

Religion for the New Millennium

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Sometime over the Christmas holidays, I came across an article in the religion section of the paper, in which the writer, obviously at pains to find some new angle for discussing the season, was pointing out that leaders of the early church had erred in their dating of the birth of Jesus, that the scholarly consensus now concluded that he had been born in the year six before the common era. This being the case, argued the writer of the article, December 25, 1994 should have been observed as the beginning of the third millennium of the common era.

Now there are a host of things wrong with this argument. To begin with, there is a handful of us who doubt that Jesus ever existed and therefore to date anything from his birth is to build the calendar on sand. Even those who are certain that Jesus was an historic figure will admit that choosing December 25 to celebrate his birth was the result of an arbitrary political decision by the church, and not a reflection of any historical reality. What is more, while there may be a consensus around the notion that the birth occurred in the year 6 b.c.e., that is not the same as unanimity. There are many scholars who argue for other dates within a ten year span. And, even if we could all agree on a date and year, there is still an argument over whether the millennium will start at the beginning or the end of the 2000th year--January, 2000 or January 2001.

The article served to remind me once more how very arbitrary are the devices we use to measure and divide the seamless robe of time. If we had chosen a different event to mark the beginning time--say the creation of the world, the founding of Rome, the discovery of America by Europeans, the founding of the Republic--we would be in a different relation to history than we now are. But the fact is that we have been shaped by a culture which measures time from the mythical birth of Jesus, and which has always been fascinated by years which end in a lot of zeros. We have been shaped by a culture which is apocalyptic by nature-- driven by the suspicion that the world we know is passing and that a new world is waiting to be born. The approach of the year 2000, inevitably becomes a time for evaluating whence we have come and whither we are tending. It is also a time for imagining what it might be like were we able to start over in a new world, in a new millennium.

Let me confess to you that I am a child of our common culture, and I, too, labor under a millennialism of my own. Most of my career has been spent wrestling with the conviction that the old religious visions which gave shape and structure to western culture are no longer adequate to the challenges which face us. Indeed, in recent years, I have come to the conclusion that those religious traditions which we have inherited from our past leave us ill prepared for coping with the demands of the world in which we find ourselves, the

world which our children shall inherit from our hands. This morning, rather than bemoaning the inadequacies of those traditions I would like to spend our time together thinking about the values, the assumptions, the beliefs which might well shape and inform a religion more adequate to the world into which we are moving.

Let me begin by confessing a real reluctance to appear in the role of one who is attempting to cobble together a new religion out of my personal enthusiasms and the evanescent fads and fancies of the passing moment. I am haunted by Emerson's critique of the religion of reason, invented by the French in their enthusiasm for the new age initiated by their revolution. Emerson pointed out that it began as "pasteboard and filigree" and ended "in madness and murder." He argued that religion must grow out of the human soul, that it will be rooted in the religious structures which preceded it, that it will have a life of its own which will bring all around it to new life, and that it will not be subject to human whim and conscious manipulation.

Despite these misgivings, however, I have not been able to push aside the feeling that as we approach a new millennium, developments seem to be occurring in various corners of our corporate lives which might well come together to create a new cultural synthesis for the western world, perhaps for the entire planet. Let me share with you this morning some of what results when an amateur places into unnatural juxtaposition ideas and insights which he only half understands and to which he undoubtedly does unintended violence, in an effort to see what hints there may be for the content of a religion for the next millennium.

The religion which gave structure to western civilization was one which took the world of physical appearance quite seriously. The Christian and the Jewish metaphors posited a god who existed outside of and independent of this everyday reality through which we move, but a god who created the world, who intended it to be good, who revealed himself in terms of that world, who loved the world, who--in the Christian tradition, at least--was willing to die for it, and who urged human beings to take the everyday world as the focus of reality. All of existence was God's creation, it existed for a purpose, and human dominion over that world was part of that purpose, as was God's regular participation in and interaction with that world. This solid world of physical interaction was the reality, the locus of revelation, the focus of divine concern and the proper concern of humankind.

When that Jewish Christian world-view began to break up at the end of the Medieval era and the beginning of the Modern age, the personal god of Christianity was gradually moved out of the center of the world, from central actor, to distant prime mover, to even more distant and abstract first cause, to hypothetical possibility to innocuous poetic fiction. However, the central conviction about the world remained. The priests of the new age, the scientists were convinced that the route to knowledge to understanding to insight was to be found in taking the physical world seriously. They, too, believed that the world of every day interactions was the locus of revelation and the proper concern of human intellect. They measured and weighed; they classified and cataloged; they broke reality down into its constituent parts, proving over and over again that the world was not as simple as it seemed and that a number of human conceits were without basis in fact.

In studying the heavens, they discovered that nowhere could they find God, but they also discovered a universe incomparably larger and more complex than any had suspected--except, perhaps the ancient Sumerians. In studying the composition of matter, they discovered that nowhere could they find God, but they also discovered a universe of infinite regress, in which bits of matter could be resolved into smaller and smaller constituent elements. In studying human beings, they thought that at last they had found God--in the fevered human imagination--but they also discovered that human beings were almost as complex as all the rest of the world--a mass of interacting drives, instincts, complexes, genetic codes and environmental influences.

Before long, science--without knowing it--had moved beyond the world of everyday reality, the world of simple appearance, the world accessible to the senses, and had entered into a world where nothing was as it seemed, a world which defied common sense. We were told that no matter what our eyes might tell us, no matter what interpretation was built into our common language, the sun does not circle the earth; it neither rises nor sets. Rather, this solid earth moves around the sun while spinning on its axis, creating the reality of the seasons and the illusion of a rising and setting sun. We were then told that this is not a solid earth, that the world is not composed of solid objects which persist through time, but of congeries of energy patterns called atoms and electrons which are constantly changing and interacting. We were told that we, as individuals, do not function as it appears to us, that we only think we choose, we only think we decide, we only think we have options, we only think we think. In truth, we are defined by our genes, by our traumas, and free will is but an illusion designed to keep us from going mad.

In short, science taught us to distrust our senses, to look behind the appearance of things, to measure reality more finely and carefully than our natural equipment would allow. And in the process, science carried the western conviction of the centrality of the physical world as the locus of insight to its logical conclusion, landing us in a world of speculation and uncertainty, in which the very nature of physical reality is in dispute. It is in response to that situation that the faith for a new millennium will emerge.

Central to that faith will be a new understanding of human beings as not separate and distinct from the natural world, but as an integral part of the universe. In studying high energy, subatomic physics, we find we have entered upon a world of infinite regress--a world in which matter is continually broken down into its constituent elements, a world in which language becomes too cumbersome a tool to convey reality, a world in which the observer and the observed merge in their interaction to alter perceived reality.

Thus, we are told that no matter how small the particle we discover, it seems that it is always composed of constituent particles and that using the right experimental methods, we can split off those constituent particles, allowing us to release various kinds of energy, even though some particles seem to have neither mass nor charge. And if a massless particle boggles the mind, that's all right, because the physicists suggest that the term "particle" is only a metaphor anyway, since they are dealing with energy fluctuations, not concrete pieces of something. Matter, ultimately, is nothing more than energy

fluctuations of longer or shorter duration. And if this seems confusing, just consider that at some levels of reality, the process of observing the activities of these ghostly particles changes the reality observed so that the observer and the observed become one interacting system.

At the most minute levels of reality we have been able to penetrate, the hard concretions of this middle level disappear and we find a world of constant interaction, of something coming into being and passing out of being, like a thought; a world in which the very term "being" ceases to have much meaning. At those levels, we and the tree and the rock all participate in the same processes, are all bodied forth from the same energies, and there is no distinction between us. As we study the world at these levels, the distinction between us and the world falls away, and we become energy contemplating energy, the universe inspecting itself. To what end, we do not know.

Similarly, when we examine the far reaches of the universe, we find our middle level of existence, our world of this or that, of either-or, of solid concretion suddenly dissolving. The study of the heavens has opened to us a vision of a universe larger than our imaginations can comprehend. Within that universe, there are countless clusters of galaxies uniformly distributed through space. At the far reaches of the universe, the galaxies seem to be rushing apart at incredible speed, giving support to the notion that the universe exploded out of a dense point of singularity and is still moving outward from that moment of creation. Except; except that galaxies near us do not seem to be moving away from us and Andromeda galaxy, our nearest neighbor, seems to be moving toward us.

Similarly, all the universe is thought to be moving toward entropy, toward a steady state of equilibrium in which all energy will be used up and everything will be in balance and nothing can happen. Except; except there are places where new stars are being created, where white holes seem to be spewing new matter into the universe, and there are places where black holes seem to be withdrawing energy from the universe. And, of late, the Hubble telescope has presented us with evidence that there are stars which appear to be older than the universe itself! There is evidence that the universe will expand forever, and there is evidence that the universe will collapse back upon itself to a time of new creation. And in the midst of all this abrupt and violent change, the earth hangs in relative security, balancing forces in such a way that life can emerge and be sustained. We know that we are made of the same stuff as the stars; we know that the warmth of the human body is the fire of the stars tamed to the uses of life; we know that in studying the heavens we are studying ourselves. We are the stars examining the stars, the universe inspecting itself. To what end, we do not know.

Finally, when we examine the human mind, we find an equally complex mystery. We are endowed with a brain which has resources we have never tapped. Some have estimated that ninety percent of our mental capacity goes unused, and we have no way, within our theory of evolution, to account for the development of so much unneeded, unused, redundant resource. We are not at all certain how the brain is related to the mind. What is more, we are increasingly confronted with evidence that in subtle ways, the human mind

alters reality. The questions we ask of the universe, the assumptions we make concerning the universe seem to shape the reality with which we work. If we ask how to split the atom and release its energy, we discover that the atom is fissionable, even though generations before us knew the atom to be, by definition, the smallest fragment of matter and therefore indivisible. By asking the question, we change reality. How much that change is only a change in our understanding, and how much it is a change in the universe, we cannot say, since our minds are a function of the universe. When we study ourselves, we study the universe; we are the universe seeking to understand itself. To what end, we do not know.

Combine all of this and what begins to emerge is a new metaphor, a new mythos, an embryonic faith. That mythos begins with a radical unitarianism, a conviction that at its heart, all of existence is one continuous fabric, and all forms existence takes are interrelated and interdependent. We and the stars, we and our fellow creatures, we and the smallest particle we can imagine are all bodied forth out of the same sacred mystery, held together for longer or shorter periods of time by the same mysterious patterning, and destined inevitably to the same end. Therefore, all that happens in this vast sidereal universe is of potential consequence to us. We are not separate from the world; we are a function of the universe. Perhaps we are the organ of self-knowledge by which reality-- whatever it is--begins to comprehend itself and its own nature. That may suggest the ultimate significance of our irrepressible curiosity and point toward the meaning of our existence.

Out of that radical unitarianism grows a conviction that at this middle level where we have our existence, we have been provided a very special gift. This beautiful planet, hung in the vastness of a violently changing universe, is the only home we have, the only home we shall ever have. It is our responsibility to care for it, to preserve it from the danger with which human folly threatens it. Here, the universe is experimenting with self-consciousness. Perhaps there are other such experiments elsewhere, but we do not know of them. Here the experiment is being carried on and our survival is related to the outcome. In a universe in which all is interrelated, we cannot longer sustain the illusion that what happens to this planet and its fragile cargo of life is a matter of indifference in the universal scope of things. The new mythos carries a hint that though we cannot define precisely how, our existence does matter; that in a universe whose center is everywhere, this planet is not an insignificant dot on the map of galaxies.

The new mythos is also defined by a radical universalism, by a conviction that there is no outside, no place of separation, no other reality; there is only this universe of the infinitely large, the infinitely small and the infinitely middle. Consequently, whatever the holy may be, it cannot be seen as outside or separate from the universe. What the generations have called god is an integral part of all that is; what the generations have called god is at risk in the game of existence; what has been called god is the mystery we confront when we stare into the world of the infinitely small, the mystery we confront when we contemplate the infinitely large, the mystery we confront when we examine ourselves. That which has been called god is the something like a thought which comes into being and goes out of being when we examine subatomic particles, and when we

study the heavens; it is the origin and the destination of all, the place where opposites unite, the thought which flows through our minds and inspirits the universe.

And all of this is captured in that beautiful icon, the vision of the earth as seen from space. There in the beautiful ball, shrouded by wisps of clouds, we see messages too profound to capture with words. Standing before that image, we glimpse truths we always knew but did not know we knew; a sense of our relatedness to all that is; a sense of our unity with our fellow creatures everywhere; a sense of our responsibility for a venture which is larger than we know, begun in a distant time before our imagining and moving to a destiny we cannot conceive; a sense of purposive motion through time and space. Standing before that image, we see our home for the first time, and begin to understand ourselves as relational beings, involved in an adventure beyond our ability to conceptualize, an adventure focused upon this tiny ball in the vastness of space.

I do not know for certain what the shape of the religion of the new millennium will be. But if it is to be adequate to the world as it reveals itself to us, it will be a religion which urges the widest possible loyalties, which nurtures the deepest sense of responsibility, which inculcates a sense of wonder and awe and mystery in the face of the common and ordinary. It will be a religion which helps us to see the world as everywhere purposive and alive with rich potential and unexpected novelty. It will be a religion which helps us reverence ourselves and our fellow creatures; which helps erase the artificial dividing lines we have erected between ourselves and the rest of the universe.

Child that I am of a world that is passing, I doubt that I shall see the full flowering of this faith in my lifetime. My generation seems destined to live in a world of all-done-and-not-yet. But the hints and suggestions of what is to come make it possible to live in hope, resisting the idolatries of the past, and trusting the day when a new faith shall emerge from the human soul, a faith adequate to a new millennium