as an issue in practical thought, with the question of the anguish of the self and the fate of the self as an issue in social practice. I have incorporated Rubenstein's thesis that the modern age is an age of triage in which whole classes of persons, considered redundant and superfluous, are either exterminated summarily or condemned by political and economic policy to live in conditions of crushing deprivation if not premature death. But I have also quoted, with approval, Rubenstein's challenge: "In truth, we must be born again as men and women blessed with the capacity to care for each other here and now" (1983, 249).

The problem of the self on the plane of social practice consists of two dimensions: the struggle against suffering and the possibility of human flourishing, or, in other words, the struggle against ill-being and the formation of structures of well-being. In this connection, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki points to a paradox present in social practice and religious traditions, namely, ill-being is oftentimes ordained and sanctioned as well-being. Poverty and misery are deemed acceptable, if not as good in themselves, then good as a means to a higher end—the long-range welfare of the social order as a whole or the ultimate salvation of the human soul. But the convoluted argument entailed in such a paradoxical identification, she finds repugnant, at least as it pertains to marginalized and deprived peoples:

The ill-being of women, blacks, and others outside the dominant cultural value system has been called well-being within a posited system of order. Irony rather paradox might be a more appropriate name for such twists, and I, a feminist, cannot in any way consider these views as functions for dealing salvifically with social situations not easily changed. Rather, using justice as an internal basis for criticism, I name such practices evil, and call for their reform (1987, 158).

I share Marjorie Suchocki's sentiment: the critique of justice names such practices evil and calls for their reform. But we must be cautious at this point. The meaning of justice is a highly contestable issue. In traditional phrasing, of course, justice is rendered: to give to each one's due. That tells us something, albeit of a formal character. Justice, as such, embraces both a giving and a receiving. It is a correlation between a duty and a right, an obligation and an expectation. In its full meaning, justice specifies a structure of reciprocity. It is therefore a relational term. In its multiple forms and levels, justice designates the proper structure of relations between persons and groups. It represents a quality that should permeate our several social practices through which we are linked with each other and our interactions are canalized. It is both distributive and aggregative. It intends a certain distribution of the powers and privileges, goods and services that flow through a social system. And it intends the coalescence of the

lives and energies of persons into structures of collaboration and cooperation.

As giving to each one's due, justice is thus properly understood as a dominant if not the paramount virtue of social institutions. But such an understanding of justice is highly generalized. It states what justice is about, but it does not specify what justice is. It portrays what counts for justice, but it does not define what substantive conception of justice might suffice to give body and soul to notions of ill-being and well-being. The controversies—philosophical and political—that rage over plausible meanings of justice are focussed at that precise point. They are contests over substantive conceptions of that social virtue.

Contestants within these controversies are many and diverse. At the risk of oversimplification, I shall cite three types. As representing conceptions of justice, each comprehends both a negation and an affirmation. That is, these types differ in both what they are against (some idea of ill-being) and what they aspire to (some idea of well-being).

To libertarians, for instance, the central quality of justice is the freedom of the individual. The coercive hegemony of social practices frustrating the wishes and desires of the individual constitutes the evil to be conquered. Individuals should be free to think as they will, to act as they desire, to use their property as they determine. The fewer the constraints on self-determination and free choice, the better.

To egalitarians, in contrast, the primary trait of justice is equality in the distribution of the benefits of social life, including political power and economic goods. The unequal allocation of fundamental social resources among classes and groups within a social system is the primary cause of suffering and misery. Individuals should not be deprived of equality of opportunity because of social policies and cultural expectations. If political and legal constraints are required to assure the equal distribution of opportunity, then such constraints are legitimate and acceptable.

To communitarians, the driving purpose of justice is the construction of forms of mutuality. The dominant social problem is the prevalence of structures of alienation, that is, institutions within which persons are entrapped in patterns of activity that contradict their own good. The practice of slavery is a classic example; patterns of sexist and ethnic degradation are no less illustrative. Justice, as the antithesis of alienation, is located where all persons are fully fledged participants in the creative give-and-take of systems of intercommunication. In this case, a fundamental goodness is present in the process of creative interchange itself, for it is in that process that the lives of all are enriched.

Are these understandings of the substantive meaning of justice irreconcilable? Perhaps. Certainly proponents of these understandings are at loggerheads over a

wide range of fundamental social policies—from taxation to welfare, from corporate governance to affirmative action.

Yet, at one level at least, there is something that seems compelling about all three perspectives. Each of the three, I would urge, gives voice to a significant dimension of the experience of the self and thus bears some relevance to the problem of the self.

Individuality is one dominant feature of the experience of the self. The self is unique, *sui generis*, has a character and a history different from all others. There is an inevitable solitariness that attends our experience, a solitariness that sometimes takes the form of loneliness. Each of us is, to some degree, a creative agent even in those moments when subjected to unyielding constraints.

Comparability is a second feature of the experience of the self. That is, as we evaluate ourselves in comparison with others, while acknowledging certain kinds of relative superiority and inferiority, we have a deep sense of equal dignity. At some profound level, we experience ourselves as, in principle, no worse though no better, than others.

Solidarity is a third feature of the experience of the self. Our lives are caught up in webs of interrelatedness. We live out of a common history and we live in association. We are engaged in forms of shared existence from which we cannot in any full and complete way extricate ourselves.

Individuality, comparability, and solidarity are all essential features of our experience of ourselves as selves. If justice is to give to each one's due, then justice requires that all these features be honored and respected in our several associations and social practices. The history of suffering is the history of injustice. It is the denial of our individuality, the rejection of our comparability, the distortion of our solidarity. It is, in short, the violation of the self.

But we must be cautious at this point. Among others, those schooled in *Religionsgeschichte* would remind us of the radical differences in the identity of the self expressed in the various cultures of humankind. Even within a single cultural history, variations abound. The Jain doctrine of *jiva*, the Vedantist theory of *Brahman-Atman*, the Buddhist principle of *anatta*—although all are strains within the cultural history of South Asia—seem at odds with each other in their interpretations of the condition and destiny of the human self. Pluralism in religious and philosophical understanding and pluralism in cultural ethos and social practice are indisputable features of our common life however much we may lament the fact. Yet, I would contend, pluralism does not necessarily undercut the principle of justice I have adumbrated. On the contrary, that principle of justice, acknowledging such pluralism, would honor it, encourage it, and support it, as expressive of the very features of the self that give justice its substance.

Proposition #4: Justice is a perspective from which the vast religious plurality of the human world might be susceptible to inter-

pretation and evaluation.

Alan Race recently developed a useful typology of approaches by Christian theologians to the presence of divergent religious traditions within the community of humankind (1982). From its beginnings, the Christian community has encountered alternative forms of faith, but the question of how properly to take account of religious diversity has become an increasingly critical issue in modern times. Each faith lays claim, in some fashion or other, to the truth and wisdom of its professed way of life and manner of thought. But, as our knowledge of divergent religious traditions has become more sophisticated, we—whether Christian, Jewish, or whatever—become more keenly aware of the radicality of the differences and the seeming impossibility of rendering these traditions wholly compatible with each other. We are therefore forced to confront the question of relationship: what is the proper way to understand and to interpret how these divergent traditions stand in comparison with each other?

Race constructs three alternative ways of responding to that question among Christian theologians: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. *Exclusivism*, in its most rigorous Christian form, declares that Christianity is the sole repository of truth. From that perspective, other forms of faith, however attractive, are grounded in error. There is but one valid faith and one way to human fulfillment, and that is located in the apostolic tradition. *Inclusivism* at least appears on the surface more appreciative of alternative religious communities. It declares that each tradition has merit, each tradition bears some truth and conveys some wisdom through its rituals and doctrines. But each is, in the final analysis, deficient. The fullness of truth is borne only in the Christian witness. There may be “anonymous” or “hidden” Christians among other traditions, even among professed atheists, but, while lacking the explicit name, they are measured by the meaning of Christian dogma.

Pluralism, the third approach Race distinguishes, is more nearly relativistic in its embrace of difference. But it often assumes that, underlying all forms of faith is a common ultimate reality, although the apprehension each faith has of that reality is limited and partial. The pluralist, acknowledging the historicity of religious cultures, the deeply conditioned character of the language and practice of religious tradition, is characteristically tolerant in the face of incompatibilities and patient in the presence of religious argument and conflict.

The debate among these three parties, at least as Race has constructed it, seems concentrated on a single basic question: the question of truth in religious belief and religious practice. At that point, of course, we encounter all the confusions and contentions that occupy much of contemporary philosophical and theological discourse. The question of truth, we must admit, is not unimportant, however it is cast, especially if

the truth pertains to our destiny. But, to take a turn that is congenial at least to some strains in that discourse, might it not be instructive to shift our attention, at least for a time, from the question of truth to the question of justice? Might it not be wise, if I may invoke that ancient term, to turn from the seeming abstractions of pure reason to the pressing issues of practical reason? Should we not take up, as our first order of business in encountering religious plurality, the question of the anguish of the self and the fate of the self in the modern world? Should we not consider the history of suffering as our preeminent priority as we proceed in our interpretations and evaluations of all forms of faith, including our own?

Once again, I would invoke an insight from Marjorie Suchocki. Liberation theologians, she notes, are keenly aware of “the invidious effects that follow when one mode of humanity is made normative for others.” That dynamic applies to relations between men and women, whites and blacks, First World and Third World. It applies as well to relations among the religions. She is led thereby to promote a radical form of religious pluralism, but, significantly, permeated and governed by the principle of justice:

universalizing one religion such that it is taken as the norm whereby all other religions are judged and valued leads to oppression, and hence falls short of the norm that liberationists consider ultimate—the normative justice that creates well-being in the world community.

A feminist perspective, therefore, suggests that one must radically affirm religious pluralism, but not without bringing a critical consciousness of well-being in human community to inter-religious and intrareligious discussion. Justice is thus to be the fundamental criterion of value and the focus of dialogue and action among religions (1987, 149).

Suchocki is not unaware of the seeming inconsistency of her proposal. She resists the old imperialism of religious claims: that imperialism “leads to oppression.” But she then, it seems, promotes a new imperialism. She calls it justice, the mandate to create “well-being in the world community.” But whose conception of well-being, whose vision of social order, whose justice is the “fundamental criterion of value” by which religious traditions are to be assessed?

Suchocki's response is complex. First, she insists that, in the investigation of the religions of humankind, one might find some degree of unanimity on “the value of freedom from suffering” (159). But, in any case, “there is a certain intransigence to the norm” of justice “when it comes to fundamental aspects of human existence, such as peaceful access to food, water, health, shelter, work, and community” (157). Second, she proposes that, as an implication of the meaning of justice, “the primary visions within each religion of what societal life should be in a ‘perfect’ world is [sic] a source

of judgment that can be used internally within each religion to judge its present societal forms of justice" (159). Third, she suggests that proponents of the world's religions have an obligation to engage in common discourse about their several understandings of ill-being and well-being with the intention of concerted action, where feasible, toward the transformation of oppressive social structures. In that very process, she notes, the several understandings of religious traditions might be modified and transformed. Fourth, she asserts that justice in its attentiveness to the historicity of the human condition, is itself supportive and protective of cultural and therefore religious diversity.

Paul Knitter, as well, has proposed that the question of justice take precedence in the interpretation of religious plurality and the conduct of interreligious discourse. Taking his cue from theologies of liberation, he adopts three concepts for this purpose: a hermeneutics of suspicion, a preferential option for the poor, and a soteriocentric criterion of judgment.

First, a hermeneutics of suspicion. Proponents of religious traditions, especially those in privileged positions, must be constantly reminded that religious practice has often been employed to cloak and to promote class interests. "All too often the truth that we propose as 'God's will' or as divinely revealed is really our own disguised, subconscious will to maintain the status quo or to protect our own control of the situation or our own cultural-economic superiority" (1987, 182). Under the broad mandate of justice, a hermeneutics of suspicion requires a rigorous and meticulous form of self-critique.

Second, a preferential option for the poor. Knitter asserts that a preferential option for the poor—"that is, the option to work with and for the victims of this world"—is or should be the driving purpose of interreligious discourse (185). Knitter is aware of potential resistance to as well as the potential fruitfulness of such a starting point.

If (a big if!) followers of various traditions could agree to a shared commitment to confronting the cross-cultural and cross-religious crises of our age, if they could share a "preferential option" for suffering humanity and suffering earth, they would have a common starting point or context on the basis of which they could, possibly, construct together some always shaky common ground of mutual understanding and cooperation. In such a soteriocentric (rather than theocentric) model for discourse, norms for discerning truth and value are derived from the shared but always relatively grasped ideal of humanity's and the earth's *well-being*. What that well-being requires can be known only in the dialogue (1989, 207).

Third, a soteriocentric criterion of mutual judgment. In contrast to the methodological principle of strict neutrality, Knitter proposes that proponents of diverse religious

traditions not shy from evaluative judgments of each other. Yet, to avoid the pitfalls of utter arbitrariness and ideological abuse, such judgments must be directed to specific doctrines and practices (not to the tradition as a whole). They must be governed by the intention to do justice in the world (not to advance the hegemony of one's own faith over the other). And they must be receptive to countercritique (not presented as unassailable dogma). The driving aim of such judgments is collaboration in addressing the history of suffering, particularly as that history is bodied forth in the crises of the modern world.

Proposition #5: *In its depths, justice, as I am rendering the term, is expressive of a communal cosmology which as such generates visions of a new social order in which and through which the prospects of human flourishing might be greatly enhanced.*

I have suggested that liberty, equality, and community are the three touchstones of justice. That is, justice, as the disposition to give to each one's due, mandates the incorporation of the qualities of individuality, comparability, and solidarity in our common life. The violation of justice is the human cause of suffering. The sustenance of justice is the human cause of life's flourishing. Justice is therefore a cardinal virtue of social institutions and a requisite in the advance of life. Justice, I have declared, is the proper response to the anguish of the self in the modern world. Understood as such, justice finds historical rootage in religious tradition, but may also, in a reflexive turn, be employed as a fulcrum of judgment upon religious practice. While justice construed in this manner does not and cannot provide sure and certain solutions to all the detailed issues of our social existence, it does, at least, give warrant to our profound sense of malaise about conditions of modern life and it does give inspiration and direction to our constructive energies. It sets out an agenda whose extent and urgency betrays the perversity of contemporary civilization: sexism and racism, neo-colonialism and poverty, militarism and the threat of nuclear annihilation, the extinction of innumerable species and the prospects of massive degradation of the biosphere. All these items bear witness to the problem of the self—the fate of the self—in the modern age.

Yet, let us admit, these pronouncements about justice, however much they may appeal to the deliberations of our practical reason, are, in some other portion of our minds, troubling. We may yearn for some foundation on which to respond to the history of suffering. We may crave some assured ground on which to understand the meaning and from which to advance the growth of the self. But is there such a ground? Or must we, in our maturity and our sophistication, acknowledge the absence of any firm standing place? Have we not become so imbued with historical consciousness and, as a consequence, so aware of the relativity of our several perspectives on

life that we are properly wary of any effort to secure a benchmark for judgment, theoretical or practical? In one way or another, this issue, the issue of foundationalism, pervades virtually all contemporary disciplines of the mind—philosophy of science and ethics, *Religionsgeschichte* and literary analysis.

In response to this issue, I would invoke the effort of Richard Bernstein to discover a way "beyond objectivism and relativism," that is, to determine whether there is an alternative method in the formation of judgments beyond the dogmatism and certainties of the objectivist tradition and the buzzing, blooming confusions of relativism. Bernstein construes objectivism as "the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal to determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness." The job of the theorist is to uncover that foundation without which we would be at a loss in our thinking and in our doing. Relativism, on the other hand, Bernstein defines as "the basic conviction that when we turn to . . . those concepts . . . taken to be the most fundamental—whether . . . rationality, truth, reality, right, the good, or norms—we are forced to recognize . . . all such concepts . . . as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture." To the relativist, there is a nonreducible plurality of such references; there are no overarching standards of judgment among the possibilities; fundamental forms of life are radically incommensurable (1983, 8).

We confront, Bernstein declares, a dilemma. Given the acknowledged idiosyncrasies of relations between self and world, objectivism is *passé*. However, given the urgencies of the crises at hand, relativism seems unacceptable. Is there a third way? Bernstein argues that there is. He discovers its emergence among a range of contemporary social critics. In a word, it is a dialogic alternative. The language of dialogue, communication, solidarity, community is indicative of a move beyond the classical principle of objectivity and the modern turn toward a principle of subjectivity to a new possibility: a principle of intersubjectivity.

Within the dialectic of intersubjectivity—when and where it is unobstructed and undistorted (an all too rare moment under modern conditions)—divergence of perspective is deeply respected, but only so long as it sustains and enriches the dialectic. In principle at least, relativity is there conjoined with continuity. Such an understanding of rationality as dialogic is not without its import in social practice. The social counterpart of dialogic rationality is that kind of energetic democracy depicted by Hanna Pitkin and Sara Shumer (as quoted in Bernstein):

Democratic politics is an encounter among people with differing interests, perspectives, and opinions—an encounter in which they reconsider and mutu-

ally revise opinions and interests, both individual and common. It happens always in a context of conflict, imperfect knowledge, and uncertainty, but where community action is necessary. The resolutions achieved are always more or less temporary, subject to reconsideration, and rarely unanimous. What matters is not unanimity but discourse. The substantive common interest is only discovered or created in democratic political struggle, and it remains contested as much as shared. Far from being inimical to democracy, conflict—handled in democratic ways, with openness and persuasion—is what makes democracy work, what makes for the mutual revision of opinions and interest (1983, 223-224).

The dialectic of intersubjectivity together with its political corollary, energetic democracy, is contingent, I suspect, on an often unspoken premise, a premise we must lift to the surface and ponder, namely, that with all our differences and through all our conflicts, we belong together. We can speak with each other, even engage in deathly struggles with each other, because we are connected with each other. The self, even in its solitariness, is always, as Caroline Whitbeck puts it in her feminist ontology, "a relational and historical being": "the realization of the self can be achieved only in and through relationships and practices" (1983, 82). The premise, however, must be extended to surmount its anthropocentric limitations. We are members not only of a sociosphere, but of a vast biosphere in whose intricate lines of interdependency we are thoroughly engaged, however little we comprehend of that engagement.

I am claiming, in short, that the dialectic of intersubjectivity, extended to include its connotations about the meaning of the self as relational and the cosmos as communal, provides a grounding for the principle of justice. The dialectic of intersubjectivity and the principle of justice are congruent in their concern for the quality of relationships and therefore the forms of our associations with each other.

Justice betokens a style of life whose theme is self in community and whose driving purpose is two-sided. Its purpose, negatively, is to shatter structures of oppression and domination, to reform patterns of indifference and insensitivity. But its purpose, in the long haul, is to construct the conditions whereby the genius of each individual and each culture (including each religious community) might enrich the lives of all others; it is to encourage new forms of creative intercommunication. Under the circumstances of modern history, that is no mean task. But, I would declare, that is the mandate of practical reason.

And, if I would be faithful to my opening quotation from Aloysius Pieris, that is the implication of the religious instinct. Recall Pieris' primary proposition: "I submit that the religious instinct be defined as a revolutionary urge, a psycho-social impulse, to generate a new humanity" (1983, 134). I am

reminded of Alfred North Whitehead's maxim: "Religion is world loyalty." In its context, that maxim affirms at one and the same time the value of the individual for itself and the value of the objective world in its dynamic interconnections with the individual. "The moment of religious consciousness," he writes, "starts from self-valuation, but it broadens into the concept of the world as a realm of adjusted values, mutually intensifying or mutually destructive" (1960, 58-59). Justice, as the practical edge of the religious impulse, resists the latter and reaches out for the former. That is the response of justice to the anguish of the self in the modern world. And that, I dare to propose, is the substance of the internal critique of religious traditions drawn from the inspiration of their own resources as they confront the persistent problems of the history of suffering and envision the revolutionary prospect of a new time and a new humanity.

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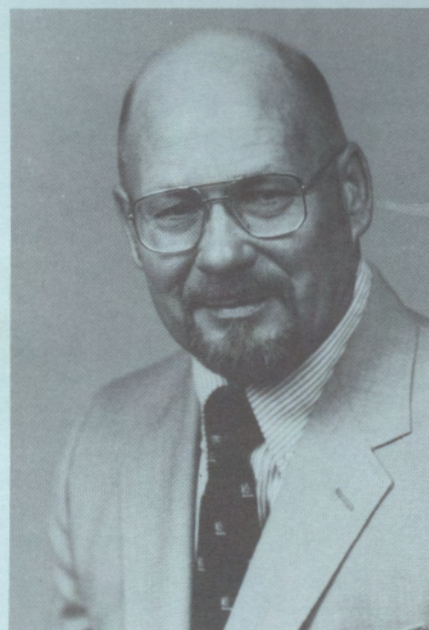
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Religious Studies Department Public Lecture

Robert D. Baird, Professor of Religion, School of Religion at the University of Iowa, will present a public lecture at 8 p.m. April 18 in Room 100, Smith Hall on the University of Kansas Campus. The title of Dr. Baird's address will be "International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) and the Struggle for Legitimation."



KSR Annual Meeting Speaker

Dr. Jane I. Smith, Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, will present the annual KSR lecture for 1990 on "Islamic Revival and the Implications for Interfaith Dialogue." This address will be at the annual KSR banquet at the Student Union of the University of Kansas on Tuesday, April 3.

Dr. Smith completed her Bachelor of Arts degree at Michigan State University, Bachelor of Divinity at Hartford Seminary Foundation, and her Ph.D. in the History of Religions at Harvard University in 1970. She then taught for two years in Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University before joining the faculty at Harvard University where she continued her teaching in the History of Religions and served in administrative positions in the Center for the Study of World Religions and Harvard Divinity School to 1986. She then moved to her present position at Iliff School of Theology.

She has presented lectures and participated in many major conferences in the United States and around the world, includ-

ing in recent years an international conference on Islam in Jakarta, Indonesia, and as visiting lecturer at the American Research Center in Cairo, Egypt. She has served on the Committee on Christian-Muslim Relations of the National Council of Churches and the Committee on Internationalization of Theological Education of the Association of Theological Schools.

Dr. Smith's extensive research and impressive publications center on Islamic studies and the role of women in world religions. Among her publications are *The Concept of 'Islam' in the History of Qur'anic Exegesis* (1975), co-author of *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (1981), co-editor of *Introduction to Religions of the East: Reader* (1974), and co-editor of *Women in Contemporary Muslim Society* (1980).

The banquet will be held in the Big Eight Room of the Student Union, beginning at 6:00 p.m. Cost is \$10.50 per person. *Reservations are needed by March 28.* Checks for reservations may be sent to the Kansas School of Religion, 1300 Oread Avenue, Lawrence, Kansas 66045. Tel. 913-843-7257.

The KSR annual lecture is open to the public without charge for those unable to attend the banquet and will begin at 7:00 p.m. in the Big Eight Room.

Dr. Smith will make two other presentations while in Lawrence. Interested persons are invited to attend any of these meetings

without charge except for the luncheon on Wednesday.

Tuesday, April 3

2:30 to 3:30 p.m. "Islam and Women" in Professor Dan Breslauer's class on "Studies in Islam." 107 Smith Hall.

Wednesday, April 4

11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. "The Situation of Muslims in America Today." Address at a luncheon at the Ecumenical Christian Ministries, 1204 Oread Avenue. *Reservations should be made by calling 913-843-4933.*



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