Religion and the Newer Forms of Consciousness

JOSEPH L. BLAU
Columbia University

The trouble begins because we all use the word "religion" without any clear idea either of what we mean by it or of how whatever it is functions in our lives. "Religion," as most people use the term, most of the time, means an organization, an institution, an establishment—a church, a synagogue, a mosque, an ashram. The kinds of organization vary greatly. Some involve a relatively simple coming-together of equals for mutual support, like the classical type of Quaker meeting, while others entail the maintenance of a vast bureaucracy and a real-estate empire, like the Roman Catholic Church. Some are focused inwardly, on the spiritual state of their own members, like the Pentecostal churches, while others are focused outwardly, on the moral condition of the environing society, like the so-called mainline Protestant Christian communions. Some emphasize ritual correctness; others stress right belief; still others subordinate both to right living. Some exercise rigorous control over their adherents and the helpless children of their adherents from womb to tomb, while others make very modest demands on their members. Whatever the form, however great or small the obligation, the organization provides a means of identification, and hence of security, for its followers. In a world of incessant physical mobility, occupational mobility, social mobility, economic mobility—a world in which anonymity is hard to avoid, where in fact most of us struggle most of the time to maintain our anonymity, not to get involved with others as whole persons but only to carry on necessary functional relations with others as fragmentary beings—the institutions of religion may constitute a glorious exception.

We need roots. We moderns need, as Simone Weil pointed out nearly a quarter of a century ago, to grow new roots to replace those that we have lost. Uprootedness has become a central phenomenon of the spirit in the modern world. Rerooting cannot take place by the simplistic expedient of merely returning to the land, for although uprootedness may originally have been a development of urban life, by now it is a *malaise* prevalent in the countryside as well. And so the two processions pass each other—the uprooted and alienated populations of the cities naively seeking to find roots by returning to the land—the uprooted and alienated populations of the countryside seeking to find roots by moving to the cities. Both are naive because human roots grow not in the soil but in the soul.

II

The institutional meaning is not the only meaning of the word "religion." Sometimes, when we use the word, we refer to that which is most personal, most central to the life

of the individual person, the core of significance that makes sense out of the multifarious variety of daily activities in the life of each one of us. We may not often think of it, consciously. Yet somewhere, somehow, each one of us has a sense of a unified meaning lying behind all the unmeaningful actions of our lives. The unifying focus, the vision of our own lives and our own selves as serving a necessary purpose, fulfilling a necessary role in the economy of the universe, is that to which in the personal sense we attach the word "religion."

If, as I suggested before, we derive our identification from our associations and affiliations with organized groups and in the ultimate analysis from our affiliations with organized religious groups, I should now add that from our personal religion each one of us gains a sense of identity. We may answer the question "Who are you?" when it is asked by another person, by naming a church, a sororal or fraternal organization, a school, an occupation, listing the number of a bank account, a social security card, an automobile operator's license: but no such answer satisfies me when I ask myself "Who am I?" That is a much more demanding question. It must be answered in terms of the essentials of my being myself, uniquely and incomparably, not in terms of the external, accidental, and inessential identifications on the cards I carry. I must define myself to myself in terms of my real identity, my place in the universe, my sense of the cosmic meaning of my life.

As a rule, though not without exceptions, the achievement of an identity by defining oneself to oneself is a gradual process. It involves trying on many roles and self-images, for we find our identity by excluding what we are not as well as by including what we are. We may discover some aspects of ourselves when we are very young, but there are other aspects that may be recognized only in late maturity. The more complex the society becomes, the more numerous the social roles that open to the younger generation, the more preparation is needed for any of these social roles and the longer delayed is the discovery of self-identity. At the very time that young people should be trying to understand their meaning in the cosmic scheme, we demand that they study for their part in the social scheme and the economic sphere. And this well-meant insistence delays even longer the process of self-definition which is the development of a personal religious understanding.

III

In an ideal situation—such as never has existed or can exist—it would be the function of the organized institutions of religion to provide a space within which each individual's personal sense of life's meanings could be worked out in the presence of and with the support of others. The others would themselves be engaged in the same process, though each might be at a different stage of self-exploration. The mutual support of each for each could very well be expressed both in the informal meetings and crossings of paths and and in the more formal exercises of rituals specifically designed to strengthen and affirm a sense of community.

This unconcealed mutual supportiveness might well be called love of one's fellow humans, even as the moral basis of the family is not to be found in an outward form, demonstratively, but in the mutual supportiveness of its members. Surely it is no accident that those sectarian groups that have striven most consciously to organize as mutually

supportive communities have used the language of family life as the figurative expression of their religious goals. A particularly clear example is provided by the Familists, a group in seventeenth-century England, whose more formal name was "The Family of Love." Nor is it by chance that among American blacks, a people whose need for mutual support is very great, the favored form of religious address is "Sister" and "Brother." The ideal family should prefigure the ideal religious society.

But institutions inevitably develop a life of their own. Habitual forms of action and interaction stiffen into precedents, and precedents harden into rules. Those who comprise the permanent staffs of institutions are engaged to serve the members. They retain in their explicit job descriptions, and often in the way they privately conceive their roles, the notion of service—because we are all prone to self-deception—but since they manage the day-by-day affairs of the institutions, they soon come to serve by governing, and a further hardening of institutional arteries ensues. Ultimately the whole notion of mutual supportiveness becomes focused on supporting the institution in order that it, and its staff, may serve by exercising control.

Among the controls that develop are controls on behavior and controls on belief. Pressures to conform increase and the words of Ecclesiastes become as the definition of permanent policy: "The thing that hath been is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun." The institutions created to free the spirit of mankind become dampers on freedom of the spirit. Traditionalism becomes the guiding principle of group life. The institution looks back on its past with smug self-satisfaction, but instead of being transformed into a pillar of salt, it is transformed into a pillar of respectability. And it no longer serves the young because the world in which it conceives itself is no longer the world in which they must find their way. To the very degree that religious institutions become most firmly settled in their societies—or in their sense of the term, most successful—they tend to lose value for those who most need help in developing a personal religious meaning.

IV

Broadly speaking, we make use of organized religion at different times in our lives to provide a sense of rooting. Our needs are threefold. One of these is retrospective, or historical. We expect our religious institutions to put us in touch with the best thoughts and the highest ideals of our ancestors and to preserve these thoughts and ideals in a form that we trust is pure and original. By reference to this body of traditional material we seek a sense of belonging, a rootedness; this we seek especially in passing through the stressful middle years of life. In the commonplace, but unthinking, inversion, we speak of the ancestors whose thoughts and ideals we revere as "the ancients," reckoning time backward from ourselves. We seek to recover a warm and comforting uterine tranquility by wrapping ourselves in the wisdom of "the ancients" as a buffer against the universal, disheartening disappointment of middle age, the discovery that our reach exceeds our grasp. This retrospective use of religious institutions is inherently conservative.

Secondly, there is a prospective use of our religions. We expect them to provide us with assurances about our ultimate destiny. The older we grow and the more immediate

the prospect of death, the more urgently we wish assurances that our death is not a "dead end." We do not know what will happen to our individuality when we die, yet we are so involved with it while we live that we cannot believe it is destined for oblivion. When Professor J. H. Leuba of Bryn Mawr questioned many thousands of educated Americans, leaders in business, the arts, and the professions, between 1910 and 1938, he found that they consistently retained a belief in *personal* immortality to a greater degree than they did a belief in a *personal* God. Were God merely an impersonal force, or another way of saying 'nature', or a projection of human hopes and fears, many found it quite acceptable; but that they themselves were to disappear at death, were to lose all personal identity, was, for a great many, an intolerable thought. We use religion, then, to guarantee and sanctify our hopes of immortality. This may not be *con*servative, but it is certainly *pre*servative.

Neither of these two ways of using religion is likely, in our age, to lead to violent conflict or to stir up controversy, although there have been times when it might have done so. There is, however, still a third use we make of religion that has been a major source of conflict in the past and continues to be so in the present. Our third expectation is that our religion will serve to guide us in solving the problems we are faced with in our everyday living. We *all* want our religion to suggest to us how we are to live in the here-and-now, but this guiding role is especially valued and especially needed by those whose character is still in formation. Judging by the extent to which the counselling function has occupied the time of ministers, priests, and rabbis, by the number of theological seminaries that have introduced courses in "pastoral counselling," and by the number of psychiatrists appointed to the faculties of seminaries of all faiths, it may well be that this need for guidance through the complexities of the modern world is the chief function of religion today.

To be adequate in this function our religion must face the modern world squarely if the guidance it gives, especially to the young, is to be relevant. It does no good to talk around the present by referring only to the tradition that sums up the experience of the past, or by holding to the imaginings that encompass the hopes of the future. Older folk can be fooled by the pious platitudes of preachers and politicians, but our young people have a keen ear for insincerity in both churches and states. They hear the music as well as the words. And they are acutely aware of the modern world. Unlike us, their elders, their consciousness is wholly in and of modernity. Because they are so familiar with the questions and demands of the modern era, their sense of what is not an answer is exact. We cannot fob off shopworn half-truths on them as guiding principles; they have eyes to see that these are not the principles by which we live. And we cannot present our institutions, whether religious, political, educational, or what-not, to them as embodiments of satisfactory modes of answering the demands of modern life, for they can see how shoddy and false are the practices that belie the high-sounding words.

V

So the consciousness of our youth-generation rejects our forms of religiosity and our established institutions of religion. But does this mean, then, that this is the first generation in all known human history to have no need of religion? Are our forms and insti-

tutions so sacrosanct as to be unchallengeable? In the face of the records of the ways in which the religious traditions for which we claim to speak have changed over the past thousands of years dare we be so dogmatic as to assert our way as the only valid way? It may well be that out of the froth and ferment of the new forms of consciousness, speaking through the souls and with the voices of the first generation of those who are wholly modern, there will come not the destruction but the fulfillment for our time of religious goals. Rejection of our present institutional forms is entirely compatible with a profoundly religious quest—the search for a personal identity for some, the search for a group identification for others.

I have been intrigued by some evidence—inconclusive as yet, but most suggestive—that during these very same years when rather large numbers of our Western young people have been exploring some aspects of Asian religions, comparable groups of Asian youth have been studying aspects of Judaism and Christianity. If further evidence should show that this is indeed the case, I suggest that the explanation is that Asian religions come to our young people without institutional restrictions and limitations and therefore allow the individual free play in the search for cosmic meaning in life, while the Asian counterparts of our young people meet the religions of their own cultures in institutional strait-jackets but find freedom of quest in Western religions.

What, then, should we do? Should we, in order to hold our youth within traditional institutions, substitute today's fads for the time-hallowed and time-tested ideals that express the experience of many generations? Many a church and many a synagogue, in the frantic effort to be "with it"—whatever "it" may be—have sacrificed the regard and respect of the mature in order to pander to the latest fashion. One can hardly recognize the traditional element in the programs of many of the seminaries that are now supposed to be training the next generation of clergy. And what is the response of the young people to this? It has recently been shown (by Dean Kelley) that they are flocking in droves *not* to the churches that are trying desperately to keep up with the flickering consciousness of the moment, but to the churches of a fundamentalist cast—the ones that make as little concession as possible to the modern world and demand as much commitment as possible from their adherents. I cannot prove that the same pattern holds for Jewish youth, but I suspect it does. The children of parents in the Reform and Conservative wings are joining Orthodox groups, trying to maintain kosher homes, bearing witness to their Judaism and not merely to their Jewishness.

This turn to the religious right is significant, no doubt, but it, too, is an affair of the moment. We should seek its meaning below the surface, in what it implies, what it tells us about what young people need and want from us, their parents, their teachers, their religious leaders. They do want the freedom to develop in their own way, the freedom to think their own thought and explore their own world. We do them no favor by considering them as boys and girls when they are men and women. But they do want guidance and limitation that can help them to find their way from immaturity to maturity. Ultimately, I am convinced, they will find the way of the fundamentalists and of the orthodox valuable for teaching what we have failed to teach—the nature of commitment and of obligation, but they will also find it too crippling, too restrictive, too limiting; and they will turn back.

VI

The conservative, institutional aspect of religion, its social value, its preservation of those phenomena of group life that are held sacred by the group, has always been balanced by a dynamic aspect, a more creative side that faces frankly the changes in the world and tries to find the wisdom to interpret those changes. Call these, metaphorically, if you will will, the centripetal "priestly" emphasis and the centrifugal "prophetic" emphasis. No purely centripetal religious group can long remain effective because with the multiplication of changes it no longer supplies relevant guidance; on the other hand, no purely centrifugal religious movement can long hold together as a group. A dynamic, centrifugal, prophetic spirit housed and made welcome within a conservative, centripetal, priestly institution can survive because it can move with the times without breaking into fragments.

To make our young people feel unwelcome by overly stressing the conservation of older motifs and practices is certainly no way to keep our religious institutions relevant to the modern world. On the other hand to chase after the will-of-the-wisp of the newest form of consciousness is to lose all stability, all dignity, without compensating results, for the newest today is old-hat tomorrow. The turn to the religious Right should reveal to us the need of a priestly sense of responsibility to the institution, the group, the past. The continuing ferment of new ideas and emotions should reveal to us the need of a prophetic sense of responsibility to the ideal, the individual, the future. When we learn to balance these obligations, our religions will be relevant to young and old alike, because they will teach us how to live, and not merely how to die.