



The Quest for Transcendence

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The 1980s are a time of considerable ambivalence religiously speaking. According to the highly regarded and often cited prophecies, this was to be the era of pervasive and rampant *secularism*. Twenty years have passed since the bold announcement was made that “God is dead.” By now citizens of the western world were to have become so accustomed to that truth that it would retain absolutely no shock value whatever.

But it hasn’t turned out that way. The 1980s, instead of being dominated by the values and ideals of secularism, must be characterized more accurately as the period wherein such values have been judged to be woefully lacking. Instead of being an era of irreligion, it has become a decade in which the major issues of the time are of a religious nature, and are recognized to be such by the citizenry. And instead of being a time when traditional spiritual aspirations have been placed on the back burner, as it were, it is a period when persons from all walks of life seem eager to acknowledge openly and candidly, in the famous words of St. Augustine (one of Martin Luther’s faithful spiritual mentors), that “our hearts are restless, and have no rest until they rest in Thee.”

How did it happen, and what significance does it carry?

I’ve asked myself this as I’ve traveled the regions of the country in which the interest in belief in God seems most intense, or, perhaps, most articulate, or, at least, most vocal. I’ve been to the places—conservative Christian pilgrimage stations, in a phrase—from which such spiritual regeneration is taking place. I refer specifically to Virginia Beach, Virginia, the institutional home of Pat Robertson’s vast network of religious and political influence; Lynchburg, Virginia, the location of Jerry Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church and the headquarters of his Moral Majority as well as his Liberty University; Charlotte, North Carolina, some twenty miles from which lies Heritage U.S.A., the conservative-Christianized version of an American Disneyworld that was conceived and created by Robertson “offspring,” Jim and Tammy Bakker; and to Washington, D.C., the current home of the United States President, Ronald

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Reagan, who has spoken more specifically and fully on the subject of religion—indeed, on the subject of the articles of the Christian faith—than any of his predecessors in the highest office in the land. And I have talked at some length with Richard Halvorsen, the Chaplain in the United States Senate, and with others who belong to this vast and intricate network of conservative religious and spiritual rejuvenation.

I. THE SHIFT TO THE RIGHT

It is a remarkable phenomenon when one looks at it; as many as 60 million Americans owning some identification with the movement referred as the New Religious Right or, perhaps more accurately, the Christian Right! It is extraordinary, in an age like ours, that Pat Robertson's operation would be funded in the amount of \$235 million annually, much of it derived from the \$10 to \$25 per month offerings of American senior citizens on fixed incomes, and under the threat of diminished Social Security income. It would never have been predicted, even ten years ago, that a Southern Baptist preacher from Lynchburg, Virginia, would be invited to the White House for consultation, to give the President "the benefit of his thinking" even on matters related to the foreign policy of the nation. And who would have suspected, a decade or two ago, that the United States Senate would be held in extended session to debate such weighty national issues as the propriety of school prayer, the implications of the Supreme Court's decision on abortion, or even whether the family should be identified as the fundamental unit of society? And would anyone have been able to forecast that the Supreme Court itself would agonize over whether school children should be allowed to have a moment or two of silence (for prayer or meditation) before beginning their day's work, or over whether it is appropriate for the citizens of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, to include a nativity creche in their annual Christmas display, or whether the interdict against interracial dating at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, is a matter that belongs to civil rights or to freedom of religion? No one would have guessed that religious issues of this kind would so thoroughly dominate the nation's social and cultural agenda. None of it should have happened, that is, if this were a time, as was predicted, of extensive and thorough secularism.

But the most telling aspect is that even many of those who would have been opposed initially to such developments have come to offer alternative plans for spiritual regeneration. And by their offerings they confirm that spiritual regeneration is necessary or, at least, that it makes some sense that the nation be involved this way today. One thinks specifically, in this regard, of the current modification and increased conservatism of the political agenda of more liberal elements within the society. One can cite the respect that President Reagan elicits when he seizes opportunities to convey his own understanding of the meaning of the faith. Not insignificant, in this regard, is the fact that the presidential candidates for the election in 1988 recognize that the allegiance and support of the conservative Christian community stands as a necessary element in their desire for success. And there are less obvious signs; the fact that Robert Bellah's new book, *Habits of the Heart*—an analysis of the spiritual character, following Alexis de Tocqueville, who was influenced by Blaise Pascal ("the heart

has reasons that reason doesn't know") and who in turn was influenced by St. Augustine ("our hearts are restless, and have no rest until they rest in thee")—has won a variety of national book awards, and is being read and studied by individuals and groups throughout the land. And another: the fact that the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. (and hardly an expected source) would issue publications confirming that strong, recognizable, and shared spiritual values are absolutely necessary to the ongoing vitality of a democratic society. All of this is eloquent and impressive demonstration that ours is a religious rather than a secular age, an age in which spiritual considerations dominate.

II. HOW TO ASSESS IT?

But we must acknowledge, before pursuing this line of analysis any further, that there are perfectly respectable ways of assessing these developments which do not buy into the rather wholesale positive evaluation. That is, it is altogether arguable that the revival of conservative religious sensitivities is deception or masquerade, a shifting of religious allegiances and enthusiasms to safe areas of human experience and conduct because the *more difficult items* on the *real human agenda* seem elusive, inaccessible, and impenetrable. We really have no satisfying answers with respect to the problems of widespread hunger and poverty, so the argument might proceed, hence we direct our interests toward areas of more immediate compensation. Or the intricacies of what would be required to create and maintain a nation, or a world, of economic justice are so complex that human ingenuity shrinks before them, and we find refuge in safer harbors of more self-evident consolation and reassurance. And the role of the United States in a world that seems dominated by the concerns of emerging “third-world” or developing nations requires such fundamental reassessments of our collective identity that we find it easier and surer to reassert our national pride—even, at times, in Rambo-like fashion—in ways that may have made sense in an era prior to the time that such international transformations and realignments occurred. According to such an appraisal, the rise of conservative spiritual or religious tendencies among us is not a sign of the strength of our collective character but, rather, of our real and abiding impoverishment. As Americans, and as Christians, we resort to the spiritual habits of an earlier time because we haven’t yet mastered the necessary alternative. We find the old habits attractive again because we haven’t acquired the talent or facility to do what our deeper and truer selves sense is being required of us.

My own reaction is that the evaluation that is only briefly sketched in the preceding paragraph must be taken with great seriousness by anyone who may have been seduced into accepting and celebrating the current conservative Christian revival simply at face value. And yet the judgment that the conservative revival is a charade, an attempted escape from more significant religious and Christian responsibilities, is not necessarily a fatal blow. It need not entail that the contemporary conservative religious revival be taken with less seriousness.

The late H. Richard Niebuhr, the esteemed professor of Christian ethics and theology at Yale Divinity School, used to say that theological statements were often correct in what they affirmed, but wrong in what they overlooked or

denied. In Niebuhr’s judgment, since theological statements can never be comprehensive or explicit enough to be reflective of the entire truth about the gospel—since truth of this high order does not easily yield to systematic conceptual representation—one should approach all of them with considerable practiced discernment. This is also the reason that the history of Christian theology is a dynamic occurrence: one school of thought responds to a predecessor school, as this one had to its predecessor, because no one of them is equipped to say all that is necessary concerning the richness of the gospel message and its application to the changing conditions of our world.

Following Niebuhr’s counsel, it is possible, in principle, that both the advocates of the conservative religious revival as well as their numerous and vocal detractors are correct, that is,

correct in what each affirms. It would follow, under the same counsel, that they both may also be wrong—wrong in what they overlook, wrong in what they deny, wrong in what they are unequipped to say, wrong in what they are inattentive to. All of this is possible—yes, it is to be expected—in principle or in theory. But how would it work in practice?

The answer might be found in the necessary relationship of interdependence between need and response. That is, it is conceivable in principle that human beings have an inherent need for the positive products of both of the two contrasting positions, while being unable to satisfy these needs from either one of the two sources of inspiration. It is even conceivable that some of those needs find a more satisfying response from one of the two orientational poles than from the other; that is to be expected if Niebuhr's counsel is diagnostically correct. And it may be possible that conservatives are better able to supply what liberals lack, while liberals are proficient in supplying what conservatives lack. After all, the effectiveness of the political process in our country is dependent upon the interaction between conservative and liberal positions. Persons who identify with the one group will be critical of persons, as it were, on the other side. But few in either group would wish that there were no other group. For if this were to happen, the conversation would also cease, and the conversation is necessary to the vitality of the political process. Indeed that process works itself out through the ongoing give-and-take that occurs between these two orientational poles. And the strength of that which each side brings to the conversation lends resourcefulness to the process. The same must be true in the world of religion.

III. LOOKING FOR ANOTHER ANGLE

But there is another way of looking at the matter. We inheritors of the achievements of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation have been encouraged to accept the principle of single-mindedness in theology. After all, Martin Luther, the chief and most significant reformer, had to discover the absolutely trustworthy basis from which he could contend against his opponents, and this made it necessary for him to sort through the competing claims to normative authority of tradition, creed, the papal magisterium, inner experience, rationality, and/or the Bible. When Luther stood before his own detractors, he knew on what ground he stood. "Unless I can be convinced on the basis of Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes

and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God." Luther added that he could not recant, "for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe." His was an act of single-minded intensity.

Luther's statement was uttered in the midst of a highly emotionally charged adversarial and combative atmosphere. After all, he was being charged with heresy. He was speaking before a tribunal that had been called to judge his case. He was pleading his case before those who had the authority to excommunicate him from the church, to prevent him from pursuing his teaching career, and to disallow him to continue providing sermons from the pulpit. And the consequence, history records, is the splitting of the unity of the Catholic Church—a fact Jaroslav Pelikan astutely identifies as "a tragic necessity," adding that Protestants have not always known it to be a tragedy, while Catholics have not always acknowledged it to be a necessity.

It is hypothetical, of course, but how would history have accommodated Martin Luther

had his affirmations not been received within an atmosphere that was both dialectical and adversarial in the extreme? What would the consequences have been had the two orientations not been on a collision course, with the possibility that only one of them would win? How would Luther's insights have been acknowledged had they not been offered within the climate of doctrinal warfare, an atmosphere that was conducive to making "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (all of whose verses are full of warfare imagery) the crowning musical signature of the Reformation movement? Where would history, as well as Christian history, have placed Martin Luther had his cause not become so highly politicized that it led to a rupture—a necessary rupture, certainly—within western institutional Christianity?

Remove it from this adversarial climate, and Luther's insightful reinterpretation of the gospel would stand as a formative event within collective Catholic Christian self-consciousness. Identify it more precisely within such self-consciousness and it becomes Catholic Christian self-criticism. Treat it as a movement within Christendom, removed from the environment of doctrinal combat, and it would take its place alongside other movements that attracted generations of followers and resilient theological and cultural traditions. Think of it, in this regard, as being similar in many respects to a Franciscan movement, or a Benedictine movement, or a Dominican movement, and, to bring the situation more closely to our own time, as a Catholic Worker movement, or even as a liberation theology movement. Seen from this perspective, there is less need to take a stand regarding its exclusive propriety—if it is correct, the others must be wrong, and vice versa. One can see it instead, following Niebuhr's counsel, as contributing to the fulness of the church's witness concerning the richness of the resources of the gospel. Just as the Franciscans have emphasized an important element in the necessary expression of the gospel, so too has the Lutheran movement. But they need not stand as opposites, or as competing claimants to the truth. Rather they are complementary—as a variety of musical instruments are necessary to the vitality of a symphony orchestra—because the overall intention is to try to give accurate and adequate witness to the richness of that reality by and through which all have been inspired.

I confess that I've come to view the conservative revival in similar terms. Certainly there is much of it that I find unattractive. A great deal of it is

repressive and recessive. In all sorts of ways, I dislike its style, for its most definitive temperament is not mine, and its overall feel does not often persuade me to adopt a worshipful attitude. But perhaps this shouldn't matter. For unless we wish to require that each thing be all things to all people, or else it cannot receive our positive valuation, or unless we wish to insist that only one mode of expressing the richness of the Christian gospel should be encouraged, I'd be willing to take a longer, broader, and less passionate point of view. I'd be willing to look for the positive consequences of the conservative revival, but never place it in even the potential position of being *the only way*.

IV. THE QUEST FOR TRANSCENDENCE

And when I do this, I believe it is most significant in its diagnostic ability. Its successes must illustrate—unless one wishes to relegate all of its influence to diabolical sources—that there is an open, intense, and even passionate interest in *transcendence* in America today. From this

vantage point, there is compelling evidence to suggest that ours is not only a religious, but also a *theological age*. After all, the primary issues of our time are religious and theological in nature. Credit the New Religious Right with discernment of this fact. Credit it too with knowing how to bring this awareness to the attention of the American people. Give its leaders plaudits for mastering the intricacies of the technology of television. Respect their ability to insert their sensibilities and convictions into the dominant political process. And thank them for being diagnostically acute, but recognize that their own responses, or proposals, function more effectively as temporizers than as clarification or resolution.

And chide them both for stimulating and then for exploiting an adversarial context. Be wary of the tendency of some within the movement to hide behind an attitude of self-righteousness. And note the great difficulty they have experienced in knowing how to approach a multi-cultural world whose modes of receptivity to reality have been inspired and nurtured by a variety of the world's religious traditions, which traditions continue to be resilient. As H. Richard Niebuhr observed, theological stances—we may also include religious orientations—are often right in what they affirm, but wrong in what they deny or neglect. And the area of neglect, or inattentiveness, within New Religious Right sensibilities, particularly on the subject of the intricacies of international relationships and global dynamics, is extensive.

But the larger story must be that. God has not left himself without witness in any generation. Translation: the quest for transcendence belongs to the human condition. And, as happens within the kaleidoscope, that quest finds expression in nearly infinite variety, given the possible combinations of social, cultural, and political experience that establish bonds with the indelible resources by which human beings are sustained and nurtured.

Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig, the great nineteenth-century Danish archbishop, insisted that we understand ourselves as being human first, and then Christian. The Christian faith, in Grundtvig's judgment, crowns that which knows itself to be human. The quest for transcendence is undeniably human too, and its varieties of expression are powerfully eloquent in our time.