



A RUMOR OF ANGELS

MODERN SOCIETY AND THE
REDISCOVERY OF THE SUPERNATURAL

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**Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the
Supernatural**

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Preface

THIS BOOK IS CONCERNED with the possibility of theological thinking in our present situation. It asks whether such thinking is possible at all today and, if so, in what way. The first question is answered affirmatively, and the answer is, up to a point, supported by an argument that derives from sociology. In the very tentative approaches made to an answer of the second question, sociology is of little if any use. It should, therefore, be very clear that I can claim no authority as a sociologist for a good deal of what follows here. This means that I'm sticking my neck out in the most blatant way, and I should probably explain my motives.

In a recent book, *The Sacred Canopy—Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1967), I attempted to summarize what seem to me to be certain essential features of a sociological perspective on religion and I tried to apply this perspective to an analysis of the contemporary religious situation. I have been trained in a sociological tradition shaped by Max Weber and so I tried, to the best of my ability, to keep my statements "value-free." The result was a theoretical work that, quite apart from the technical jargon in which it had to be presented, read like a treatise on atheism, at least in parts. The analysis of the contemporary situation with which it ended could easily be read (and, as far as my intentions were concerned, misread) as a counsel of despair for religion in the modern world. For better or for worse, my self-understanding is not exhausted by the fact that I am a sociologist. I also consider myself a Christian, though I have not yet found the here into which my theological views would comfortably fit. All this made me uneasy about the possible effect of *The Sacred Canopy* upon the unwary reader and so I added an appendix that dealt with some possible theological implications of the book's argument. This way out did not satisfy me, and the present book is the result of this dissatisfaction.

In what follows I try to say what I have to say as simply as I can and without forcing the reader to go first through the conceptual and terminological apparatus with which I habitually carry on my business as a sociologist. I have found a few technical terms indispensable, but I have tried to keep these to a minimum. This book, then, is not particularly addressed to sociologists and does not presuppose the debatable benefits of a sociological education. It is addressed to anyone with a concern for religious questions and the willingness to think about them systematically. I hope that it may have something to say to theologians, though I'm fully aware of my lack of expertise in theology. In view of the non-technical (I'm tempted to say unprofessional) character of the book, I have also kept the notes to a minimum and almost entirely limited them to references in English. The relatively frequent references to previous writings of my own should in no way be construed as a conviction on my part that these writings are terribly important or as advice to the reader to go back to them. But even the process of thinking must be a conversation with oneself and particularly with one's previous thoughts and one cannot at each step start all over again from the beginning. Not to have to do this should perhaps be one of the fringe benefits of having written more than one book.

I suppose one sticks one's neck out when it comes to things one deems important. I think that religion is of very great importance at any time and of particular importance in our own time. If theologizing means simply any systematic reflection about religion, then it would seem plausible to regard it as too important to leave to the theological experts. Ergo, one must stick out one's neck. This implies impertinence as well as modesty. To try at all may well be impertinent. This should make all the clearer that the effort is tentative and the result unfinished.

Some of the ideas that follow were discussed at length with Richard Neuhaus. I would like to express my great appreciation of his interest and suggestions on these occasions.

I have dedicated this book to my first teacher in theology. I know that he would not have liked many of its conclusions, but I venture to hope that he would have approved the basic intention.

P. L. J.

New York, Fall 1968

1. The Alleged Demise of the Supernatural

IF COMMENTATORS ON THE contemporary situation of religion agree about anything, it is that the supernatural has departed from the modern world. This departure may be stated in such dramatic formulations as “God is dead” or “the post-Christian era.” Or it may be undramatically assumed as a global and probably irreversible trend. Thus the “radical theologian” Thomas Altizer tells us with the solemnity of a confessional pronouncement that “we must realize that the death of God is an historic event, that God has died in our cosmos, in our history, in our *Existenz*.”¹ And Herman Kahn and Anthony Wiener, of the Hudson Institute, in their fascinating attempt to project the course of the final third of this century, manage to do so with only minimal mention of religion and on the assumption that twentieth-century cultures will continue to be increasingly “sensate”—a term coined by the late Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, and defined by Kahn and Wiener as “empirical, this-worldly, secular, humanistic, pragmatic, utilitarian, contractual, epicurean or hedonistic, and the like.”²

The departure of the supernatural has been received in a variety of moods—with prophetic anger, in deep sorrow, with gleeful triumph, or simply as an emotionally unprovocative fact. But the spokesman of traditional religion who thunders against a godless age, the “progressive” intellectual who hails its coming, and the dispassionate analyst who merely registers it have in common the recognition that such, indeed, is our situation—an age in which the divine, at least in its classic forms, has receded into the background of human concern and consciousness.

The term “supernatural” has been justly criticized on a number of grounds. Historians of religion and cultural anthropologists have pointed out that the term suggests the division of reality into a closed system of rationally comprehensible “nature” and a mysterious world somehow beyond it, a peculiarly modern conception, which is misleading if one seeks to understand the religious notions of primitive or archaic cultures. Biblical scholars have criticized the term as failing to convey the concreteness and historical character of the Israelite religious experience, and Christian theologians attacked it as offending the world-affirming implications of the doctrine of the incarnation, if not indeed of the doctrine of creation. Nevertheless the term, particularly in its everyday usage, denotes a fundamental category of religion, namely the assertion or belief that there is *an other reality*, and one of ultimate significance for man, which transcends the reality within which our everyday experience unfolds. It is this fundamental assumption about reality, rather than this or that historical variation of it, that is allegedly defunct or in the process of becoming defunct in the modern world.

The historian of religion Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy* (originally published in German in 1917) attempted what may still be regarded as a definitive description of this “otherness” of religious experience. Otto emphasized that the sacred (that is, the reality man believes he encounters in religious experience) is “totally other” than ordinary, human phenomena, and in this “otherness” the sacred impresses man as an overwhelming, awesome, and strangely fascinating power.

As one might expect, there has been extensive controversy since then as to the validity of Otto's delineation of the sacred as the religious category par excellence in all cultures. Once more, however, these scholarly debates may be left aside. Instead, let us look at the ordinary world, which some philosophers have called the *Lebenswelt*, or “life-world,” within which we carry on our “normal” activities in collaboration with other men. This is the arena of most of our projects in life, where reality is strongest and thus the most “natural” in our consciousness. This, in the words of the sociologist philosopher Alfred Schutz, is “the world of daily life which the wide-awake, grown-up man who acts in it and upon it amidst his fellow-man experiences within the natural attitude as a reality.”³ It is in this domain of taken-for-granted, “natural” experience (*not* necessarily to “nature” in the sense of

say, the eighteenth-century rationalists) that religion posits a “supernatural” reality.

~~As cultural anthropologists have pointed out, the everyday life of primitive man was, like our~~ dominated by empirical, pragmatic, utilitarian imperatives geared to “this world”; he could hardly have solved the basic problems of survival if it had not been. This was even more true of daily life in the great ancient civilizations. The preoccupation with “natural” consciousness is not at all peculiar to the modern age. Someone once remarked that most present-day Anglo-American philosophers have the same conception of reality as that held by a slightly drowsy, middle-aged businessman right after lunch. Very probably slightly drowsy, middle-aged tribal warriors and ancient Greeks held very similar conceptions right after *their* lunches. But primitive and ancient men also accepted the idea of another, supernatural world of divine beings and forces as a background to the ordinary world and assumed that “the other world” impinged on this one in a variety of ways. This suggests that at least part of the reason why we today have embraced what we consider the “rationality” (or “naturalism”) of modern science and philosophy is because we wish to maintain that “natural” consciousness is the only possible or desirable one—a point that will be taken up again later.

There is a German fairy tale about a young apprentice who is disturbed by the fact that he has never been able to experience gruesomeness and deliberately subjects himself to all sorts of situations that are reputed to evoke such feelings. The spiritual adventure of modern man seems to have been motivated by the opposite aim of *unlearning* any conceivable metaphysical terror. If the idea about the demise of the supernatural is correct, then the unlearning effort has indeed succeeded. How much evidence is there in support of the idea?

The answer hinges on what might be called the secularization theory of modern culture—using the word secularization not in the sense of what has happened with social institutions (such as, for example, the separation of church and state), but as applying to processes inside the human mind, that is, a secularization of *consciousness*. Here the empirical evidence is not very satisfactory. Considering the importance of the question, one might have expected professional observers of the contemporary scene, especially sociologists, to invest some energy in an attempt to provide answers. But in recent years sociologists, with very few exceptions, have shown very little interest, probably because they have sworn allegiance to a scientific “progressivism” that regards religion as a vanishing leftover from the dark ages of superstition and do not care to invest their energies in the study of a moribund phenomenon. The fairly small group of sociologists who have taken the sociology of religion as their professional specialty have not been terribly helpful either.⁴ They have not looked on religion as moribund, if only for reasons of professional self-respect, but they have regarded it almost exclusively in terms of the traditional religious institutions—that is, most recent sociology of religion has been the *sociology of the churches*. And it is from this somewhat restricted perspective that a good deal of sound evidence has, indeed, been accumulated on secularization. The largest body of data, most of which refer to Europe, comes from the school of so-called “religious sociology,” which is largely Catholic-inspired.⁵ Recently there have been some interesting attempts quite distinct from this school to uncover motives for religious participation in America with the use of more sophisticated research tools.⁶

On the basis of this evidence one can say with some confidence that *churchly* religiosity (that is, religious belief and practice within the traditions of the principal Christian churches) has been on the decline in modern society. In Europe this has generally taken the form of a progressive decline in institutional participation (attendance at worship, use of the sacraments, and the like), though there are important class differences in this. In America, on the contrary, there has been an increase in participation (as measured by church membership figures), though there are good reasons to think that the motives for participation have changed greatly from the traditional ones. It is safe to say that

compared to earlier historical periods, fewer Americans today adhere to the churches out of a burning desire for salvation from sin and hellfire, while many do so out of a desire to provide moral instruction for their children and direction for their family life, or just because it is part of the lifestyle of their particular neighborhood. The difference between the European and American patterns has been aptly characterized by the sociologist Thomas Luckmann as, respectively, “secularization from without” and “secularization from within.” In both cases there is strong evidence that traditional religious beliefs have become empty of meaning not only in large sections of the general population but even among many people who, with whatever motives, continue to belong to a church. All this, of course, leaves open the question of whether there may not be genuinely religious forces outside the traditional Christian or churchly frame of reference. Also, since sociologists and their ilk have been around for only a rather short time, it is not clear to what extent their findings can be rigorously compared with the situation in previous periods, for which different and only imperfectly comparable data are available. Sociologists, equipped with all the latest tricks of their trade, may be able to tell with some precision why people join churches in America in the 1960s; to compare their findings with the situation in the 1860s we have to rely on what they would call much “softer” data.

All the same, the proposition of the demise of the supernatural, or at least of its considerable decline, in the modern world is very plausible in terms of the available evidence. It is to be hoped that more plentiful and more precise evidence will yet be produced, and that there will be greater collaboration between social scientists and historians in this undertaking. But even now we have a good empirical foundation for the proposition as we do for most generalizations about our world. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, *today* the supernatural as a meaningful reality is absent or remote from the horizons of everyday life of large numbers, very probably of the majority of people in modern societies, who seem to manage to get along without it quite well. This means that those to whom the supernatural is still, or again, a meaningful reality find themselves in the status of a minority, more precisely, a *cognitive minority*—a very important consequence with very far-reaching implications.

By a cognitive minority I mean a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society. Put differently, a cognitive minority is a group formed around a body of deviant “knowledge.” The quotation marks should be stressed here. The term “knowledge” used within the frame of reference of the sociology of knowledge always refers to what is *taken to be* or *believed as* “knowledge.” In other words, the use of the terms is strictly neutral on the question of whether or not the socially held “knowledge” is finally true or false. All human societies are based on “knowledge” in this sense. The sociology of knowledge seeks to understand the different forms of this. The same quotation marks apply to my use of the adjective “cognitive,” of course. Instead of saying that societies have bodies of knowledge, we can say that they have cognitive structures. Once more, this in no way implies a judgment of the final validity of the “cognitions.” This should be kept in mind whenever the adjective is used in the following argument. Put simply, the sociologist qua sociologist always stays in the role of reporter. He reports that people believe they “know” such and such, and that this belief has such and such consequences. As soon as he ventures an opinion on whether the belief is finally justified, he is jumping out of the role of sociologist. There is nothing wrong with this role change, and I intend to perform it myself in a little while. But one should be clear about what one is doing when.

For better or for worse, men are social beings. Their “sociality” includes what they think, believe they “know” about the world.⁷ Most of what we “know” we have taken on the authority of others, and it is only as others continue to confirm this “knowledge” that it continues to be plausible for us. It is such socially shared, socially taken-for-granted “knowledge” that allows us to move with a measure of confidence through everyday life. Conversely, the plausibility of “knowledge” that is not

socially shared, that is challenged by our fellow men, is imperiled, not just in our dealings with others but much more importantly in our own minds. The status of a cognitive minority is thus invariably an uncomfortable one—not necessarily because the majority is repressive or intolerant, but simply because it refuses to accept the minority's definitions of reality as “knowledge.” At best, a minority viewpoint is forced to be defensive. At worst, it ceases to be plausible to anyone.

Highly intriguing studies, which it would be unpractical to review here, have been made of the social dimension of our cognitive life.⁸ One example may illustrate its importance. A person coming to America from a culture in which it is part of everyone's “knowledge” that the stars influence human events will, if he expresses this “knowledge” in the United States, soon discover what it means to belong to a cognitive minority. He will be listened to with shocked surprise or tolerant amusement. Attempts may be made to “educate” him, or he may be encouraged to exhibit his exotic notions and thus to play the role of ethnological specimen. Unless he can insulate himself against this massive challenge to his previously taken-for-granted reality (which would presuppose an available group of fellow astrologers to take refuge with), he will soon begin to doubt his challenged “knowledge.” There are various ways of coping with doubt. Our cognitive exile could decide to keep his truths to himself—thus depriving them of all social support—or he could try to gain converts; or he could seek for some sort of compromise, perhaps by thinking up “scientific” reasons for the validity of his astrological lore, thus contaminating his reality with the cognitive assumptions of his challengers. Individuals vary in their ability to resist social pressure. The predictable conclusion of the unequal struggle is, however, the progressive disintegration of the plausibility of the challenged “knowledge” in the consciousness of the one holding it. The example may seem loaded—after all, presumably both the writer and the readers of this book “know” that astrology is a lot of nonsense.

To make the point clearer, the example can be reversed. An American stranded in an astrological culture will find his “scientific” view of the world tottering under exactly the same social assaults that undermine astrology in America, and the end result is equally predictable. This is the kind of thing that happens to cultural anthropologists in the field. They call it “culture shock” and cope with it by means of various rituals of detachment (this is the latent psychological function of field procedures) by staying in the company of or at least in communication with fellow outsiders to the culture being studied, and best of all by going home from the field after a relatively brief period of time. The penalty for failure in these efforts to remain outside the situation is “to go native.” To be sure, cultural anthropologists like to do this behaviorally (“participant observation”) and even emotionally (“empathy”). If they “go native” *cognitively*, however, they will no longer be able to do cultural anthropology. They will have dropped out of the universe of discourse in which such an enterprise is meaningful or even real.

So far, then, we have amplified the proposition concerning the demise of the supernatural in the modern world in two ways: We have conceded the empirical viability of the proposition and we have suggested that such supernaturalists as may still be around will find their beliefs buffeted by very strong social *and* psychological pressures. Therefore it is hardly surprising that a profound theological crisis exists today. The theologian like every other human being exists in a social milieu. He too is the product of socialization processes. His “knowledge” has been socially acquired, is in need of social support, and is thus vulnerable to social pressures. If the term “supernatural” is understood in the above-mentioned sense, it must be further observed that, at least traditionally, its meaningfulness has been a necessary condition of the theological enterprise. It follows that, in a situation where one may speak of a demise of the supernatural, and *where the theologian himself does so* when he describes the situation, the theological enterprise is confronted with truly formidable difficulties. The theologian more and more resembles a witch doctor stranded among logical positivists—or, of course, a logical positivist stranded among witch doctors. Willy-nilly he is exposed to the exorcisms of his cognitive

antagonists. Sooner or later these exorcisms will have their effect in undermining the old certainties his own mind.

Historical crises are rarely consummated in one dramatic moment. They are contained processes that extend over varying periods of time and that are experienced in different ways by those affected. As Nietzsche tells us in the famous passage about the “death of God”: “This tremendous event is still on its way . . . it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard.”⁹ It would therefore be extraordinarily naïve to expect the demise of the supernatural to be equally visible from all vantage points of our culture or to be experienced in the same way by all who have taken cognizance of it. There continue to be religious and theological milieus in which the crisis is, at the most, dimly sensed as an external threat in the distance. In other milieus the crisis is beginning to be felt, but is “still on its way.” In yet other milieus the crisis is in full eruption as a threat deep inside the fabric of religious practice, faith, and thought. And in some places it is as if the believer or theologian were standing in a landscape of smoldering ruins.

These differences in the perception and absorption of the crisis run across the traditional divisions between the religious groupings of Western culture. But the divisions are still significant in terms of the over-all impact of the crisis. Protestantism has lived with the crisis longest and most intensively, lived with it, that is, as an internal rather than an external cataclysm. This is because Protestant thought has always been particularly open to the spirit of modernity. Very probably this openness has its historical roots not only in an intellectual or spiritual affinity but in the important part that Protestantism actually played in the genesis of the modern world, as Max Weber and others have shown. Be this as it may, one can perceive a major trend of accommodation to modern thought and worldliness in Protestant thought for well over a century, beginning as far back as 1799, when Schleiermacher’s *Addresses on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers* were first published. The century that followed, extending into the present century up to World War I, saw the rise to dominance of theological liberalism whose crucial concern was a cognitive adjustment of Christianity to the (actual or alleged) world view of modernity and one of whose major results was the progressive dismantling of the supernaturalist scaffolding of the Christian tradition. Indeed, the intended audience of Schleiermacher’s *Addresses* was prophetic too. Increasingly, Protestant theology has oriented itself to the changing coteries of “cultured despisers” of religion, that is, by shifting groups of secularized intellectuals whose respect it solicited and whose cognitive presuppositions it accepted as binding. In other words, Protestant theologians have been increasingly engaged in playing a game whose rules have been dictated by their cognitive antagonists. While this curious vulnerability (not to say lack of character) can probably be explained sociologically, what is interesting here is the over-all result—a profound erosion of the traditional religious contents, in extreme cases to the point where nothing is left but hollow rhetoric. Of late it seems more and more as if the extreme has become the norm.

For a short time, roughly from the end of World War I until shortly after World War II (there are some differences in the duration of this period between Europe and America, and to some extent between denominations), the trend appeared to be about to be reversed. This was the period marked by the ascent of what was variously called neo-Protestantism, dialectical theology, or (most aptly) neo-orthodoxy, ushered in with éclat in 1919 with the publication of Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans*. With tremendous passion Barth, particularly in his early work in the 1920s, repudiated all the major assumptions of Protestant liberalism. He called for a return to the classical faith of the Reformation, a faith that, he maintained, was unconditionally based on God’s revelation and not on any human reason or experience. In retrospect it is clear that this period was an interruption rather than a reversal of the secularizing trend. It also seems likely that the interlude had a very specific historical and social-psychological foundation, namely the tremendous shocks administered to the self-confidence of the

culture in general and its Christian sector in particular by the horrors of war, revolution, and economic disaster. This was, of course, especially true of German-speaking Protestantism and its confrontation with the anti-Christian delirium of Nazism. Theological liberals have glibly dismissed neo-orthodoxy as basically a kind of postwar neurosis, a case of spiritual battle fatigue. This view has a good deal of historical plausibility. It should not surprise us, then, that the “normalization” of society setting in after World War II (in Germany this can be dated quite precisely, and in the context embarrassingly so by the currency reform of 1948) led to a rapid decline of neo-orthodoxy and to the resurgence of various strands of neo-liberalism.

More or less intact milieux of Protestant conservatism still exist, of course. These are typically located on the fringes of urban, middle-class society. They are like besieged fortresses, and their mood tends toward a militancy that only superficially covers an underlying sense of panic. At times, in eruptions of frustrated aggression, the militancy becomes hysterical. Today, the neo-orthodox, who only a few years ago could think of themselves as representing the upsurge of a new Reformation, find themselves dwindling in both numbers and influence. Most of them are elderly veterans of battles that have become unreal to the new generation (such as the battles of German Protestantism in the 1930s) and they are often even more out of touch with what animates the younger theologians than the old-line conservatives who never modified their orthodoxies with the (possibly fatal) prefix “neo-.” The theological novelties that have dominated the Protestant scene in the last two decades all seem basically to take up where the older liberalism left off. This is certainly, and in these cases biographically, the case with Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann. Tillich understood the task of theology as one of “correlation,” by which he meant the intellectual adjustment of the Christian tradition with philosophical truth. Bultmann proposed a program of what he called “demythologization,” a restatement of the biblical message in language free from the supernaturalistic notions of ancient man. Both Tillich and Bultmann drew heavily on existentialism (particularly as developed in Germany by Martin Heidegger) for the concepts employed in their efforts to translate Christianity into terms adequate for modern man. The various recent movements of “radical” or “secular” theology have returned even more unambiguously to the old liberalism whether through “cultured despisers” being cognitively embraced are psychoanalysts, sociologists, existentialists, and language analysts.¹⁰ The self-liquidation of the theological enterprise is undertaken with an enthusiasm that verges on the bizarre, culminating in the reduction to absurdity of the “God-is-dead theology” and “Christian atheism.” It is no wonder that even those clergy, younger theologians, and with particular poignancy, theological students who are not simply eager to be “with it” in terms of the latest ideological fashions are afflicted with profound malaise in this situation. The question “What next?” may sometimes be the expression of an intellectual attitude geared to fads and publicity; but it may also be a genuine cry *de profundis*. In the American situation the option of political activity, made morally reasonable by the unspeakable mess of our domestic and international affairs, can serve as a welcome relief, a liberating “leap” from ambiguity to commitment. I do not for one moment wish to disparage this option, but it should be clear from even moderate reflection that the fundamental *cognitive* problem will not be solved in this manner.

The Catholic situation is different, at least in part because Catholicism has viewed the modern world with much more suspicion from the beginning and, as a result, has managed to keep up its cognitive defenses against modernity more effectively and until a much more recent date. Throughout the nineteenth century, while Protestant liberalism carried on its great love affair with the spirit of the age, the basic temper of Catholicism can be described as a magnificent defiance. This temper is exemplified by the figure of Pius IX, whose *Syllabus of Errors* of 1864 condemned, among other modern abominations, the claim that “the Roman Pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself to, and agree with, progress, liberalism and civilization as lately introduced.” It was in the same pontifical

that the First Vatican Council proclaimed papal infallibility as well as the immaculate conception, in July 1870 in the very teeth of “civilization as lately introduced,” which, two months later, marched into Rome in the shape of Victor Emmanuel’s army. As late as 1950 (on the very eve of sputnik, as we were) this splendid recalcitrance in the face of modernity manifested itself once more in the proclamation of the dogma of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven. But that was in the pontificate of Pius XII. The winds of change began to blow more wildly under John XXIII.

It goes without saying that there were undercurrents of accommodation and modernization long before this. The very constitution of the Catholic church, however, provided the means by which these currents could, indeed, be kept *under*. Thus the whole syndrome of secularization, including the demise of the supernatural, could be officially diagnosed as a malady of the world outside the gates. On the inside, the supernaturalist apparatus of mystery and miracle could go on as before—just as long as the defenses (political as well as cognitive) were properly manned, or so it seemed. Such fifth columns within the church as, for instance, the modernist movement around the turn of the century were promptly and effectively repressed. In this particular instance the Freudian allegory of hydraulics is most apt: The repressed impulses, when finally released, threaten to blow off the roof. The pumps, of course, began to gush with Vatican II. The ancient dikes showed punctures. Not that there were no little boys ready and willing to stick their fingers into all the holes—the conservatives were, and did. And now, when all the furniture seems to be swimming out to sea, they can say with some justice, “We told you so.”

The theological flux that has engulfed large segments of Catholicism since Vatican II is still very new. There are still sizable islands of immunity, especially in geographical or social areas that are relatively sheltered from modern mass communications (not to speak of literacy). But in Catholic intellectual milieux, the very milieux in which the theological enterprise must be socially rooted, there have of late emerged noises of a fearful modernity sufficient to put the most “radical” Protestants to shame. David Martin, a British sociologist of religion, has described this process with admirable succinctness: “Most Protestant countries in the Anglo-Saxon ambit have been so used to religious vacuity that another cloud of existentialist dust barely disturbs the clarity of their theological vision. But for those only lately inured to clear and distinct ideas like Thomism or to the firm exercise of authority, the effect is startling. Just as Catholics who cease to be conservative often become Marxists, so those who cease to be Thomist easily embrace the most extreme existentialist fashion. They are experts at excluding the middle.”¹¹ In other words, in religion as in politics, if one once starts to clobber the opposition, one stops clobbering at one’s peril. The peril was predictable. The irony of the situation is that the Catholic liberals, who rank sociology high in their hierarchy of secular revelations, have failed to see the peril. The conservatives, who generally view sociology as one of the more nefarious devilries of modern intellect, smelled the danger signals a mile off. It may well be that conservatives usually have the better sociological noses.

The Jews have experienced the crisis differently. For one thing, Judaism, unlike Christianity, has never developed authoritative and rigorously defined systems of theological propositions. Orthodoxy in Judaism has always been more a matter of practice than of belief. An orthodox Jew can hold a number of perhaps wildly modernistic ideas without necessarily feeling that these are inconsistent with his attitudes regarding family excursions on Saturday or family meals with certain kinds of salami. Thus the efforts of Mordecai Kaplan to “reconstruct” Judaism by getting rid of its entire baggage of traditional supernaturalism, while enraging a goodly number of his fellow rabbis, created less of a storm among American Jews than a comparable program would have, certainly at the time of its initial promulgation in the 1930s, in most Christian milieux. For another thing, Judaism, unlike any Western form of Christianity, has an ethnic dimension, which is closely related to its religious tradition but may also be divorced from it. The modern crisis of Judaism has been closely linked

the so-called problem of Jewish identity, and there have been various strictly secular solutions to this problem, the most successful having been political Zionism. Nevertheless secularization has plunged Judaism into a dilemma as great as Christianity's. It is all very well to say that Judaism is, above all, a matter of practice. This practice is, however, rooted in a specific cognitive universe without which it is threatened with meaninglessness. The numerous pre- and proscriptions of orthodox Judaism are likely to appear as so many absurdities, unless they remain linked to a world view that includes the supernatural. Lacking this, despite all sorts of traditional loyalties and nostalgias, the whole edifice of traditional piety takes on the character of a museum of religious history. People may like museums but they are reluctant to live in them. And the secular solutions to the problem of Jewish identity become highly tenuous unless there is *either* anti-Semitic pressure *or* a "natural" Jewish community to which the individual can belong regardless of his religious orientation. The decline of both conditions in contemporary America has produced considerable worries for American Jewish leadership. In Israel, where the second condition pertains, the debates, extending into legal controversy, over the relationship of Jewishness, Judaism, and Israeli nationality indicate the appearance of new variations of the classical problem of identity. In neither country does it seem plausible to exempt Judaism as a religion from the crisis that interests us here.¹²

As we have seen, the crisis is refracted in different ways through the several prisms of religious traditions, but no tradition within the orbit of modern Western societies is exempt from it. A good case can also be made (though not here) that religious traditions in non-Western societies that are undergoing modernization become engulfed in the same crisis, the extent of the crisis keeping pace with the extent of modernization.

In this confrontation between religion and modernity the case of Protestantism is the prototype. Both Catholic and Jewish writers in America have referred to the "Protestantization" of the respective communities, by which they usually mean certain features of their community life (for example, the development of the church as a social center for its congregation, or the emergence of the clergy into public life on certain current issues) that can be attributed to Protestant influence. This term, however, has deeper implications. The case of Protestantism may well serve other religious traditions as a highly instructive example of the impact of the crisis and its various effects. It was Protestantism that first underwent the onslaught of secularization; Protestantism that first adapted itself to societies in which several faiths existed on equal terms, the pluralism may be regarded as a twin phenomenon to secularization,¹³ and it was in Protestant theology that the cognitive challenges of traditional supernaturalism were first met and fought through. The Protestant experience has a vicarious quality about it, especially in its assorted miseries. Catholic and Jewish writers, who on occasion are prone to be patronizing about these miseries, might do well to watch the portents and realize that they are in no way immune to the same perils.

How one predicts the future course of the secularizing trend obviously depends to a large extent on how one explains the origins and the moving forces of the trend to begin with. There are many different theories of the roots of secularization,¹⁴ but whether one sees the process in terms of the history of ideas (listing factors such as the growth of scientific rationalism or the latent secularity of biblical religion itself), or whether one prefers more sociologically oriented theories (with factors such as industrialization, urbanization, or the pluralism of social milieux), it is difficult to see why any of these elements should suddenly reverse themselves. It is more reasonable to assume that a high degree of secularization is a cultural concomitant of modern industrial societies, at least as we now know them, so that abrupt changes in the secularizing trend are not very likely in the foreseeable future. This presupposes what Kahn and Wiener rather nicely call a "surprise-free" world, that is, a world in which present trends continue to unfold without the intrusion of totally new and unexpected

factors.

Our “futurologists” themselves seem a little nervous about the notion of “surprise-freeness,” and with good reason. One might wonder whether someone equipped with the techniques of modern social science in the late fifteenth century would have been in a position to predict the imminence of the Reformation—or a similarly precocious type in the late first century the coming expansion of Christianity. One of the elements that keeps history from being a complete bore is that it is full of “surprises.” At the present time it is easy to envision a number of possible “surprises” that would mean that all bets are off, with regard to secularization or any other present trend—a thermonuclear war devastating much of the world, a complete collapse of the capitalist economic system, permanent racial war in America, and so on. If any of these are in store for us, attempts at prognosis are futile. It would hardly help our understanding to predict the appearance of strange new religions among the wretched survivors of a thermonuclear Armageddon. We lack the data to play through, in the case of religion, what Kahn and Wiener call “canonical variations,” that is, possible constellations of “surprise” developments. But despite these limitations, some further observations are possible. We can assume the continuation of the secularizing trend and then proceed to ask what options this leaves for religion and theological thought—options that will, of course, have to be exercised under the conditions of a cognitive minority.

The fundamental option is simple: It is a choice between hanging on to or surrendering cognitive deviance. This choice belongs to the realm of ideas. But it is very important to understand that it has practical social implications.

Choices in real life are rarely pure, but to understand the middle ground it is helpful to imagine the extremes. At one extreme, then, is the option to maintain (or possibly to reconstruct) a supernaturalist position in the teeth of a cognitively antagonistic world. This entails an attitude of the stiff upper lip, a steadfast refusal to “go native,” a (literally or otherwise) pontifical insouciance about the opinions of mankind. The theologian with this stance will stick to his trade, supernaturalism and all, and the world (literally or otherwise) be damned. Assuming the continuation of the secularizing trend, this stance is not going to get any easier to maintain. There will be extremely strong social and social-psychological pressures against it. Unless our theologian has the inner fortitude of a desert saint, he has only one effective remedy against the threat of cognitive collapse in the face of the pressures: He must huddle together with like-minded fellow deviants—and huddle very close indeed. Only in a countercommunity of considerable strength does cognitive deviance have a chance to maintain itself. The countercommunity provides continuing therapy against the creeping doubt as to whether, after all, one may not be wrong and the majority right. To fulfill its function of providing social support for the deviant body of “knowledge,” the countercommunity must provide a strong sense of solidarity among its members (a “fellowship of the saints” in a world rampant with devils) and it must be quite closed vis-à-vis the outside (“Be not yoked together with unbelievers!”). In sum, it must be a kind of ghetto.

People may be forced into ghettos, or they may elect to live in them. It is relevant to recall that Judaism originally created the ghetto as a segregated countercommunity, not because of outside coercion, but because of its own religious necessities. Probably as far back as the Babylonian exile the segregated Jewish community was the social expression (and, one may add, a sociologically necessary one) of the separateness, the difference of the Jewish religion. Without the fence of the law, as the rabbis well realized, Judaism could not have survived in the midst of the Gentiles. Inevitably the theological fence had to produce a practical social analogue. But to live in a fenced-in milieu requires strong motivation. In the absence of such motivation, only persecution or outside force can produce the social conditions necessary for the survival of the cognitive deviance.

When people themselves elect to live in this kind of segregation from the larger society we have

the phenomenon that sociologists have analyzed as sectarianism. The term “sect” is used in different ways in common speech. Sociologically, it means a religious group that is relatively small, in tension with the larger society and closed (one might say “balled up”) against it, and that makes very strong claims on the loyalty and solidarity of its members. The choice to persist in defiant cognitive deviance necessarily also entails the choice of sectarian forms of social organization. But people must somehow be motivated to live in such sects. Sometimes this can happen “naturally,” if the sectarian or ghetto community coincides with ethnic or class barriers set up by the larger society. This happened for a while with Catholicism in the United States, but as the barriers began to come down the sectarian motives declined in the same measure. Sometimes the larger society may be so unattractive that the sectarian underworld has an appeal over and beyond its particular message. This probably helps to account for the period of neo-orthodox ascendancy in European Protestantism. In a world full of Nazis one can be forgiven for being a Barthian.

The trouble with the sectarian option, at least in a “surprise-free” projection of the future, is that such “favorable” circumstances are not very likely to recur. Social mobility and integration are likely to increase, not recede. Modern governments are unlikely to start imposing religious conformity after a long-lasting trend in the opposite direction. Even the most fundamentalist Marxists seem to be losing their taste for religious persecution. The resulting conditions are not only unfavorable to the maintenance of religious monopolies in any sizable segments of the society, they also produce an open market for world views, religious or secular, in which sects have a hard time thriving.¹⁵ In other words, the modern situation is conducive to open systems of “knowledge” in competition and communication with each other, and not to the closed structures in which widely deviant “knowledge” can be cultivated.

The option of cognitive defiance, then, runs into considerable difficulties of “social engineering.” To these must be added, in the case of the major Christian groups, a profound aversion to sectarian forms. Christianity has behind it many centuries of universalism and social establishment. The suggestion to go underground, as it were, is unlikely to recommend itself to many churchmen and theologians, least of all in the Catholic camp. The odd sound and indeed literally contradictory meaning of the phrases “Catholic sect” or “sectarian Catholicism” reveal the fundamental spiritual incompatibility.

The polar opposite of defiance is surrender. In this option the cognitive authority and superiority of whatever is taken to be “the *Weltanschauung* of modern man” is conceded with few if any reservations. Modernity is swallowed hook, line, and sinker, and the repast is accompanied by a sense of awe worthy of Holy Communion. Indeed, the sense of injury and incomprehension evinced by modernist theologians whose cognitive celebration is rejected could well be put in the words of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, in the pre-Communion exhortation to negligent parishioners: “Ye know how grievous and unkind a thing it is, when a man hath prepared a rich feast, decked his table with all kind of provision, so that there lacketh nothing but the guests to sit down: and yet they who are called . . . most unthankfully refuse to come.” At the moment, of course, there is little reason to complain on this score—the feast lacketh not in attendance.

The basic intellectual task undertaken as a result of this option is one of *translation*. Traditional religious affirmations are translated into terms appropriate to the new frame of reference—the one that allegedly conforms to the *Weltanschauung* of modernity. Different translation grammars have been employed for this purpose, depending on the preferences of the theologians in question as well as their different notions as to the character of the modern *Weltanschauung*. In the cases of Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann, the grammars are variants of existentialism. In the more recent American derivations of “radical” theology, some sort of Jungian psychology, linguistic philosophy, and popular sociology have been used to accomplish the translation. Whatever the differences

method, the result is very similar in all these cases: The supernatural elements of the religious traditions are more or less completely liquidated, and the traditional language is transferred from other-worldly to this-worldly referents. The traditional lore, and in most cases the religious institutions in charge of this lore as well, can then be presented as still or again “relevant” to modern man.

It goes without saying that these procedures require a good deal of intellectual contortionism. The major sociological difficulty, however, lies elsewhere. The various forms of secularized theology, unless they are understood as individual intellectual exercises (something against which the ecclesiastical background of most of their protagonists militates), propose various practical pay-offs. Typically, the lay recipient of these blessings will be either a happier person (his existential anxieties assuaged or his archetypal needs fulfilled) or a more effective citizen (usually this means a bigger and better political liberal), or perhaps both. The trouble is that these benefits are also available under strictly secular labels. A secularized Christianity (and, for that matter, a secularized Judaism) has to go to considerable exertion to demonstrate that the religious label, as modified in conformity with the spirit of the age, has anything special to offer. Why should one buy psychotherapy or racial liberalism in a “Christian” package, when the same commodities are available under purely secular and for the very reason even more modernistic labels? The preference for the former will probably be limited to people with a sentimental nostalgia for traditional symbols—a group that, under the influence of the secularizing theologians, is steadily dwindling. For most people, symbols whose content has been hollowed out lack conviction or even interest. In other words, the theological surrender to the alleged demise of the supernatural defeats itself in precisely the measure of its success. Ultimately, it represents the self-liquidation of theology and of the institutions in which the theological tradition is embodied.

Extreme choices are, however, not only relatively rare, they are particularly unlikely to be adopted by sizable institutions with a variety of vested interests in social survival. There may be coteries of intellectuals to whom something like “Christian atheism” has an appeal, but a banner with this strange device is unlikely to be taken up by any of the major churches. Conversely, the extreme and defiant traditionalism is likely to be restricted to smaller groups, typically those whose social location (in “backward” regions, say, or in the lower classes) gives them little interest or stake in the world of modernity. The larger religious groups are rather inclined toward various forms and degrees of *aggiornamento*, that is of limited, controlled accommodation. Cognitively, this stance involves a bargaining process with modern thought, a surrender of some traditional (which here equals supernatural) items while others are kept.

This was the classical pattern of Protestant theological liberalism. Under new guises it has come to the fore again, in Protestantism since World War II and in Catholicism since Vatican II. While this pattern has the healthiest prospects in terms of social survival values, it has its own troubles too. The main one is a built-in escalation factor—escalation, that is, toward the pole of cognitive surrender. *Aggiornamento* usually arises out of tactical considerations. It is argued that one must modify certain features of the institution or its message because otherwise one will not be able to reach this or that recalcitrant clientele—the intelligentsia, or the working class, or the young. These modifications, however, entail a process of *rethinking*, the end results of which are hard to predict or control. Tactical modifications thus tend to escalate toward genuinely cognitive modifications. At this point the outside challenge becomes a challenge from within. The cognitive antagonist has crept inside the gates and, worse, inside the consciousness of the theologian assigned to guard the gates. The notion that trade promotes understanding is a sound one. When one trades ideas, however, the understanding pushes toward agreement, for those reasons deeply grounded in man’s social nature that have been mentioned before. In other words, once one starts a process of cognitive bargaining, one subjects oneself to mutual cognitive contamination. The crucial question then is, Who is the stronger party? If the

secularization thesis holds, the stronger party, of course, is the modern world in which the supernatural has become irrelevant. The theologian who trades ideas with the modern world, therefore, is likely to come out with a poor bargain, that is, he will probably have to give far more than he will get. To vary the image, he who supps with the devil had better have a long spoon. The devilry of modernity has its own magic: The theologian who supps with *it* will find his spoon getting shorter and shorter—until that last supper in which he is left alone at the table, with no spoon at all and with an empty plate. The devil, one may guess, will by then have gone away to more interesting company.

Having considered the options and their likely consequences on the “surprise-free” prognosis that the secularizing trend will continue as before, it may be useful now to look briefly at some possible modifications of the trend short of the cataclysmic possibilities in which any prognosis would come to naught. Dean Inge once remarked that a man who marries the spirit of the age soon finds himself a widower. This can be the result of external events, and sometimes happens quite suddenly. For example, as recently as 1965 Harvey Cox in *The Secular City* invited us to celebrate the advent of modern urbanism as if it were some sort of divine revelation. Only a few years later it is difficult to arouse much enthusiasm for *this* particular bit of “timely” wisdom. American cities seem fated to go up in flame in an annual ritual of mad destructiveness and futility. The civil rights movement, which presumably gave Cox confidence in the libertarian future of urban secularity, seems dead as a political force. And that larger city, which is the American polity, has been bled of its moral substance in the war in Vietnam. Right now very few people in America are in a mood to celebrate much of anything in their city. The lesson of this example can be augmented by a look into even the nearest future. It is quite possible that the Vietnamese war will end in the near future, even end abruptly, and that its termination will be followed by policies that come closer to sanity and humaneness. It is also possible that the war will go on for a long time or, even worse, that one Vietnam will follow another in a series of imperial adventures. If “timeliness” is the criterion, how are Christians to follow Cox’s admonition to “speak politically”? In the stirring notes of millenarian optimism that marked the early civil rights movement? Or in the apocalyptic mood that seems more appropriate right now? Depending upon how things go, the one or the other option could become obsolete in no time at all. “Relevance” is a very fragile business at best.

It is not only the vagaries and sudden turns of external events that make it so. The organization of our cultural life creates a fragility. Relevance and timeliness are defined for the society at large primarily by the media of mass communication. These are afflicted with an incurable hunger for novelty. The relevancies they proclaim are, almost by definition, extremely vulnerable to changing fashions and thus of generally short duration. As a result, the theologian (or, of course, any other intellectual) who seeks to be and remain “with it,” in terms of mass-communicated and mass-communicable relevance, is predestined to find himself authoritatively put down as irrelevant very soon. Those who consider themselves too sophisticated for mass culture take their cues on relevance and timeliness from an assortment of intellectual cliques, which have their own communication system, characterized by fashions that are more intolerant but hardly more durable than those of the mass media. In this country the maharajas of the world of true sophistication are mainly individuals whose baptism in secularity has been by total immersion. The theologian who wants to take his cues from this source is unlikely even to be recognized short of abject capitulation to the realities taken for granted in these particular circles—realities hardly conducive to the theological enterprise in any form. But even he who is ready for such capitulation should be cautioned. Intellectuals are notoriously haunted by boredom (they like to call this “alienation” nowadays). Our intellectual maharajas are no exception, if only because they mainly talk to each other. There is no telling what outlandish religiosity, even one dripping with savage supernaturalism, may yet arise in these groups, which will once more leave our theologian where he started, on the outside of the cocktail party, looking in.

But let us assume that theological relevance is oriented by long-term social trends rather than by fleeting fashions, esoteric or exoteric. Even here a little caution is in order. There is scattered evidence that secularization may not be as all-embracing as some have thought, that the supernatural, banished from cognitive respectability by the intellectual authorities, may survive in hidden nooks and crannies of the culture. Some, for that matter, are not all that hidden. There continue to be quite massive manifestations of that sense of the uncanny that modern rationalism calls “superstition”—last but not least in the continuing and apparently flourishing existence of an astrological subculture! For whatever reasons, sizable numbers of the specimen “modern man” have not lost a propensity for awe for the uncanny, for all those possibilities that are legislated against by the canons of secularized rationality.¹⁶ These subterranean rumblings of supernaturalism can, it seems, coexist with all sorts of upstairs rationalism. In a study of American students, 80 per cent of the respondents expressed a “need for religious faith,” while only 48 per cent admitted to a belief in God in traditional Judaeo-Christian terms.¹⁷ Even more startling, in a recent opinion poll conducted in western Germany, 68 per cent said that they believed in God—but 86 per cent admitted to praying!¹⁸ There are different ways of interpreting such data. They can perhaps be explained quite simply in terms of mankind’s chronic irrationality. But perhaps they express a more significant discrepancy between verbal assent to the truisms of modernity and an actual world view of much greater complexity. In this connection the following data give one pause: According to studies made in England, nearly 50 per cent of the respondents had consulted a fortuneteller, one in six believed in ghosts—and one in fifteen claimed to have seen one!¹⁹

I would shy away from any explanations, such as those made in a Jungian vein, in terms of the psychology of religion, that is, in terms of alleged religious “needs” that are frustrated by modern culture and seek an outlet in some way. Empirically, the psychological premises here are very dubious. Theologically, there are few ideas less helpful than the one that religious belief relates religious need as orgasm does to lust. And it is not unthinkable, after all, that in a world as poorly arranged as this one we may be afflicted with “needs” that are doomed to frustration except in illusion (which, of course, is what Freud thought). However, psychology apart, it is possible to argue that the human condition, fraught as it is with suffering and with the finality of death, demands interpretations that not only satisfy theoretically but give inner sustenance in meeting the crisis of suffering and death. In Max Weber’s sense of the term, there is a need, social rather than psychological, for *theodicy*. Theodicy (literally, “justification of God”) originally referred to theories that sought to explain how an all-powerful and all-good God can permit suffering and evil in the world. Weber used the term more broadly for any theoretical explanation of the meaning of suffering or evil.

There are, of course, secular theodicies. They fail, however, in interpreting and thus in making bearable the extremes of human suffering. They fail notably in interpreting death. The Marxist case is instructive. The Marxist theory of history does, indeed, provide a kind of theodicy: All things will be made whole in the postrevolutionary utopia. This can be quite comforting to an individual facing death on the barricades. Such a death is meaningful in terms of the theory. But the wisdom of Marxism is unlikely to afford much comfort to an individual facing a cancer operation. The death he faces is strictly meaningless within this (and, indeed, any) frame of reference of theodicy slanted toward this world. These remarks are not, at this point, intended as an argument for the truth of religion. Perhaps the truth is comfortless and without ultimate meaning for human hope. Sociologically speaking, however, the stoicism that can embrace this kind of truth is rare. Most people, it seems, want a greater comfort, and so far it has been religious theodicies that have provided it.

There are therefore some grounds for thinking that, at the very least, pockets of supernaturalism

religion are likely to survive in the larger society. As far as the religious communities are concerned, we may expect a revulsion against the more grotesque extremes of self-liquidation of the supernaturalist traditions. It is a fairly reasonable prognosis that in a "surprise-free" world the global trend of secularization will continue. An impressive rediscovery of the supernatural, in the dimension of a mass phenomenon, is not in the books. At the same time, significant enclaves of supernaturalism within the secularized culture will also continue. Some of these may be remnants of traditionalism, the sort that sociologists like to analyze in terms of cultural lag. Others may be new groupings, possible locales for a rediscovery of the supernatural. Both types will have to organize themselves in more or less sectarian social forms. The large religious bodies are likely to continue their tenuous quest for a middle ground between traditionalism and *aggiornamento*, with both sectarianism and secularizing dissolution nibbling away at the edges. This is not a dramatic picture, but it is more like the prophetic visions of either the end of religion or a coming age of resurrected gods.

If my aim here were primarily sociological analysis or prognosis, this would be the end of the argument. Since this is not the case in this book, the preceding is in the nature of preliminary discussion. It is intended to delineate some facets of the situation within which thinking about religion must take place today. I am concerned with the religious questions themselves, on the level of truth rather than timeliness. I also contend (as I will explain next) that the sociological perspective on the questions can yield a little more than a diagnosis of the present situation. No one, to be sure, can think about religion or anything else in sovereign independence of his situation in time and space. The history of human thought demonstrates rather clearly, however, that it is possible to go some way in asking questions of truth while disregarding the spirit of an age, and even to arrive at answers that contradict this spirit. Genuine timeliness means sensitivity to one's socio-historical starting point, not fatalism about one's possible destination. What follows, then, is based on the belief that it is possible to liberate oneself to a considerable degree from the taken-for-granted assumptions of one's time. This belief has as its correlate an ultimate indifference to the majority or minority status of one's view of the world, an indifference that is equally removed from the exaltation of being fully "with it" and from the arrogance of esotericism. Perhaps this indifference also has an element of contempt for the emotional satisfactions of either stance.

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