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Some Current Mythologies and World Community

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Some current mythologies and world community

Although myths have always had an important function in human society, they can sometimes undermine the very values they are intended to serve. In this address Rabbi Tanenbaum examines and evaluates three current mythologies which have won widespread acceptance in our world of rapid and radical change. He finds that these mythologies – the “post-Judeo-Christian Age,” “anti-institutionalism,” and “evangelicalism” – are misleading and destructive. Unless they are de-mythologized, they will seriously impede our communal effort to build a world community. This study concludes with a conjecture regarding the most important export that Americans and Westerners have to contribute to this effort.

Commencement address at St. Louis University, June 5, 1971. On this occasion the degree of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* was bestowed on Rabbi Tanenbaum, who has written and lectured extensively on the history, theology, and sociology of Judaism and Christianity. He is National Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee and co-secretary of the newly formed joint Vatican-International Jewish Committee.

In her book, *Between Past and Future*, Hannah Arendt describes the present condition of the world. In her view we are living in a world unsure of authority, dominated by a sense of loss of the groundwork of the world, a world which shifts, changes, and transforms itself “with ever-increasing rapidity from one shape into another, as though we were living and struggling with a protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else.”

Dr. Robert Lifton, a social psychiatrist at Yale University, declares in his study, *History and Human Survival*, that

never before in human history has the extent and intensity of change nor “the sheer velocity of historical developments” been as great as it is today by virtue of simultaneous social, cultural, political and economic revolutions that are intersecting all about us. The “populist” philosopher, Eric Hoffer, has described our time as “an ordeal of change.”

Patterns of excess

These radical changes have resulted in “a passionate state of mind” which expresses itself in a variety of equally radical responses. In order to gain some

measure of equilibrium in the midst of the turbulence, many people are flailing about to achieve some secure foothold. That passionate flailing frequently expresses itself in extremist behavior, in irrationalism, and in expressive speech.

This latter sensibility, accurately described as "the cult of feeling," disdains restraint and reason, and usually operates by a single criterion of judgment — what feels revolutionary is good, what does not is counter-revolutionary. A characteristic tendency of this "romantic totalism" (Lifton's phrase) is to pose every issue, political or otherwise, in "either-or" disjunctive terms. Another characteristic is its tendency to condemn and negate the entire Western historical tradition, usually blared forth in loud, obscene imprecations which is the new addictive style of communication. These attacks are frequently attempts at severing totally a relationship to Western civilization by means of an "impossibly" absolute identity replacement, namely, that of seeking to assume the identity of an Oriental mystic or of an Asian or African victim of "Western colonialism."

Such an effort to replace history with subjective experience — with intense and absorbing states of liberated feeling — manifests itself in the unique contemporary blending of experiential transcendence with social and political revolution. These experiential cults, when coupled with revolutionary mystiques, constitute a transformationist myth of "making all things new" and reinforce an indiscriminate rejection of all inherited learning, culture, and tradition.

These patterns of excess need to be understood as symptoms of our period of turmoil and transition, but it is past due that we cease confusing the symptoms with accurate understanding of the

causes of our condition. Without a precise analytic understanding of our national and international situation, we will more than likely make faulty prognoses that in fact will confound our predicament more drastically than is even now the case, and render it less amenable to reasonable, humane solutions and the building of civilized community for the welfare of all men everywhere.

In these brief remarks I should like to address myself to three of the current mythologies which appear to have won such widespread acceptance and loyalty but which, unless demythologized, will contribute to the serious undermining of the very humane and civilized goals which they are presumed to serve.

1. POST-JUDEO-CHRISTIAN AGE?

At the very outset, I would suggest that the time is upon us for demythologizing the rather widely-held notion that this is a "post-Jewish," "post-Christian," or a "post-Judeo-Christian" age. If anything, on careful, non-mythological reflection, as I will seek in a moment to demonstrate, this could well be called, in light of real world developments, a "pre-Judeo-Christian" age.

Erik Erikson has somewhere written that Americans have a predisposition to think in slogans. There is hardly a piece of cultural analysis that is written today that avoids the temptation to sloganize that this is a "post-modern," "post-Western," or "post-Judeo-Christian" age. That form of expressivism should normally not disturb us too much, except for the fact that when it is repeated often enough it tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. My appeal, especially to a graduating class that is

about to enter a real and not fictitious world, is to view such slogans with great skepticism and seek to penetrate to the realities beneath that highly apocalyptic language.

What are some of the realities in a demythologized world that Jews and Christians confront today? One of the most helpful signs that emerges out of this period of change and turbulence is an unprecedentedly clear consciousness of the unity of the human family. Indeed, those who celebrate the counter-culture regard this commitment to the unbreakable bonds of the unity of mankind across racial, religious, and national barriers as being one of the distinctive achievements of the under-thirty generation. To the degree that this consciousness of the oneness of the human family and the precious worth of every person is operative in the attitudes and behavior of the so-called counter-culture, to that degree should it be celebrated for the great redemptive vision that it represents.

A destructive myth

But the notion that this "new consciousness" arises out of the ashes of previous generations, and in fact has arisen in opposition to the consciousness of the "Judeo-Christian" civilization, is in fact a myth, and a destructive myth. It is a myth which has taken hold because it arises out of the anti-intellectual posture of some elements of the counter-culture who consistently demean the uses of history and who celebrate unreason.

In the *Ethics of the [Synagogue] Fathers of Rabbinic Judaism*, it is affirmed, "An ignoramus cannot be a pious man." An adaptation of that maxim today would aver that an ignoramus cannot be a responsible man. Any one with the least religious and historic

understanding would have to acknowledge in all honesty and integrity that the deep-seated vision of the unity of mankind as we know it in the Western world is unthinkable and unimaginable without its profound rootedness in the central biblical and prophetic affirmations of Judaism and Christianity.

The theology of creation in both Judaism and Christianity derives from the fact that the Bible begins with the Book of Genesis which, in the history of Western ideas, crucially determined the understanding that the whole created order is bound together in origin, in common fate and destiny, in the mystical unity of the sovereign Creator. While the Bible emerged out of the genius and consciousness of the Jewish people and is a testimony to their millennial quest for spiritual meaning and freedom, it is a central affirmation of Judaism that the Bible is conceived of as "the book of the generations of all men." Indeed, the foremost historians of Christian, Jewish, as well as secularist commitments have consistently affirmed that these central religious conceptions have been the fundamental pre-conditions for the writing of universal history.

Thus, the *lebenswelt* in which all of us find ourselves today, characterized by conditions of instant mobility, global communications, and worldwide transportation, to wit, the "global village" — is closer to the realization of the biblical conception of the unity of the human family than perhaps any time since the days of Adam and Eve in Eden. The implication of this extraordinary reality is that the ideals and values of Judaism and Christianity with regard to God, man, nature, society, and history are open to the possibility of application and translation into actual human experience more than at any time in historic memory. This moment in history

can in truth therefore be more accurately described as "pre-Judeo-Christian" rather than "post-Judeo-Christian."

Creative use of resources

That is not a matter simply of trading a "good" slogan for a "bad" slogan. An understanding of the difference between these two perceptions goes to the very heart of our role, our mission, our whole world of possibilities in the service of everything that the past 2,000 years of Jewish and Christian history have struggled to stand for at their best. If we continue to allow the mythology of a "post-Judeo-Christian" world to dominate our thinking, we are literally curtailing the energies, the imagination, the sources of creativity within our communities which the world so badly needs. If we honestly open ourselves to the understanding that the world in many ways stands in a "pre-Judeo-Christian condition," then we allow ourselves the kind of stimulation and challenge which will call upon the most creative, rational, and productive uses of the extraordinary resources that I believe continue to obtain in our respective and common cultures and traditions.

It is no accident that the boldest and most advanced developments of science and technology have taken place in Western civilization which has been decisively shaped by the Judeo-Christian world view. Many historians of religion believe that the Hebrew view of creation began the process of what Max Weber has called "the disenchantment" of the magical view of man's relation to nature. While it is true that modern man's attitude toward disenchanted nature has sometimes shown elements of vindictiveness, the mature man who stands within the biblical tradition understood that his task was to make use of nature for human purposes. This disenchant-

ment of the natural world provided an absolute pre-condition for the development of natural science, technology, and modern urbanization.

The crucial challenge

It is increasingly clear that the so-called Third World will enter into the 20th century to the degree that it appropriates modern scientific, cultural, and technological devices. In appropriating that science and technology, it is inevitable that Third World cultures will need to make major accommodations to the world-views and the religious and cultural presuppositions without which the management of science and technology will become impossible. And here lies the crucial challenge for the Jew and the Christian in the Western world; namely, to what degree will Judeo-Christian civilization find it possible to mediate the fruits and benefits of a scientific-technological development to the Third World without the imperialism and triumphalism that has for so long dominated much of the posture of Western man to non-Western societies, religion, and culture. In that sense the Third World represents the "pre-Judeo-Christian" condition. Implicit also in that theme is the question of an adequate theology of pluralism and world community to which we will return later in this presentation.

2. ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT MYTHS

A second dominating mythology of our time which requires de-mythologization, is that "anti-institutionalism" or "anti-establishment" mentality which frequently borders on mindlessness if not pathology. Recently I shared a platform with a well-known Christian theologian who discharged publicly such notions as "The Church is corrupt in

principle. Its only hope for renewal lies in its death and resurrection." That kind of expressivism may help some people feel emotionally relieved, but it clearly serves no constructive and objective human purpose. It is a form of "totalism" or psychological extremism which frequently leads to a closed ideological or religious system that is more destructive of spiritual and human purposes than the system which it disdains. Its most serious failing is that it deflects persons genuinely concerned about necessary social change from dealing effectively with a rational and legitimate reform and renewal that all institutions require.

There is, in fact, a genuine "institutional" or "organizational dilemma" which universities, religious institutions, and the society at large continuously need to confront. On the one hand, if the university, the church and synagogue, and similar institutions are to take seriously their obligations, they must maintain some semblance of continuity, stability, and persistence; they must work through organizational and institutional forms. On the other hand, the very institutional structures necessary for the survival of the university, the religious and other institutions may obscure, distort, or deflect from the purposes for which the institutions were originally founded. There is a persistent risk that the instrumental purposes of institutions become exalted as ends. "The results are paradoxical," Paul Harrison states, "since the goals which the organization was created to achieve tend to be displaced by the goal of organizational self-perpetuation. Organizational incentives drive institutions to satisfy their own self-generated needs before the group can pursue the goals for which these institutions were established."

Creative tension needed

The search must be for that "theoretical point" which will allow the educational, religious or other institutions to remain true to their purposes and yet operate through viable institutional forms that will preserve their positive gains and extend their constructive influence. That must be an ongoing, never-ending quest. Although there can be no simple resolution of this dilemma, it may become easily obscured or perhaps misunderstood so that equally truncated views are adopted, views which interpret the university, church, or synagogue, only as an organization — or as "a spiritual entity" devoid of organization. What we can hope for and need to work for is that the tension which is implicit in the organizational dilemma be kept alive.

Techniques for sustaining such creative tension and bringing about changes in our educational, religious, and other major social, cultural and political institutions are available. Richard Shaull, in his essay on *Containment and Change*, outlines a variety of such strategies. He proposes "the formation of small groups and movements which, whether based inside or outside an institution, forces it to accelerate its own renewal . . . One small team, with a certain amount of autonomy and freedom, can transform a large organization; while the renewal of one institution in the center of society can effect others related to it."

Shaull's approach is based on his assumption that moving out of the "Establishment" and attacking it head-on will accomplish very little:

To attempt to develop new institutions to replace those now existing in each major area of society — a new church or university system, a new labor movement, new political parties — would be an impossible task. Even if such an undertaking were to succeed there is no more guarantee that it would produce

institutions any less rigid or more open to the future than those that now exist . . . For those committed to revolution, it may be the one ground for hope that powerful interdependent institutions of a technological society can be changed. In fact we may eventually discover that in this way a dynamic purpose can be set in motion that will bring about more fundamental transformations than have occurred as a result of previous forms of revolution.

The real danger of large organizational development of our institutions does not inhere in the organizational structures per se, but rather first, in the need of statesmen, of leaders who lead; and second, in the ethos that often undergirds mass organizations. The absence of spirituality among "spiritual leaders," of models of ethical integrity and religious humanism, contribute to undermining the credibility of any special quality of academic or religious institutional life.

The central institution

To focus exclusively on the dysfunction of large-scale organizations surely neglects the ways in which such organizations help toward the realization of good purposes in the modern world. Large-scale organizations provide new possibilities for creativity. In this age the new and central institution is the large organization. Organization created knowledge and performance vastly superior to what any individual, no matter how skillful or how experienced, could have produced. The new organization, with a new capacity to organize men of knowledge and high skill for joint effort and performance through the exercise of responsible judgment, has emerged as a central institution everywhere, under free enterprise and under communism, in developed countries and in underdeveloped ones.

Youthful ideologists who uphold the ideal of a new social order based on mutual interdependence, of a new society in which the worth and dignity of the individual person is affirmed, need to reason with the fundamental truth that spiritual freedom is impossible without man's liberation from bondage to material destitution. Material things must be put in their proper subordinate place as a means to a higher end, but the first moral and human obligation is to help the poor and the deprived. Both America and the developing nations must reach a level of material subsistence where men are no longer controlled by starvation, no longer at the mercy of every cloudburst, hailstorm, and drought. Such material independence for individual and society alike can be realized only through massive economic and social development. The role of Christian and Jewish "Establishment institutions" in alleviating the suffering and misery of millions of persons in the Nigeria-Biafra and India-Pakistan conflicts are dramatic testimony to this vital truth.

There is adequate evidence to affirm that men, both here and abroad, can improve their economic lot through systematic, purposeful and directed effort, employing the available organizational and technological tools. Economic development requires an intricate distribution system; a financial system to make possible the distribution of goods; and a marketing system that integrates wants, needs, and purchasing of the consumer with capacity and resources of production.

These are indeed serious moral and ethical questions raised by the new centrality of organization. In a free society the organization must never be allowed to become an end in itself for which the individual is just the means. It must

never be permitted the dangerous delusion that it has claim to the ultimate loyalty or allegiance of the individual — other than what it can earn by enabling him to be productive and responsible. It must never substitute its partial interest for the commonweal. It must never, for instance, demand or expect of a man that he do his job at the expense of his responsibility as a husband and father, a citizen, a church member, or a member of a profession. Thus, the really essential issue that requires balanced understanding in terms of our moral ideals and humanitarian values is not that of the destruction of the "Establishment" and its institutions, but rather what is required of us to transform institutions in order that they serve in maximum ways the human purposes for which they were initially established.

3. PLURALISM AND WORLD COMMUNITY

The third mythology centers on the concept of pluralism and world community and is in many ways related to the previous two current myths. As Dr. Anton Zijderfeld has indicated, modern society is an essentially "abstract society," which is increasingly unable to provide man with a clear awareness of his identity and a concrete experience of meaning, reality, and freedom. Compared to tribal societies and their overarching kinship systems, or to medieval society with its rather uniform structure of meaning, the institutional structure of modern society has resulted in the loss of existential concreteness. Pre-industrial man received his identity and freedom from an encompassing meaningful reality, integrated by the bonds of religion and tradition.

In many ways, modern society has become abstract in the experience and consciousness of man. Modern man,

that is, does not "live" society — he faces it often as a strange phenomenon. The extraordinary resurgence of denominationalism in an ecumenical age within the Protestant community, the growing tendencies toward strong group identification on the part of ethnic Americans who are primarily Roman Catholic, and the emergence of a powerful mystique of peoplehood among Jews as manifested in the concern for Russian Jewry and the security of Israel, are all, in my judgment, reactions against this "abstract society," in which individuals feel powerless, frustrated, and without control over their lives. The assertion of group identity is an expression of a deep need to find one's personal identity, meaning, and freedom within a familiar and trusting community.

The American experiment

There has emerged in the United States during the past century, a workable dialectical tension between universal community and respect for particular group experience, which has become a unique achievement of American pluralism. There is an imminent danger, however, that the Western world, and in particular Americans, will seek to impose their Western conceptions of pluralism on the world community in a way that will have learned little from the best in the American experience. Some of the conceptions of global pluralism that have recently been advocated by Western spokesmen of thought, ideology, and religion are in fact contributing to a Western mythology that also requires de-mythologization — if these are not to prove to be inimical to the building of a genuine world community that recognizes the integrity of other non-Western religions and cultures and the potential richness

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of diversity within the unity of the human family.

The by-and-large successful pluralism of American society is a relatively recent experience, no older than perhaps the last 100 years. The weight of much Western ideological and religious thinking and experience is shaped by the imperial theologies and ideologies that governed Europe from the fourth until the early 19th century. In the United States the first half century of American national life saw the development of evangelicalism, which "set out consciously to create an empire, to attract allegiance of all the people, to develop a spiritual kingdom and to shape the nation's ethos, mores, manners, and often its laws," as Dr. Martin Marty has described this period in his book, *The Righteous Empire*. Two British churchmen, whom Marty cites, after their visit to America in 1836, declared: "Blot out Britain and America from the map of the world, and you destroy all those great institutions which almost exclusively promise the world's renovation." On the positive side they added, "Unite Britain and America in energetic and resolute cooperation for the world's salvation, and the world is saved."

This evangelical and Anglo-Saxon tradition equated the American way of life, the defense of laissez-faire capitalism, and the crusade against Communism with the Christian mission to the world. "So close was the fusion between the American republic with evangelicalism," Dr. Marty writes, "that a basic attack on American institutions meant an attack on Protestant Christianity itself. Positively, the defense of America meant a defence of the evangelical empire."

Pluralism and dialogue

In the second, more recent, period of

American history, the ecumenical moderates tried to extricate the Protestant churches from identification with the American way of life, from a single economic pattern, and from a crusading spirit. They tried to break away from the provincialism or the chauvinism of their fathers who equated the kingdom of God with the evangelical empire. They sought to become an experiencing agent in the nation and not merely the dominant mold of symbols. They reached back to other elements in the American constitutional tradition and supported a pluralism whose ground rules were that "no religion was to have a monopoly or a privileged position and none should be a basis for second-class status for others." That tradition of liberal Protestant pluralism has made possible the Christian ecumenical dialogue and the Jewish-Christian dialogue. The dialogue means that people could have exposure to each other across the lines of differing faiths without attempting to convert in every encounter, without being a threat, and with the hope that new understanding would result. The goal would be a richer participation in the city of man, the republic, or the human family.

These two opposing conceptions of world community are now being contested on the global scene. In a world in which two-thirds of the human family is neither white, nor Jewish, nor Christian, a refurbished Western evangelicalism, reinforced by Anglo-Saxon hubris, or arrogant pride, can be the surest way of leading to disaster on a global scale. If we have learned anything worthwhile from the American experiment, and particularly from the Jewish-Christian dialogue, it is the sure knowledge that Jews and Christians are learning to live together as brothers, are seeking to build community without compromise

of their respective differences and are learning to celebrate the wisdom that unity in the midst of diversity may after all be the will of God.

Perhaps the most important export that Americans and Westerners have yet to contribute to the building of world

community is the knowledge that we are called by God as children of his covenant not to build a super-church nor a super-synagogue but to search together for the true service to God's own people gathered from all the nations on the mountain of the Lord.

Humanity needs religion not religious conflicts

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, "Education of the Clergy for a Pluralistic Society," *Jewish-Christian Relations* (proceedings of an institute held at St. Mary's College, St. Marys, Kansas, February 21-22, 1965, and privately printed) 61f.

The problems of religious liberty, freedom of conscience, the question of proselytization or witnessing, freedom of movement, the relationship of Church to State, racial and religious discrimination — once regarded as the preoccupation of Westerners and Christians in the internal relationships between Catholics and Protestants on the one hand, and Christians and Jews on the other — have now been catapulted onto the world scene. In an age in which there is instantaneous global communication, rapid transportation and mobility, it is no longer possible to "keep under wraps" for long, or to withhold from the judgment of a restive and interdependent human family, acts or attitudes of contempt for the human person which deny him his "natural rights" . . .

The human society, both East and West, threatened by moral decay and materialism, needs every human and spiritual resource to meet the overwhelming needs and challenges of our age. Repressive, mutually antagonistic religions, and racial and ethnic group conflicts, will paralyze mankind in its effort to meet the challenges of survival. The monopolies and hegemonies of the past must give way to a global pluralism in which, in the words of Pope John's encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, "the universal common good, that is, the common good of the entire human family," is promoted.



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