

GENERATIONAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN AMERICA SINCE WORLD WAR II

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The question of identity, personal and cultural, coalesces in the question of generations. The generation whose inception followed the close of the Second World War brought about protean changes in all aspects of American life. In religion, Americans shifted from a traditional Judeo-Christian mode of expression to consumers of new religious movements and trans-cultic phenomena. Prior to the late Sixties, personal experience was mediated through the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions, and the slogan, "One Nation Under God", summarized civil religion. Since then, a radical turn in American religious expression yielded an outpouring of extra-ecclesiastical religion.

A number of perspectives emerge to contribute to our understanding of the revolution in religion.¹ Sociological explanations include the influences of secularization, the need for community, the emergence of value crises, and the desire for a holistic self-definition in a differentiated society. Psychological perspectives focus primarily on the conversion process and indoctrination techniques. These sufficient explanations suffer, on the other hand, from a functional fallacy. "If the function of the phenomenon to be explained is an unintended consequence, it is a logical fallacy to explain the phenomenon by reference to its function."² Functional explanations tell us something important about the socio-cultural revolution; they say something less about the revolution of the American religious experience. Indeed, the devotee of Krishna may sense a loss and re-gaining of community, or a disintegration and reintegration of the psyche, or have renewed values. Yet these may be interpreted as unintended consequences of the new found faith, not causes. Functional interpretations presuppose that our experience of the phenomenal world is primary and the determining factor for explaining human responses. Causal relationships depend on our sense perception and subsequent stimulus and response. It is just as tenable, however, to begin with internal experience as primary and interpret all other experiences, including those of the phenomenal world, in terms of it.

My purpose is to suggest an alternative model for interpreting the religious changes in America wrought by a generation. It is a model which assumes that a generation is the primary agent of social and religious change, and, secondly, that the generational process is identifiable as a ritual process.

A generation is what happens to people; as is the case with a social class or ethnic group, one is born into it. A generation's self-identity is so powerful and compelling that older and younger generations are drawn into its particular *Weltanschauung*. As an agent of change, the impact of a generation is directly related to its size. During the French Revolution, for example, forty percent of the population were between the ages of 20 and 40; only twenty percent were over 40.

The American Revolution and Protestant Reformation were predominantly youthful. Traditionally totalitarian movements are built on the backs of committed youth. These examples make generations worthy of study³ even though such a study may be accused of demographic determinism and oversimplification.

My second assumption is that the generational process is identifiable as a ritual process. Religious experience, if not all extra-ordinary experience, partakes of the particular and concrete and, more significantly, of an ever-present pattern. Otto suggests that the pattern is constituted by the *mysterium*, or a sense of the "holy".⁴ In contrast to everyday ordinary experience, the sense of mystery is extra-ordinary and modulated according to two modes. One mode is the *tremendum*, or sense of destruction inherent in religious experience, e.g. a devotee is "slain" by the Lord at a nineteenth century camp meeting, St John of the Cross encounters the dark night of the soul, a Hari Krishna devotee may have the felt sense of being destroyed by a prior drug experience. The other mode of experience is the *fascinans*, the affirmation sensed by being touched with the holy, e.g. a renewal through the *imitatio Christi*, the chanting of a *mantra*, the sense of being one of the "elect". Thus, according to Otto, all religious experience partakes of Power, of destruction and affirmation, of engagement, crisis, and renewal.

In addition to the affective dimension, the expressive dimension deserves attention as well. The felt sense of being religious correlates with the inclination to act as if these feelings made a difference. The expressive dimension is acted out in the drama of the ritual process, involving three phases.⁵ A pre-liminal (liminal signifying "threshold") phase in which persons and society are structured according to roles and types; in other words, human beings participate fully in maintaining and structuring society. During the second phase, liminality, structure undergoes a process of destruction or *tremendum* and then affirmation, symbolic restoration, and *fascinans*. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are "betwixt and between". They constitute both the apex of the structural system and the community as an unstructured unit. In post-liminality, the third phase, a "new" coherent unity, founded on the values gained in liminality, issues in the "new" being or "new" society. In religious terms, the three phases indicate a process whereby we move from the profane into the sacred, with a destruction of the profane, affirmed by a sense of personal renewal, and out into the profane with a new sense of commitment.

Given Otto's understanding of religious experience and Turner's studies in liminality, the last forty years of American religious and cultural history can be interpreted as a ritual process, particular to a generation. Internal experience is the necessary precondition for how we respond to external stimuli. Cultural forms recapitulate that experience in much the same way as the individual life cycle corresponds to what Hannah Arendt calls "the notion of irresistibility."⁶ Culture as ritual both constitutes and expresses our humanness.

Destruction becomes the independent variable for assessing each phase of the process. Destruction is integral both to the ritual process and, since Hiroshima, essential for understanding how human beings conceive of themselves and the world in which they live.

Heretofore, life had been the dominant term, and death had been comprehended by life. Following Hiroshima — that awesome, tragic, and paradoxically catalytic event — a reversal and interchange occurred within the fundamental relationship: death became the commanding term, and life was conceived in terms of death, first, for those directly affected by the war, but gradually for an increasingly larger number of persons.⁷

How the destructive tendencies are characterized and defined by each phase of the ritual process tells us something about ourselves as cultural and religious beings.

Phase I: The pre-liminal phase of the American ritual process, from 1945 to 1963, was a period when destruction was viewed as containment. The destructive tendencies in American culture were pushed into the background of experience, both through historical and personal silence. This is the meaning of the Eisenhower years, in which a general who leads a nation in victory becomes a steadying president. The phase ends with the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the last president of such stability. During the eighteen year period, the aggressive tendencies were symbolically contained on a variety of levels. The Cold War depicted a political tension and military rivalry between nations which stopped short of an actual full-scale war. Even the thirty-seven months of the Korean War, one of the bloodiest in history, were referred to as a "police action". The McCarthy investigations attempted to contain the last vestiges of destruction by ferreting out alleged communist influence and infiltration into government, education, defense industries, and other fields of human endeavour.

The structured aspects of this period were carry-overs from the Second World War. In victory the rightness of the order was exemplified and took on various cultural forms. Barracks became the Levittowns and planned suburbs of America; the familiar K-ration was transformed into the TV dinner and transported to the frozen food sections of grocery stores; authority, whether military or domestic, emphasized its pyramidal structure. It was also a period of an unprecedented birthrate which began in 1946 and peaked in 1957. What was to constitute a significant percentage of the American population during the mid-Sixties was conceived between 1946 and 1948. Manchester calculated⁸ that "During those years a wife was being impregnated once every seven seconds, and the U.S. Bureau of Census was blushing." The significance of the so-called "baby boom" will become evident during the liminal phase of the American ritual process.

The predominant religious forms which served to contain destruction at all levels of experience were two: 1) *Traditional religions*, the so-called "mainline churches", whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jew; and 2) *Civil religion*, in which religion, politics, and economics were intertwined and given divine sanction. "The God of the civil religion is not only rather 'unitarian', he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love."⁹ Eisenhower, in 1954, justified the religious outlook. "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply religious faith — and I don't care what it is." Whichever religious affirmation was used to check destruction, the memory of the depression, World War II's destructiveness, and the atom bomb was employed at a distance, not in terms of the immediacy of everyday experience. Hence it was an age of silence, but also a time of existential anxiety. On the popular level, both features were exploited to produce a more generalized religiosity concerned with peace of mind and confident living. It was, what Ahlstrom called¹⁰ "an Indian summer of confident living and renewed religious interest", presided over by Norman Vincent Peale, Fulton J. Sheen, Rabbi Joshua Liebman, and Billy Graham.

The general tenor of post-war American sensibilities was reflected in the academic study of religion. The theological musings and exclusiveness of an older generation were challenged by the more urgent need for religious understanding, if not unity. Instructive in this context is the founding, in 1950, of the International Association for the History of Religions. Although its stated purpose was "the promotion of the academic study of the history of religions",¹¹ by the 1958 Tokyo Congress of the

IAHR, the mood focused on Friedrich Heiler's paper, "The History of Religions as a Way to Unity of Religions". Placed first in the conference report, Heiler's address argues that "scientific insight into this unity calls for a practical realization in friendly exchange and in common ethical endeavour, 'fellowship' and 'cooperation'."¹²

In America, the need for a more comprehensive unity was coeval with a post-war isolationism which affirmed the rightness of the traditional order. The historian of religions, Joachim Wach, can be taken as illustrative. He was one of four American members of the IAHR (along with W.F. Albright, A.D. Nock, and R.H. Lowie), and taught at the University of Chicago from 1945 until his death ten years later. In speaking both as a committed Christian and historian of religions, he laboured enthusiastically to establish a theoretical and practical basis for unity. At the same time, Wach reflects the general attitude of American scholarship which viewed religion as a means to contain conflict. He states in the Preface to his *Sociology of Religion*:¹³

Personal experience has aided the author in realizing the vital importance and significance of *religion as an integrating factor in human society* and in understanding its function in the contemporary crisis of civilization in East and West. [emphasis added]

The assumption that religion functions primarily to contain conflict and act as "an integrating factor" was not seriously challenged until the late Fifties. As a paradigm, it reflects both the general attitude of scholarship and the republic whose official motto became, in 1956, "In God We Trust".

Phase II: By the time of Kennedy's assassination, the pretensions of the Anglo-Saxon religious "empire" of the 1950's and before are crumbling. The sensibilities of the nation are cued for transformation from a sense of being a domineering empire to a new appreciation for redefining traditional symbols in terms of modern experience. The psychological and historical parameters of the events of the Kennedy-King assassinations, from 1963 through 1968, set the stage for the first phase of liminality in which the religious consciousness of the nation was sharpened by a ritual usurpation of destruction as *tremendum*. The events of the period, too well-known to need elaboration, include Vietnam, the drug culture, political frustrations, and violence towards the self, the universities, and the government.

Why did the radical shift from the relatively placid Fifties to the violent Sixties occur? Although no single cause can be designated, I would suggest a correlation between the internal experience of destruction as *tremendum* during this six year period and the high birthrate of the mid-1940's. By the mid-Sixties, post-war babies had reached the age of social and psychological puberty. The American experience was dominated by a collective rite of initiation. In traditional societies, initiation rites are preceded often by the act of circumcision — a cutting away from the mother; in America, the 1960's indicate a period of a collective cutting away from the Motherland and subsequent loss of identity. An identity crisis issues in what Erikson calls ¹⁴ *distantiation*, "the readiness to repudiate, isolate and, if necessary, destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one's own"; or it takes on the characteristics of a negative identity, "an identity perversely based on all those identifications and roles which at critical stages of development, had been presented to them as most undesirable or dangerous and yet also as most real." The identity crisis was expressed in the form of a revolution, a revolt against the post-World War II militarization of society.

At the same time, a ritual killing of the absent father eclipsed the study of religion. J.A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God* appeared in 1963. It was preceded in 1960 by H. Richard Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism* and Gabriel Vahanian's *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (1961), and followed by Pierre

Berton's *The Comfortable Pew* (1965) and Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (1965). The media popularized the "death of God" movement and gave the names of Altizer and Hamilton, to mention only two, household familiarity. Closely related to radical theology was a "tidal wave of questioning of all the traditional structures of Christendom."¹⁵

The most critical intensities of destruction during the 1960's — which yielded a correlation between a loss of authority, a loss of identity, and the theological and experiential death of God — were countered by the affirmative usurpation of destructive forces, now turned into religious channels. By 1968, the death of a binding Father allowed the children their freedom to usher in the second phase of liminality.¹⁶ Two other types of religious forms, distinct from the traditional and civil religions of the 1950's turn destruction into an affirmation of broader and more diverse vistas of meaning. 1) *The New Religious Movements* which emphasize personal experience, for example, in the appearance of religious cults, but also in the seemingly cultic bonds among such persons as civil rights workers and anti-war protestors. With the loss of a symbolic center, whether divine or human, destruction was carried over into a destruction of the self. Innumerable examples can be extracted from the time — the Beatles bond with Maharishi, Rennie Davis (of SDS fame) becomes a devotee of Mahara Ji, Richard Alpert metamorphoses into Baba Ram Das, Cassius Clay into Mohammed Ali, and Timothy Leary simply drops out. 2) A second religious form develops during this time into what can be called *symbolic religion*, for example, the new sense of tribalism marked by McLuhan's "global village" and consciousness-raising movements. In this instance, personal experience is either down-played or becomes politicized in the service of cultural experience in which personal appropriations of expanded awareness take place.

Concurrent with the second phase of liminality, the study of religion undergoes a dramatic change. Departments for its study proliferate in universities and colleges. The adjective "religious", as in Religious Studies, is preferred over the noun "religion", as in Department of Religion or Religion Study. Traditional topics such as historical studies and systematic theology are displaced by the history of religions and cross-cultural studies in religion. Eliade and Campbell, Jung and Watts become the "paradigms" for its study, and popular literature includes sacred texts from the Amerindian and Asian traditions. Collectively, the various changes indicate that religious studies shifted to a position of defining the new religious consciousness and providing a context for potential religious experiences. In other words, Religious Studies both forms and is informed by the second phase of liminality.

Further, the study of religion as religious studies became a religion. During the 1960's, a ritual destruction of priestly forms of religious and political leadership occurred, generating a subsequent loss of a sense of the nation as community. The precipitative factor was a collective identity crisis, mediated through *distantiation* and a negative identity, which gave rise to cultic and symbolic forms of religion. The traditional and civil forms did not, indeed could not, serve as affective bonds to incorporate the new sensibility. The collapse of an effective symbolic authority in America created a sense of "cultural failure" and accelerated the search for new "centers". Studies in the history of primitivism have shown that a feeling of cultural failure is accompanied by a sentimentality for that which is believed to be a simpler and more genuine mode of being. Chronologically, Americans turned to their respective historical foundations in order to recreate an early Christian community, Druidic or Celtic traditions; by some, the ecological consciousness of the Hopi and Navajo was idealized; others turned to their African heritage. On the other hand, those exposed to the East, either through Vietnam, the mass media, or other contacts, expressed a "cultural primitivism" in their discovery of Krishna, Meir Baba, Ananda Marga, Tibetan

Buddhism, Zen and Vedanta.¹⁷ Within this cultural and religious milieu, religious studies took on the role of providing alternative modes of being in the world. It was a decentralized religion "with no scripture, but many stories".¹⁸ The architects, whether an Eliade or a Jung, were those who could synthesize an "archaic mentality" with modern experience.

Phase III: The years 1973 and 1974 are crucial for our understanding of current American religious history. They signify a transition from the liminality of the 1960's into a "new" post-liminal mentality. By 1973, Vietnam was over for all intents and purposes. Those born immediately following the Second World War by this time had been ushered through the ritual process of initiation and had reached their late twenties and early thirties, thereby ending the crisis of social and psychological puberty. The events of the two year span establish also the flavor of the new post-liminal consciousness. The proximity of Watergate and the popularity of the film, *The Exorcist*, are illustrative. Both, in their respective ways, were attempts to remove the destructive tendencies from American culture. Watergate exposed them, *The Exorcist* eliminated them. Taking these two events as indicative, the new post-liminal mentality can best be described as effacement, an erasing of both destruction and affirmation, of *tremendum et fascinans*, a flight from feeling to the Apollonian structure of the machine. "What is significant is the replacement of actual emotion by the sensation of the operator who gets things done, who wheels and deals despite all odds."¹⁹

The image is that of Apollo and not the Dionysius of the new religious movements and symbolic religion. The Apollonian distrusts, as Nietzsche stated in his *Birth of Tragedy*, "the annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence," required in a commitment to the other; he "knows but one law, measure in the Hellenic sense." But unlike the Apollonian civil religion of the 1950's, in which one became committed to the communal other, the technological religion of the 1970's and 1980's harbors a spiritual and secular narcissism, a concern only with the smooth functioning of the individual isolated machine. The theme for the age is expressed in the title of the feminist book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.²⁰ One has only to examine the intentions behind the ecology movement, the values placed on being female or male, Black or Chicano, the health foods fads, the cult of running, the public outcry over the harmfulness of selected jobs, foods, and smoking, the fantasy of becoming a bionic man or woman, the revival of themes expressed through Country Western music, and the search for family roots. Sensation has replaced emotion or feeling, whether it be destructive or affirmative. It is a cult of psychic and physical self-improvement in which one hungers "not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling — even if it is only a momentary illusion — of personal well-being, health and psychic security."²¹

In contrast to the secular narcissists are the spiritual narcissists. Although the ways of being religious in the 1970's and 1980's are multiple, two popular, yet diverse, trends can be singled out as representative: 1) *Western fundamentalism*, and 2) the use of *meditational techniques* from religious traditions and therapeutic models. Effacement before destruction and affirmation is most evident in the meaning given by fundamentalists to the person of Jesus. As the multisignative symbol of western consciousness, Jesus appeared during the 1950's as a means of containing destruction. Confronted with indecision and conflict, Christians were admonished with the question, "What would Jesus do?" In the 1960's, with an emphasis on naturalness and usurpation of destruction, Jesus symbolizes the revolutionary heroic figure of pop posters; yet he remained the harbinger of culture for those over thirty. In an age of effacement, however, the question is not what would Jesus do, but what *did* Jesus do? The shift implies that the image of Jesus has collapsed into nature, mediating not between

nature and culture, but between the cyclical pattern of life and death. Have we not moved from a death denying age to one that is death obsessed? The conversion experience of increasing numbers often takes them into fundamentalist and evangelical groups where narcissism and the effacement of destruction combine a burial of feeling with an overcoming of the dread of death. Similarly, this type of fundamentalism, in erasing the last barrier of narcissism — death — has spilled over into the non-sectarian world and elevated Kübler-Ross and her colleagues to American sainthood.

Parallel to the fundamentalists are those engaged in self-fulfillment programs which utilize meditational techniques. In fundamentalism the image is that of a Superman who crosses the threshold to eliminate personal destruction, whereas meditational techniques evoke the image of Proteus who could change his own form at will. The theme is self centeredness. Rather than conforming to an Absolute, what is true and good is what helps me out of my suffering; what is false and evil is that which locks me into it.

Complicated by the threat of nuclear annihilation, both fundamentalists and those who rely on meditational techniques, in their emphasis on personal salvation, exhibit a spiritual narcissism combined with the seemingly contradictory eclipse of Man. Studies²² confirm that narcissism is not exaggerated self-love, but rather its opposite — self-hatred, self-destruction. The self-idolatry of the narcissist becomes a defense mechanism in the face of a feeling of self-worthlessness. Because he is loveless, Narcissus must wrap himself in self-love. The loss of the other as an "object" of love and hate turns the need for affirmation and the defeat of destruction inward, thereby causing the narcissist to flee, to escape the human condition. The type of fundamentalism which gives a literal reading to the Biblical message and the writings of Hal Lindsey,²³ eclipses the self in the denial of a personal death and the hope for the millenium. The means of effacing destruction and affirmation in meditation, on the other hand, is through the elimination of the ego, often without asking the question of the function of the ego and the nature of the self.

Given the cultural tendency towards privateness and the subsequent effacement of human experience, what is the focus of religious studies? In the 1950's, efforts were directed to articulating the functions of religion in containing destruction. The first phase of liminality spelled not only the death of God and the loss of transcendence, but the death of theology as the locus of truth. The affirmative forces of liminality allowed religious studies to center on the relative absoluteness of all religious traditions. In an age of effacement the study of religion again reflects the cultural fashion. It has become a field without a focus, a discipline without a method. "In the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant."²⁴ Appropriately, the 1985 IAHR Congress is addressing the theme, "religion and identity".

In the absence of a paradigm, investigators of religion are thrown back on their own shadows. Traditional approaches no longer seem appropriate. The phenomenological *epoche*, with its intended separation of the observer's perspective from the analysis of the data, requires heroic measures which are sociologically and psychologically improbable. The religious unmusicality of functionalist approaches has been challenged from within various disciplines. In their place observer-participant studies are prominent. Consider Bennetta Jules-Rosette's *African Apostles*,²⁵ an observer-participant study of the church of John Maranke by an anthropologist turned convert.

The loyalty that I had displayed preceded a glimpse of new realities. To resolve the conflict between their formal models of indigenous beliefs and lived experience, researchers often settle for loyalty. The models are presented as detached from

experience and, therefore, can be seen from a relativistic perspective. Through loyalty, researchers appear to provide translations of member's beliefs and categories. These renderings substitute the sympathy of the detached observer for the test of performance and performative description. The turning point in my research, the critical conversion experience, required the step from loyalty to assertion.

Mea culpa. Does the presence of the observer-participant in religious studies represent methodological sophistication, in which the demands for the immediacy of experience dictate the necessity for the experience? Ought we to expect historians of religion to be more "religious" when we do not expect economic historians to be more "economic" or political historians to be more "political"? What ought to be the relationship between the study of religion and its practice? If we attempt the former does that attempt depend on the latter? If "truth" becomes a function of "faith" then all religions are equally valid. Particularly in the light of Jonestown, how are we to distinguish between those religions which suggest a genuine religious experience and those which are merely spurious? The question is one of definition. Yet without a paradigm no definition is possible; without a definition no paradigm is possible.

Cultural, religious, and disciplinary changes are, in part, dependent on a generational ritual process, one that centers on the pivotal rite of initiation. Such a process will focus on movements or phases, not periods. Traditionally, societies have spawned institutions — familial, cultural, educational, religious, and military — in which the initiate is submitted to the authority of the ritual elder, easing the transformation process from childhood to the generative man or woman. Without such ritual elders (or paradigms), the focus will continue to be on a confirmation of "the necessity of feeling young, thinking young, acting young" without asking if there are good or bad ways of expressing it.²⁶ At the same time, "De-mythologized religion reflects our modern consciousness that has been narrowed to ego identity. To become as a child and to be led by a child means to reverse the process of ego development."²⁷

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