

RELIGIO <sup>1</sup>

---

By encoding «religion» in its latinate form, as «religio», the organizers of this conference have directed us away from the mundane and commonsensical to a more fundamental understanding of religion as the most mysterious and yet at the same time the most omnipresent of the qualities that distinguishes humankind from other living creatures who have not experienced the void that defines existence.

For I wish to define religion as the very effort to close that void. To exist is to experience one's particularity, the gap between one's own experience and the universal possibilities of the mind, the heart, and the human group. To be religious is to experience the transcendence of these particularities, to enter into some «ultimate» realm that is beyond one's one, beyond «normal life». The religious realm is the noumenal world beyond the phenomenological world, beyond the concrete individual, beyond the visible society, and beyond the strategic interactions and scarce resources over which human beings hustle, fight, and sometimes die.

Religion is the name we give to the activity that allows us to feel we are in contact with this noumenal world «beyond our own», which to be sure is a world of the imagination, of projected fantasy and the sensibility of the unconscious mind. In this precise sense, and no other more ontological one, religion allows transcendence. The noumenal world may be represented in different ways and by different things. The representations may be sublime or they may be evil, but they cannot be mundane.

In terms of the perspective I am developing here, human beings and their societies continue to be deeply religious. They are more or less continually in contact with an ultimate realm. They try to become holy by seeking contact

<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared during my Fellowship at SCASS, the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, in Uppsala.

with the sacred through rituals, through deference, and through moral, cognitive, and emotional communication and action. They seek to defend themselves from defilement by struggling against the profane; by engaging in concerted political and social action to defeat evil people, ideas, and things; by degrading such threatening forces in ritual ceremonies; and by cleansing themselves of the stain of pollution in rites of purification.

As I will suggest more systematically later in this talk, these religious activities stretch from the sublime to the ridiculous and to the terrifying, and they are organized at macro and micro levels. Societies and entire collectivities are always «religiously» engaged. Great wars and social movements, whether emancipatory or repressive, involve ritual efforts to engage the sacred and defeat the profane. Mass culture has mythical and iconic elements as well. For the gothic, epic, and romantic genres this religious dimension is readily apparent, but it also is at work in the comic form. Popular comic narratives expose the triviality of mundane life in contrast with a world that «really matters», a world of love, friendship, and true ideals. Great national comedians, like Woody Allen, are liminoid and multivalent representations, trickster symbols which mediate between everyday life and the mysteries of «the other side». The life world is also permeated by *religio*. This-worldly mysticism permeates contemporary Western societies, in the thirst for sacral contact and the fear of defilement that mark the body rituals of diet, sport, and sex, and in the nature worship that guides rituals like hiking, bird-watching, back-packing and environmentalism more generally.

Yet, despite these pervasive patterns of what might be called natural religiosity, the thrust of contemporary social theory denies the significance of religion. The news of social science is carried under the banner headline, «The World Has Become Rationalized».

By exploring three possible meanings of this message, from the strong to the weak, I will begin also to present the theoretical alternative I have in mind.

The first and most radical implication of the rationalization thesis is that individual action has become exclusively concerned with means at the expense of ends and, correspondingly, that the organization of contemporary society distributes scarcity but not meaning. Instrumental rationality was the result of capitalism for Marx. It was the result of secularization, industrialism, and bureaucracy for Weber, and with his concept of *Entzauberung* he specifically linked it to the denial of the world of mystery, magic, and religion. Lukacs combined Marx and Weber with his representation of the world as reified, a theme that has informed the course of so-called critical theory ever since. While Marx and Weber regreted this instrumentalization of the world, liberal

and conservative rational choice theorists have welcomed it. Homans and Coleman, and even Boudon, celebrate the rise of instrumentalizing, assiduous asceticism as the epitome of rationality itself.

Perhaps because it is the furthest removed from religious experience, this strong version of rationalization is the easiest to disprove, and has been time and time again, most notably perhaps by Mead in his inspired writings on mind, self, and society, and by Parsons in his classical early work, *The Structure of Social Action*.

A weaker version of the rationalization thesis acknowledges that individuals strive for meaning — they are oriented to ends — but insists that these ends remain individual and are not integrated into patterns that give a collective meaning to individuals and societies. This argument was made by conservative theorists of massification like Ortega y Gasset and was elaborated classically for sociology in Durkheim's theories of egoism and anomie. In contemporary terms, this middling argument against *religio* is articulated by the insistence on methodological individualism, as in the works of Blumer, Elster, or Boudon. It has also been represented by the recent emphasis on what is called reflexivity, that is, the actor's distance and relative freedom vis-a-vis her social, psychological, and cultural environments. This emphasis shapes the character of work by thinkers like Goffman, Garfinkel, and Giddens and also an influential strand of postmodernist thought.

Probably the most effective refutation of this sociological nominalism is the corpus of Parsonian functionalism, which showed, first, how individuals refer their ends to situationally specific norms that are created not by themselves but by their reference groups and, second, how these norms are «elevated» by actors in a manner that allows them to be seen as consistent with, indeed as derived from, broad values shared by larger collectivities and possibly by society as such. (cf. *The Cement of Society* by Elster). Yet, while Parsonianism was undoubtedly more analytically precise, it was the wayward theoretical mystic Edwards Shils who refuted this version of the rationalization argument most powerfully when he argued that individuals remain bound to one another not only by political but also by civil, sacred, and primordial ties. Modern, supposedly rational individuals remain rooted in primary groups based on love; even when they choose to leave these groups they usually spend a great deal of time and energy creating new ones again. But neither are secondary groups simply deracinated. As Mary Douglas has shown, even institutions «think». Myers and the «neoinstitutionalists» have demonstrated that organizations are enmeshed in collective representations and that bureaucratic rationality is itself a primary ideology of collective social integration.

We come now to the third argument for the rationalization of the world.

While individual ends may be recognized by this perspective and collective values highlighted, it is argued that *religio* no longer remains at the core of the contemporary world. We have beliefs and values, but we no longer have myths. We have symbolic media of communication and communicative action but we have neither sacrality nor ritual action. Because the modern world lacks a telos and a fundamental ordering principle, it is supposed that it is not meaningful in a religious sense.

At the base of this third and weaker version of the rationalization thesis is an account of cultural and structural differentiation, as it has been articulated by Parsons and Luhmann, and by Habermas when he is not in his «critical theorist» role. According to this perspective, religion is a cognitive commitment to the ontological reality and epistemological truth of the metaphysical world. In a world that is still religious, the cognitive, moral, and expressive dimensions of culture are subordinated to this ontological form of transcendental belief; as a result, they are themselves fused in a manner that allows no cultural conflict or independent standards of evaluation. Because social and cultural progress clearly depends upon splitting apart these cultural dimensions, it can be argued that differentiation allows anti-transcendental, and antireligious, standards of cognitive truth to emerge, along with natural moral law and purely esthetic action.

This is by far the most sophisticated and most acceptable version of the thesis about the rationalization of the world. The cultural processes described have indeed come to pass: God-based explanations for the world have diminished and naturalistic moral, cognitive, and aesthetic judgments have increased. This differentiation thesis produces, moreover, a much more benign and empirically accurate understanding of secularization. Rather than claiming that God-based religion — Religion with a capital «R» — has disappeared, the argument is merely that Religion has withdrawn from its dominant position and has assumed a denominational form. As a functionally and culturally specialized activity, Religion can be respected and studied; it can be acknowledged to be vigorous and to continue to play an often powerful role (as in Poland or Iran) in contemporary events.

The problem with differentiation theory is that it may be right about Religion but not about *religio*. At its core, it maintains a commitment to the thesis that the world has become a relatively rational place. Values and norms are specialized by task, and the more societies evolve, the more values themselves are held to become universalized and generalized, identical with abstractions like «individualism» and «rationality» that facilitate reflexivity in its most radical form. In Parsons' theory, for example, «fundamentalism», a term first applied to evangelical, frankly anti-scientific religion, plays the role of a gene-

ral pejorative applied to every deviation from rational action and progressive thought.

The question is this: Does the withdrawal of God-religion mean the elimination of grand narratives, of myth, of iconic, analogical, and symbolic thought, and of ritual action from areas outside the ecclesiastical domain? The answer must surely be «no». Sacrality and the demand for experience of transcendence remain fundamental features of life even in what are taken to be highly differentiated societies. The functional specialization of Religion merely means that *religio* assumes a more naturalistic, less ontological form. The referents are no longer in heaven, but the signifiers and the signifying process remain religious: their aim is to place an actor, group, or society in touch with the pure and impure forces from which the world seems, in the mythic and existential imagination, to ultimately derive. By touching this force, via emotional experience, physical contact, or intellectual participation, the void between the mundane and transcendental world can be overcome.

In their thinking about religion, then, the main currents of social science have been crippled by the legacy of rationalism, in either its liberal or radical form. Rather than explaining the world as it is, they have projected their own experience, representing in their science the struggle between moral naturalism and ecclesiastical thinking that has so often marked the struggle between democracy and reaction since 1789<sup>2</sup>. I will come back to the notion that rationalization is an ideology in my conclusion.

In my own theoretical and empirical work, particularly in the last several years, I have tried to develop an alternative to these theses about the rationalization of the world. Building upon an interpretation of what I have called «late Durkheimian» sociology, I have connected this sociological base with developments in semiotics and post-structuralism, existential phenomenology, symbolic anthropology, and narrative theory. My students and I have used and elaborated this model to explore a fairly wide range of empirical phenomena, from political crisis and civil disorder, to technological discoveries, to charismatic leadership and war.

<sup>2</sup> While conservative thought has never found a persistent voice in American social science, there have been some conservatives, and they have not had more success in explaining *religio* than have those on the left. In the work of Nisbet, Shils, and Bell for example, we find that the rationalization thesis has merely been inverted. These conservatives argue, quite simply, that the world is as religious, and culture as teleological, as it has ever been. The world is a Church, and the only source of tension is Godlessness, or the failure to believe. Cultural and social differentiation is unrecognized, as is the increasing naturalization of *religio* in the modern world.

Time permits me to present only the outlines of what remains at this point a rather tentative and still developing model. While every experience and interaction in contemporary society is symbolized, of course, much of the social experience in this society, as in early ones, is simply mundane. In my cultural sociology, by contrast, I have been interested in contemporary social experiences that reach into the religious realm, specifically in what might be called, from the present perspective, the «religion of civil society» — the codes, narratives, and rituals that are rooted in, and help to construct, the differentiated system of solidarity that Parsons called the societal community.

The cultural structure of this sphere consists of a polarized set of symbolic antipathies specifying the motives, relationships, and institutions that allow inclusion in, and demand exclusion from, civil society. The «discourse of liberty» and «the discourse of repression» are stable vocabularies, or languages, of institutionalized democracy that have provided the reference points for struggles over inclusion and exclusion, purification and pollution, for hundreds of years.

These semiotic structures provide the skeleton for «social narratives» that produce and elaborate historically specific versions of the archetypical dramatic forms — epoch, tragedy, romance, irony, satire, comedy and realism. Societies tell stories about themselves, beginning with their myths of origins, transforming national spaces into culturally meaningful places, and incorporating crises and triumphs into a story line that is ever shifting but perceived, paradoxically, as never having changed at all. In America, the master narrative may be called the «Drama of Democracy» other nations specify the fundamentally similar narrative forms in historically different ways. Peter Brooke, for example, has shown that in nineteenth century Britain «melodrama» was employed to construct class politics as a emotional and simplified struggle between social good and social evil, a narrative which, he believes, allowed the moral character of British society to be maintained even after the hegemony of traditional religion had fallen away.

Finally, in contemporary civil societies there are distinctive ritual forms that channel the lifeworldly experience of actors and groups whose social representations are coded and narrated in the context of the cultural structures I have described above. If we follow Durkheim in distinguishing between the liquid, or effervescent moments of ritual experience and ritual experience of a more structured kind, we can say that the experience of liberty involves, on the one hand, moments of ecstatic and cathartic triumphant liberation — in social movements (Eyerman and Jamison, Sewell), revolutions (Tiryakian), political crises (Alexander, Turner) and peak experiences like media events (Katz and Dayan). On the other hand, the experience of liberty involves enthusiastic

participation in rituals like voting, political meeting and campaigns, daily conversations, and the interested if highly routine absorption of televised and printed social news (see Gabriel Tarde).

In what might be called «rituals of repression», members of civil societies are brought into contact with the profane elements which threaten their very identity as active participants in it. On the one hand, there is the immediate experience of terror, either vicariously through symbolic participation in cultural constructions like horror movies, spy novels, or published accounts of terror, or directly through contact with crime and violence and institutions representing them or through contact with socially outcast pariah groups. On the other hand, there are more structured rituals of domination and objectification which bring actors into contact with the profane and the polluted in a different but nonetheless effective way. Experiences of social shame and ridicule, status degradation, and enforced loneliness and exclusion may all, for example, be seen as ritualizing contact with the profane world of the impure. It seems perplexing that mundanity, which possesses a realistic narrative but is not exposed to the tension between sacred and profane, can itself be the source of ritual experiences, which move between the more immediate «stultification» to the more routinized boredom and ennui.

With this more religiously sensitive model of contemporary culture in mind, we can return to the idea that the rationalization thesis may be viewed less as a scientific description of modern society than as an ideology. What it involves, indeed, is discursive construction of the polluted other. In «Critical Theory», for example, elements from the profane discourse of repression are woven into a tragic or melodramatic narrative of social decline that provides its followers, its «audience», with representations of terror, domination, and objectification. It is no accident, from this perspective, that critical theorists never describe themselves or their reference groups as victimized by the same objectifying social forces of which capitalist society stands accused. Instead, what they suggest — and here we may think of theorists from Plato and Rousseau to Marx, Weber, Lukacs and even Foucault — is that social degeneration may be overturned by the sacralizing discourse of liberty, which involves a heroic or romantic narrative, assumes rational motives, honest social relations, and open institutions, and promises the experience of cathartic liberation and continuous participation in the most triumphalist terms.

I do not wish to imply here that the dramaturgy of rationalization is somehow confined to the imagination of intellectuals, whether of the freefloating, power-hungry, or emancipatory kind. Far from it. Discourses, narratives, and rituals about the diabolic «other» and the «humane self» energize the everyday life of the proverbial common man, fuelling economic

and political conflicts, ethnic, racial, gender and generational confrontations, and wars.

It seems possible, in fact, that the temptation to objectify others actually increases with social differentiation. By merging center and periphery and creating expansive legal and political structures, individuals and groups are often forced into contact without the historical opportunity for civil representation of what come to be regarded as foreign, primordial identities (Sztompka). The increasing frequency and intensity of enforced encounters with the constructed other, in contrast with the more segmented and dispersed relations of traditional milieux, may increase anxieties on the psychological level, leading increasingly to what Anna Freud first called the ego's basic mechanisms of defense, particularly splitting, projection, and neutralization.

Organization theorists, like Mann, have stressed that the power-generating capacity of advanced societies, which includes not only administrative but ideological reach, has greatly increased. However, it is a serious empirical and theoretical error, and also a moral one, to conceptualize even the most heinous exercises of power in such purely instrumental and structural terms. Nazism was not simply the highest stage of abstract modernist bureaucracy and industrial might, as Zigman Bauman tried to demonstrate in his (Amalfi prize winning) book of three years ago. To the contrary, the Nazism employed their technically efficient apparatus in the service of «higher» ends; their mission was to protect the sacred *Volk* from contact with political, religious, and national groups represented as dangerous and polluting scum.

Nor should the great and terrible wars of our century be understood merely in geopolitical terms or as the inevitable product of industrial might. In mass mobilized societies, war leaders can mobilize support only by representing their conflict as a heroic or romantic struggle between good and evil, a construction that allows cathartic ritual participation in the sacred while projecting various experiences of ritual degradation and dehumanization. The legitimacy of war making deflates to the degree that war leaders are constructed in terms of the discourse of repression and narrated in tragic, comic, ironic, or merely realistic ways.

Neither can emancipatory social movements be understood in a deracinated way. Their success might make the society more «rational» in Parsons', Rawls', or Habermas's sense, but the content of this rationality is not gained by reason alone. These movements, too, must code, narrate, and ritualize their followers and their others. They are emancipatory, not because they have gone beyond the symbolic and the presuppositional and become more rational thereby. Rather, they have expanded the boundaries of society by successfully constructing a once excluded outgroup in terms of the discourse and narrati-



ves of the good, and created opportunities for ritual experience with that group that further legitimated its inclusion. Have not the bourgeois, women, Jews, workers, and various racially polluted groups been reconstructed — to some degree at least — in precisely these terms? —————

Perhaps it is time for social theory to couple Weber's *Entzauberung* with *Verzauberung*, to match «demagicalization» with the concept of «remagicalization»? Because the human and natural world remains mysterious and mystifying, it is experienced by its members in a religious way. Social science must learn to remystify the world before it can demystify in a rational way.