Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture

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University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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Introduction

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The title of this book might raise questions. Does man’s participation in the eternal ever change? Interpretations, rituals, even moral precepts become transformed over the centuries. Yet does the religious attitude not remain constant within the flux of time? It does, indeed. But the individual and social response to religion also includes the task of integrating that attitude within the warp and woof of existence in a particular culture at a particular time. The manner in which the devout fulfill that task differs from one period to another. Its nature is at least in part determined by the social and intellectual conditions prevailing at the time of the response.

In the history of Christianity, cultural transformations may have been more substantial during the modern period than in any preceding one. The seeds of change were planted much earlier, some at the height of the Middle Ages, some even before. I shall trace them in the first two chapters. For over a millennium Western culture had been the culture of Christianity. At the beginning of the modern age, culture and religion assumed a certain independence vis-à-vis each other. During the Enlightenment, separation turned into opposition.
Later their relation became more conciliatory. Yet the Church never regained its former authority over society. Theology, once the dominant science that had integrated all others, definitively lost its commanding position.

In the first part of these lectures (ch. 1–4) I shall sketch the gradual weakening of the Christian synthesis, partly as a result of the breakdown of the form principle (ch. 1) and partly because of an ever-growing distinction between the orders of nature and of grace (ch. 2). In addition to these changes and partly because of them, modern culture increasingly came to regard the human subject as the sole source of meaning and value. Combined, these factors gradually severed Christianity from the culture it had built. The Enlightenment marked a turning point in this process of secularization (ch. 3). Atheism became, for the first time, a real threat to religion (ch. 4).

After the French Revolution and mostly as a reaction against it, religion, but not necessarily Christian faith, once again appeared destined to play a significant role in intellectual life. Yet now the roles were reversed. Rather than dominating them, religion became transformed by intellectual and moral principles conceived independently of faith and often against it. In the second part of these lectures I shall investigate the new situation in three areas. First is in the literature of Romanticism. To illustrate this I have selected three poets whose work profoundly affected religious attitudes of the contemporary age: Goethe, Schiller, and Hölderlin (ch. 5). Second, the related impact of idealist philosophy significantly contributed toward reunifying religion with the entire life of the mind. No one illustrates this better than Schelling, who incorporated mythology and revelation as essential parts within his philosophical system (ch. 6). Third, theology itself underwent a basic transformation during this period, as the early Romantic Schleiermacher and the late Romantic Kierkegaard prove (ch. 7).

I have deliberately limited the discussion to German sources, because in Germany the Enlightenment had achieved its influence mainly within and through theology. German poets, philosophers, and theologians consciously attempted to achieve a new synthesis of religion and culture. Moreover, during this critical period the originality of German philosophers and theologians surpassed that of
their contemporaries in France and England. I conclude with some general reflections about the impact of modernity on the contemporary state of religion and culture.

Obviously, this work presents no more than a limited perspective on the very complex relation between religion and modern culture. But I remain convinced that the basic patterns formed in the modern age, especially at the dawn of the contemporary era, have maintained themselves. The chapters here presented are to be considered capitula selecta of a more comprehensive project. The reader is encouraged to read them as such.
Until recent years some cultural historians restricted the concept of modern culture to the Enlightenment. They assumed that the main significance of fifteenth-century humanism, of the Renaissance, and even of the first part of the classical seventeenth century consisted in preparing the mental attitudes of the Enlightenment. Jacob Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* may serve as a model of this approach. But principles such as the equation of the real with the objective, the emancipation from past political and religious traditions, or the autonomy of reason, characteristic of Enlightenment thought, by no means define the early modern epoch.

Even today, the assumption of a straight continuity between the phases of modernity has not entirely vanished. To be sure, there is a modern culture, a mode of thinking, feeling, and creating that stretches from the fifteenth through the twentieth century. But it arrived in successive waves, each one bringing its own principles, which, though continuous with those of the previous one, do not follow from them with logical necessity. Modernity is an ongoing creative process that even today has not reached completion.
By the end of the fourteenth century the cloud of dark resignation that hung over a civilization half destroyed by the plague and an intellectual life lost in a moribund theology began to lift. In those southern regions of Europe, which had never fully broken with ancient culture, the old sense of dignity was revived and the rediscovery of the past inspired a new confidence in the future. Nature suddenly assumed a more humane appearance: it once again was thought to reflect human emotions, and appeared eminently worthy of human exploration.

Classical and Medieval Precedents

What, then, was the past out of which, and eventually in contrast to which, modernity developed? In the first place there was the classical culture, which had never ceased to influence the medieval one, and which suddenly in fifteenth-century Italy intensified that influence. Particularly, the concept of form acquired a new significance. For the Greeks, it had been both a physical quality and an intellectual principle. Proportion was a quality of nature as well as a primary attribute of the gods, who, by their formal perfection, surpassed the perishable, imperfect humans. In Plato’s thought, the notion of form implied the profound metaphysical principle that it belongs to the nature of the real to appear and to do so in an orderly, intelligible way.

For a long time the Greeks had succeeded in preserving the unique identity of their culture, despite its dispersion over such remote islands as Sicily and such distant regions as Asia Minor and Southern Italy. It continued to do so for a while even after the Hellenistic empires extended it to the entire Middle East. At the end of that period Greek culture confronted its supreme challenge. It began when, in the Septuagint translation, Jews opened their sacred books to the Gentile oekumenè. In Alexandria, now the intellectual capital of the Greek world, where this event had occurred, the Jewish philosopher Philo attempted to reconcile Jerusalem with Athens. But the Greek mind felt a strong aversion to the idea of a God who no longer formed a part of the cosmos but was its transcendent Creator. That early Christians, steeped in Jewish theology, fared no better in the

Christians did not give up the attempt to reconcile their faith with Hellenic wisdom. Religiously oriented Neoplatonic thought provided a fertile ground for dialogue. The Cappadocian Fathers adopted much of Plotinus’s philosophy, and soon most of the Christian East followed. For the last of the great classical thinkers, the divine still dwelled within the cosmos, yet at the same time transcended it. This truce between Christian and ancient culture was not to last.

The tension between the two worldviews appeared when some of the eighth-century Macedonian emperors of Byzantium, who considered the iconic representations of Christ and the saints to conflict with the idea of a God hidden in impenetrable light, banned them from the churches. Most Christians resisted, appealing to the mystery of the Incarnation, which had forged an indissoluble link between God and human nature in the person of Christ. They prevailed. But the impact of the same mystery of the Incarnation, which had supported the return of orthodoxy in the East, eventually was to cause the breakup of the Hellenic-Christian synthesis in the Latin West.

The problem arose in the wake of what was perhaps the most attractive development of medieval Christianity: Francis of Assisi and his thirteenth-century followers extended the effect of the Incarnation to the entire created world. Even the image of Jesus changed. He was not merely God’s eternal Word among us, but a concrete human being. Francis concluded that Christ’s human nature itself deserved to be honored and adored. The religious humanism he had initiated blossomed into an artistic movement in which, contrary to the Greek primacy of the universal, the highest spiritual meaning resided in the individual. It was the time of the great innovators in painting, Cimabue, Duccio, and Giotto, and in poetry, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Soon it became apparent how much this new idea of individual form conflicted with the classical one adopted by earlier Christian culture, in which only the universal had intellectual birthright.

Against the background of this new vision, the Franciscan John Duns Scotus accomplished an intellectual revolution. The doctor subtilis understood that the Greek notion of form was inadequate for expressing the mystery of Christ: it omitted what Christians of his
time had come to see as most essential, namely, the individuality of
the person of Christ. So he added to the ancient hierarchy of forms a
forma individualis to legitimate the unique thisness of the historical
Jesus. His move was not totally unprecedented. Plotinus himself (in
Enneads 4, 3, 7) had written that souls are formally individuated be-
fore becoming united to the body. Even Aquinas, concerned to pre-
serve the spiritual integrity of the soul after death, had declared it to
be unaffected by its physical embodiment (Summa Theologiae I, q.7,
a.2, and I, q.50, a.2). Nonetheless, reluctant to abandon the Greek
principle of universality altogether, he had qualified his position by
claiming that the human soul, though spiritual, attains individuality
through its relation to matter—the mysterious materia quantitate sig-
nata. Scotus went further. For him, individuality itself was a form,
the ultimate one in the Platonic hierarchy.

The Via Moderna and the New Humanist Form

Another Franciscan, William of Ockham, brought this develop-
ment to its conclusion when he denied that universals—including all
ancient forms—in any way exist. Everything in nature as well as in
the mind is singular. That a substance bears a certain resemblance to
another is a matter of subjective perception, not the effect of their
sharing a common nature. Ockham thereby totally abandoned the
assumption, deeply entrenched in Platonic thinking, that universal
forms exist in reality as well as in ideas. He admitted the need for
universal concepts and for names with a universal significance, but
asserted that universals existed neither beyond (Plato) nor inside re-
esty (Aristotle). They are mere constructions of the mind. Ockham’s
critique of form obviously spelled the end of the Greek cosmo-
theological synthesis. One might also assume it to be the end of me-
dieval philosophy. Yet the notion of form, both the classical and the
Christian, was to acquire new life in the humanist movement.

The rise of Italian humanism coincided with that of the nomi-
nalist via moderna in philosophy. At the surface the two movements
appear unrelated. Humanism unquestioningly accepted the form prin-
ciple as articulated by Plato and his followers. Indeed, the movement
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itself was first and foremost a new search for form through language. Having started as a rhetorical movement, humanism aimed at studying the Latin writers and at imitating their style, not only in the ancient language but also in the vernacular. Humanists attempted to revive the formal perfection of classical authors and generally objected to the late medieval language of Scholasticism. Nonetheless, as Paul Kristeller has shown, humanism preserved a strong link with the rhetorical tradition of the Middle Ages. Most humanists remained loyal to the medieval worldview and, indeed, to much of its philosophy.

Nominalist philosophy, though it undermined the ancient notion of universal form, agreed with humanism on at least one crucial issue: the supreme significance of language. It thereby added substantial weight to the rhetorical exercises of the humanists and, in fact, contributed to their raising the practice of language into a pursuit of ideal form. According to Lorenzo Valla, the last and most articulate of the early humanists, the nominalist conception of language reduces philosophical concepts to their concrete, earthly origins and thereby establishes a new, more direct link between thought and reality. He regarded nominalist philosophy as needlessly complicated, however, and he had no use for the nominalism of the Scholastics. His theory may rightly be called a “humanist counter-nominalism” (Charles Trinkaus).

The humanist movement characteristically stressed poetic and artistic creativity. In one of his prose writings Dante defined the attitude that was to become typical of modern culture as one of unlimited confidence in man’s creative power. Even as God created all forms *ex nihilo*, so the poet in inventing metaphorical meaning creates a poetic form that did not exist before. Dante and most early humanists regarded this creative power as a gift of God. The artists and poets of the Renaissance increasingly attributed it to human genius. All agreed on the ancient rule that art must be an imitation of nature. They regarded nature itself as a work of art, though an impure one.

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that the artist must bring to formal perfection. The two currents, on one side early humanism and the Renaissance, on the other the philosophical via moderna, initiated modern culture.

Galileo’s thought presents the transition to the second modern period. He drew from both sources of the early modern age. Confident, creative, artistically gifted, and deeply religious, he initially had much in common with some of the Italian humanists. In his early writings he refers to the divine wisdom as inherent in nature, causing it to follow ideal laws of simplicity and regularity. Observation alone, however, does not suffice to know a phenomenon: it must be broken down into ideal elements. In his later work Galileo abandoned much of this Platonic idealism and avoided constraining the complexity of nature within the demands of philosophical ideals. Consequently he attempted to capture the mathematical nature of motion as actually observed rather than as ideally projected. Moreover, observation taught him that in the celestial sphere the same physical laws are valid as the ones on earth. Hence, the laws of mechanics rule the entire universe, not only the sublunary sphere, as ancient and many medieval philosophers thought.

The Loss of Form in Post-Cartesian Thought

Galileo had continued to assume that truth is inherent in the nature of reality. In this respect he differed from the position Descartes and most thinkers of the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries were to embrace, namely, that truth is achieved by the mind. To produce truth, the mind must first transform nature into a representation. Instead of participating in nature’s immanent truth, the mind has to perform a reconstruction of it. Descartes intended to establish knowledge on the unshakable foundation of the mind’s own laws and thus stop the flood of skepticism unleashed by nominalist theology. According to this theology, divine omnipotence was not bound by the restrictions of human reason. A lingering nominalism continued to affect Descartes’ own philosophy, however, as when he attributes the intuitive insight that 2+2=4 to a divine decree.

Doubts about the efficacy of Descartes’ a priori method in science sprang up soon after he formulated it. Could nature’s course be
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described exhaustively or even functionally in mathematical terms? Contrary to Descartes’ assumptions, Newton famously declared “Hypotheses non fingo.” He did in fact construe hypotheses, but avoided doing so independently of observation. Yet the most serious questions about the applicability of Descartes’ mathematical approach came from the budding life sciences. Buffon unsuccessfully tried to apply the mechanistic method to the study of animal life and was forced to abandon the effort.

In modern cosmology the notion of substance came to replace that of form without major consequences. But because of the complex relation between mind and body, that notion proved inadequate for defining personal identity. Yet Descartes had no other option, if he was to include all beings within a simple comprehensive world system. To maintain the spiritual quality of the mind, he had to separate it from the body as an independent “substance.” In his bodily substance the person shares a mechanistic world common to all material things. Though man surpasses the laws of mechanics, yet through his body he indirectly forms a part of the world system. If the body constituted a reality in its own right, it had to be called a substance as well as the mind. Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy had escaped this dualism of body and soul. For both, the soul was the form of the body, while still retaining a certain independence of it. Aristotle spoke of the double function of one soul. Aquinas called the soul forma substantialis subsistens, a term that embraced both functions.

How much the replacement of form by substance militated against the traditional position and indeed against Descartes’ own fundamental insight appeared soon after his death. Materialists such as La Mettrie and Helvétius argued that he had accepted half the materialist theory. Had he not declared that the entire animal world formed part of a single material universe and was subject to mechanical laws? Why, then, had he inconsistently made an exception for the mind? No essential difference separates human knowledge from animal cognition. Condillac in his Treatise on Sensations had shown that one as well as the other is derived from sensations caused by physiological processes. Baron d’Holbach, the unanointed leader of the French materialists, confidently concluded: “Man is a physical being.” This, of course, marked the end of the form principle. Only one homogeneously material nature remained.
A comparable change occurred in Britain. Locke, despite his firm opposition to materialism, nevertheless decided that the mind ought to be studied by the same method that was yielding such remarkable results in the natural sciences. Rather than accepting a formal principle of psychic unity, he chose to break experience down into the simple units of sensations and reflections. This elementalist reduction caused major problems for maintaining the traditional unity of the self and even more for treating it as a single substance. Nonetheless Locke continued to accept a common belief in the presence of a single substratum to the multiplicity of sensations and reflections. The fact that the data of consciousness appear in clusters and in a relative continuity induces the mind to assume the existence of such a substratum. We believe it to be a spiritual substance. But must consciousness be the exclusive attribute of spirit? Locke had to admit that he could not prove it.

Hume brought this argument to a more consistent conclusion. Since impressions (the atomic units in his analysis) are qualitatively distinct, they must be considered separately, and whatever can be considered separately may exist separately. There is no need for assuming a common substratum or even an intrinsic link among singular perceptions. “Self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have reference. . . . Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea.”

British empiricism eventually led to the destruction of the form principle, as sensationalism did in France. Yet French sensationalists based their empiricism upon a materialist presupposition, namely, that sensations and impressions originated as a direct effect of the impact of the physical world. Expressed in d’Holbach’s crudely reductionist language: “[The person’s] visible actions as well as the invisible motion interiorly excited by his will and his thoughts, are

equally the natural effects, the necessary consequences, of his peculiar mechanism, and the impulse he received from those beings by whom he is surrounded.”

While rationalists and empiricists were undermining the form principle, Leibniz on the rationalist side and Shaftesbury on the empiricist one attempted to revive it. Leibniz did so by reinterpreting Newton’s concept of force in the sense of an Aristotelian form, thereby enabling it to serve as a dynamic principle of the physical world and as a spiritual principle of the ideal world. For him, the soul was not a “substance” in the Cartesian sense of the term, but a monad, that is, a center of power capable of directing the subordinate monads of the body. Leibniz thereby avoided the fatal dilemma: either the person would consist of two substances, or of one material substance, which would jeopardize the spiritual nature of the mind.

Shaftesbury, inspired by Plato’s idea of form, intrinsically transformed the very nature of the empiricist philosophy in which Locke had tutored him. He rejected Locke’s elementarism, but accepted that philosophy should have its ground in experience. Beyond the singular experiences of particular sensations and impressions, he argued, we have the continuous experience of a persistent feeling that accompanies all stages of consciousness and links them together. That feeling of self-awareness secures the smooth transition from one perception to the next and encompasses the whole person, body and mind. Self-consciousness consists not primarily in the awareness of successive, vanishing impressions, but in the awareness of a deeper, continuous undercurrent of feeling.

In shifting the weight of selfhood to the side of feelings, Shaftesbury restored at least some of the qualities of the self as a formative principle. His influence proved to be enormous, in France as well as in Britain. The new significance he granted to feelings inspired a number of autobiographical writings. Their authors attempted to convey a formal unity to the self, by showing the continuity of its feelings. Rousseau in his Confessions identifies the self with the

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history of his feelings. In fact, however, he does more than reproduce feelings: he produces new ones on the basis of old memories and thereby recreates the scattered experiences of the past into a unified, orderly totality. It is through a constant reconstruction of our feelings, then, that we link the past to the present and convey a real identity to life.

In chapter 5 we shall see how the great German thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Kant, Herder, Fichte, and Schelling, replaced the static notion of substance by the dynamic one of freedom. The term Bildung, which expressed this ideal of self-making, came to dominate theories and programs of education. Humans ought to conform themselves to an ideal form of humanitas. One might regard this as at least a partial restoration of the ancient idea of form.

The Modern Idea of Truth and Transcendence

Rationalism differs from the primacy of reason, which our culture since its beginning in Greek Antiquity has considered its most prominent characteristic. The question is: Could Western rationality have avoided developing into rationalism? When Descartes identified truth with certainty, he essentially eliminated what had supported the intentional quality of knowledge, which in one way or another his predecessors in philosophy had preserved. For Plato, intelligible forms had constituted the core of the real. Truth originates neither in sense evidence nor in self-awareness, but in the contemplation of the forms. In his Phaedo Plato declares the soul to be “like” the forms within which it participates in knowledge, but he never identifies the two. In the Cratylus he insists that true learning can come only from things in themselves, that is, from the forms. Aristotle rejected the theory of independent forms, but for him also, the mind attains truth only by an intentional relation to reality. The Scholastics, despite major differences among themselves, defended an intentional theory of knowledge. All presupposed an ontological givenness of the real in the act of knowing.

The principles of modern thought implicitly conflicted with this assumption. That truth was to be established exclusively on the basis
of the mind’s own criteria of certainty directly affected the conception of transcendence. Thus, there was a sudden explosion of arguments to prove the necessary existence of what the new concept of rationality no longer needed. Not surprisingly, those arguments failed to be persuasive. Only the ontological argument, which in fact expressed the ancient belief that all thinking rested on a transcendent basis, regained new power.

Still, few thinkers embraced the “modern position” without serious reservations. Descartes himself preserved much of Augustine’s doctrine, according to which the process of truth presupposes a divine illumination. In the Third Meditation, he actually resumes the Augustinian doctrine of the interior Master who gives the idea of the infinite to human consciousness. His much-criticized “ontological argument” in the Fifth Meditation merely explicates an idea not construed by the mind but given to the mind. “While from the fact that I cannot conceive God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from Him, and hence that the reality exists, not that my thought can bring this to pass, or impose any necessity which lies in the thing itself, i.e. the necessity of the existence of God determines me to think this way.” Even the famous “cogito, ergo sum” goes back to Augustine, who had written: “Si enim fallor, sum. Nam qui non est, utique nec falli potest: ac per hoc sum si fallor” (De civitate dei, XI, 26) (Even if I am deceived, I am; for who is not cannot be deceived, hence I am if I were deceived).

What, then, were the effects on religion of Descartes’ intellectual revolution? Rationality, which formerly had constituted the essence of the real, now became the exclusive attribute of the mind. The notion of transcendence lost much of its meaning when the mind itself had to define what, by its own description, totally surpassed it. The turn to the self as the new source of meaning affected even the self’s own content. Being the subject of meaning, the self was in fact reduced to a mere function that possessed no content of its own. Kant put his finger on the problem: the source of knowledge cannot become an object of knowledge.

Did the newly defined reason do for the modern mind what the idea of the cosmos did for Greek Antiquity, or the idea of God for medieval culture? I think not, because reason had become a purely critical concept, formal and abstract, void of content. In the Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel describes the Enlightenment as a dialectical struggle between reason and faith, whereby faith preserved the ideal content but lost the power to justify itself, and reason retained only the critical force without the content. Critical reason imposed an abstract pattern of order on nature and society. In the French Revolution it initiated a global project to improve the entire human species.

The rationalist rhetoric strikes us today as absurdly presumptuous. Yet rationalism and its irrational counterpart were still very much alive in the twentieth century when communist ideologies attempted to impose a rationalist pattern of abstract equality upon society and when, on the opposite side, an irrational nationalism proclaimed the superiority of nation and race over all values. Who would dare to say that today the desire for rationalist engineering under yet a different banner, such as the worldwide spreading of democracy upon reluctant nations, has vanished? Or that the destructive powers of irrational racism and intolerance have finally yielded to reason?