# LUCKMANN'S "INVISIBLE RELIGION" AND THE PROBLEM OF BELIEF IN UPDIKE'S HARRY ANGSTROM

R. FRANKLIN TERRY

*Human life, like a poetical figure, is an indeterminate middle between overspecified poles always threatening to collapse it. The poles may be birth and death, father and mother, love and judgment, heaven and earth, first things and last things. Art narrates that middle region and charts it like a purgatory.*

*—Geoffrey Hartman*

In its classical mode the sociology of religion has been concerned with the theory of the place religious institutions hold, and the roles they play, in modern industrial societies. One of its main assumptions, says Thomas Luckmann (*The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society,* The Macmillan Co., 1967), consists in the identification of churches with religion. "Religion becomes a social fact either as ritual (institutionalized religious conduct) or doctrine (institutionalized religious ideas)" (p. 22). This instiutional definition of religion, furthermore, legitimates techniques of institutional analysis as appropriate methods for the sociological investigation of religious behavior. But it fails to provide for what may be the most distinctive character of modern religion, namely, its growing internalization. Thus, by far the most interesting questions for the sociology of religion are without theoretical formulation so long as religion is identified as an institutional phenomenon. In Europe, says Luckmann, "only a small fraction of the members of congregations join activities that lie outside the ritual functions of the churches," and those actually participating in these services "represent only a relatively small part of the nominal membership of the parish" (p. 31), while in America, though participation in church-related activities (often those other than ritual functions) is higher by comparrison, other factors such as "the process of doctrinal leveling" and accommodation to secularism together with the gradual disappearance of ethnic churches invite the conclusion "that church-oriented religion has become a marginal phenomenon in modern society" (p. 35). This conclusion holds, moreover, in spite of the close identification between the American middle classes and their churches. The mass-character of American religion, in other words, does not represent a reversal of

R. FRANKLIN TERRY is Associate Profsesor of Religion at Morningside College, Sioux City, Iowa.

the trend toward secularity: it is not a resurgence of traditional church religion. Rather, it is the result of "a radical inner change in American church religion" consisting in "the adoption of the *secular* version of the Protestant ethos by the churches" (p. 36). The problem is summarized:

> If the churches maintain their institutional claim to represent and mediate the traditional religious universe of meaning, they survive primarily by association with social groups and social strata which continue to be oriented toward the values of a past social order. If, on the other hand, the churches accomodate themselves to the dominant culture of modern industrial society they necessarily take on the function of legitimating the latter. In the performance of this function, however, the universe of meaning traditionally represented by the churches becomes increasingly irrelevant (p. 37).

This "marginal predicament" of the churches and the contrast between orthodoxy and secularism are nicely etched in John Updike's novel *Rabbit, Run* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1960; Fawcett World Library Edition). In Harry Angstrom, Updike has focused on what Whitehead identified as the religion of individual solitariness, combining this with his concern for covenantal relationships, for a sense of community (e.g., "respectful identification with the people of one's locale;" see Updike's review of R.K. Narayan's *My Days* in the *New Yorker*, Sept. 2, 1975, pp. 80-82, for amplification of this point). Rabbit's predicament may be seen in part as exemplification of the split between orthodox and secular Christianity, aptly personified in Fritz Kruppenbach, the Lutheran pastor for twenty-seven years in Mt. Judge—the lower middle-class section of the city of Brewer— and Jack Eccles, Kruppenbach's younger and modern Episcopal counterpart. Harry Angstrom (Rabbit) and Janice Springer—son of a printer, daughter of a car salesman—married early out of highschool owing to an unplanned pregnancy, now parents of Nelson (two-and-a-half) and expecting a second child; Rabbit, "MagiPeel" salesman at a local five-and-dime, and Janice, incipient alcoholic, TV housewife. Impelled by a diminishing sense of freedom ("Rabbit. . .senses he is in a trap"), Rabbit runs away one evening while out to pick up cigarettes for Janice, takes up with Ruth, a prostitute (procured by Tothero, Rabbit's high school basketball coach), and lives for two months in her apartment, returning to Janice the night she delivers their daughter, Rebecca June, leaving Ruth pregnant. Eccles, Springers' priest, takes up with Rabbit during his absence from Janice, analyzing his

motives for leaving home during their Tuesday afternoon golf games, counseling Rabbit (he believes skillfully and with Christian understanding) into a gradual reconciliation. During one brief meeting Eccles arranges with Kruppenbach, Angstroms' pastor, the distance between their versions of religion becomes apparent. Eccles explains "his role" to this massive "man of brick," showing how "Harry has been in a sense spoiled by his athletic successes; how the wife, to be fair, had perhaps showed little imagination in their marriage; how he himself, as a minister, had tried to keep the boy's conscience in touch with his wife without pressing him into a premature reunion," and that "the boy's problem wasn't so much a lack of feeling as an uncontrolled excess of it," and so on. Kruppenbach's response is unconditional: "Do you think this is your job, to meddle in these people's lives? I know what they teach you at seminary now: this psychology and that. But I don't agree with it. You think your job is to be an unpaid doctor, to run around and plug up the holes and make everything smooth. I don't think that... I say you don't know what your role is or you'd be home locked in prayer. *There* is your role: to make yourself an exemplar of faith. There is where comfort comes from: faith, not what little finagling a body can do here and there, stirring the bucket... Now I'm serious. Make no mistake. There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness, is nothing. It is Devil's work" (pp. 142-143).

This conflict between Christian orthodoxy and its more secular amalgam is written into Rabbit's character and is never fully resolved. He and Janice are homebound urbanites, their dingy apartment with the omnipresent flicker of the television indicative at once of the banality of their lives and the lackluster quality of their marriage. Rabbit runs, in part, because there is nothing to leave—at least it seems so to him at first. In the beginning he moves from nothing toward nothing, from the centerless void he experiences toward the margins of "the vast blank of his freedom." "Do what the heart commands," Tothero glibly advises just before he introduces Harry to Ruth. "The heart is our only guide." Rabbit recoils from this, almost instinctively; later, he begins to understand why. Through Rabbit's time with Ruth, Updike defines the search for some center of wholeness in personal bonds, tied in part to a persistent belief in God, amplified too by what Luckmann describes as the peripheral nature of the church in the modern industrial city. As Rabbit contemplates making love to Ruth on their first night together, he tries with muddled tenderness to let her know that "it is not her crotch he wants, not the machine; but

her, her." In bed, Ruth wants the shade pulled on the "dismal view" outside.

> He goes to the window and bends to see what she means. There is only the church across the way, gray, somber, confident. Lights behind its rose window are left burning, and this circle of red and purple and gold seems in the city night a hole punched in reality to show the abstract brilliance burning underneath. He feels gratitude to the builders of this ornament, and lowers the shade on it guiltily (p. 69).

The next morning, after making love again, the church bells across the street call him to the window "to watch the crisply dressed people go into the limestone church. . .The thought of these people having the bold idea of leaving their homes to come here and pray pleases and reassures Rabbit, and moves him to close his own eyes and bow his head with a movement so tiny Ruth won't notice. Help me, Christ. Forgive me. Take me down the way. Bless Ruth, Janice, Nelson, my mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Springer, and the unborn baby. Forgive Tothero and all the others. Amen" (pp. 76-77).

A moment later, Robbit's comment about the size of the congregation prompts a denunciation of belief on Ruth's part and a puzzled inquiry about Rabbit's apparent religious nostalgia. The rasp sureness of her own disbelief makes Rabbit wonder if he's lying to himself about wanting to believe. "If he is, he is hung in the middle of nowhere, and the thought hollows him, makes his heart tremble."

What happens here, in Luckmann's analysis, is symptomatic of the decline of the "religion of the fathers" and the development, however tentative, of a new kind of private, internalized religion which does not manifest itself in specialized forms. This privatized religiousity is rooted in an "anthropological condition" Luckmann calls "the transcendence of biological nature." In the more traditional or "primitive" societies this subjective "leap" in which the self is both identified and projected into a sacred dimension requires the invention of holy societies with specific structures, mythologies, and ideologies constituting a "sacred cosmos" and an earthly counterpart of the same. But Rabbit indeed "hung in the middle of nowhere." Like some of Hemingway's characters (and that prototype of all modern heroes divided between sacred and secular sensibilities, Stephen Dedalus) Rabbit wishes he were more religious when he sees old churches and stained glass windows. But his search for transcendence (running), overladen at times with Christian pietism, moves toward those forms of "invisible" religion Luckmann identifies as autonomy (private biogra-

phy), self-realization, the mobility ethos, sexuality, and familism (see Luckmann, pp. 109-113). Ruth is Rabbit's incarnation of these sacral realities in which (he desperately hopes) he may be newly valued and secured. "The thing about her is, she's *good-natured.* He knew it the second he saw her standing by the parking meters. He could just tell from the soft way her belly looked... In all the green world nothing feels as good as a woman's good nature" (p. 79, emphasis added). He yearns for her domesticity, the quality he cannot find in Janice who, he fears, is farther from truth than he. On that first Sunday of Easter week, he wants to buy a few groceries, watch Ruth cook lunch, and afterwards walk lazily "to the top of Mt. Judge." The bells again accompany his reverie. "Out on the street people leave church carrying wands of green absent-mindedly at their sides."

Luckmann's thesis concerning the emergence of "modern religious themes" in a configuration of internalized values anticipates the eventual loss altogether of the kinds of remembrance that bring Rabbit "in the twinkling of an eye" back from the center of nowhere to a posture of what Updike calls "irrevocable passion" (see *New Yorker* article cited *supra*). Not that Harry Angstrom discovers again a traditional religious stability (*Rabbit Redux,* 1971, makes this clear), but he moves over, as it were, to a new position, a new understanding of his "former" life. Updike's sense of irony keeps this transition in a truly modern state of ambiguity, but he intends a significant character transformation in Rabbit's return. Ruth's fear of losing Rabbit is manifest during a "double date" with one of Rabbit's high school team mates for whom he holds little fondness. The realm of grace Rabbit once experienced with Ruth begins to dissipate in the sleazy night spot he has never liked. Ruth seldom drinks, but tonight puts away two Daiquiries in short order. "The thing about Ruth is lately she's been trying to make him feel guilty about something." But the guilt Rabbit feels is something less definable than Ruth's pregnancy, being similar in a way to that "sense of sin" Celia Copplestone speaks of in T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party:* "It's not the feeling of anything I've ever *done/* Which I might get away from, or of anything in me/ I could get rid of—but of emptiness, of failure/ Towards someone, or something, outside myself; And I feel I must . . *.atone*—is that the word?" Unlike Celia's transformation, Rabbit's does not represent an ultimate resolution of the problem so much as a sense of its persistent and compelling presence: "And just there, in the space of blinking, with the alcohol vaporizing under his ribs, he feels himself pass over. He laughs, really laughs. They can all go to Hell" (p. 150).

Luckmann's comment about the aimlessness of modern man's

search for meaning underscores Harry Angstrom's situation: "The individual who is to find a source of 'ultimate' significance in the subjective dimension of his biography embarks upon a process of self-realization and self-expression that is, perhaps, not continuous—since it is immersed in the recurrent routines of everyday life—but certainly interminable." (p. 110). But Rabbit's desperation is not that resulting from the emptiness of a groundless subjectivity. Rather, it stems from a stubborn, inexplicable persistence of his belief in something, somewhere that made us, something that turns fate into destiny. "Last night driving home I got this feeling of a straight road ahead of me; before that it was like I was in the bushes and it didn't matter which way I went" (p. 175). Though Eccles has not been directly responsible for this leveling out, he represents the negative side of Rabbit's faith. Eccles' religion is a perfunctory formalism filled with insubstantial convictions about helping people find Christ. He is the figure of Luckmann's marginal institution filled with thinned-out symbols whose power to evoke judgment and grace has long since been bargained away. Following his confrontation with Kruppenbach, Eccles is faced with the shame of his own faithlessness. "His depression is so deep that he tries to gouge it deeper by telling himself *He's right, he's right,* and thus springing tears and purging himself, however absurdly, above the perfect green circle of the Buick steering wheel. But he can't cry; he's parched. His shame and failure hang downward in him heavy but fruitless" (p. 144).

Though I think Updike is affirming Rabbit's picaresque saint-hood, Rabbit himself only dimly perceives his destiny and always through the haze of his panic. While waiting in the hospital for Janice to deliver their second child, Rabbit's thoughts oscillate between a strong conviction of sin and fear that his moral failure will bring death to Janice or the baby, and the dreadful suspicion that the sky is vacant, that nothing counts for good or ill. "His life seems a sequence of grotesque poses assumed to no purpose, a magic dance empty of belief. *There is no God; Janice can die;* the two thoughts come at once, in one slow wave" (p. 165).

The central theme of the novel, as I see it, confirms Luckmann's thesis concerning the emigration of our primary social institutions from the "sacred cosmos," but it qualifies Luckmann's hunches about the solitariness of modern religion. Luckmann argues that individuals transcend biological necessity by building sacred institutions and projecting ultimate truths in which to believe. But with the collapse of transcendence in modern society, the self, no longer able to discover "ultimacy" or a sacred order in institutions, takes up residence, as it

were, in the temples of subjectivity. This is not entirely the case with Harry; at least, he is not content with a subjectivity cut off from even the barest remnants of a sacral order. After the birth of their daughter Rebecca June, Rabbit is moved to give thanks. "Harry is happy to go to Eccles' church. Not merely out of affection for Eccles. . .but because he considers himself happy, lucky, blessed, forgiven, and wants to give thanks. His feeling that there is an unseen world is instinctive, and more of his actions than anyone suspects constitute transactions with it" (p. 195).

When Janice drowns their baby in a drunken stupor (after Rabbit leaves their apartment because Janice refuses his sexual advances), Rabbit understands the moral balance being worked out, not so much through an inscrutable providence as in the acceptance of guilt and responsibility. The choice between an absurd freedom and "something beyond" that holds us accountable becomes clearer to Rabbit through Becky's death. "Do what the heart commands," Tothero exhorted Rabbit at the beginning. Tothero's own suffering in the meantime has chastened him, but his comment to Rabbit before the funeral marks the difference between his own stoicism and Harry's hesitant religious conviction: "Right and wrong aren't dropped from the sky. We make them. Against misery. Invariably, Harry, invariably" (p. 232).

The thing finally that separates Harry from the the others who share in the tragedy of his baby's death is his refusal to see it on their terms, as a hapless stroke of fate having nothing to do with their own folly and mortality. "He wants to believe in the sky as the source of all things." At the end, his flight is not the sign of panic that grows out of a sense of pointlessness, banality, and doom; it is more an affirmation of his own sense of freedom *in* destiny. He is running at the end, away from the graveside of his daughter ("he is sure his girl has ascended to Heaven"), away from the circle of despair which Eccles' feeble and unbelieving prayers have broken for Harry as for none of the rest. The predicament his flight attests to is that of one tracing the boundaries between those institutions, in Luckmann's terms, which have emigrated from the sacred cosmos, and the fragile durabilities of the human presence seeking some confirmation in the heavens of its enduring and noble significance.

> Afraid, really afraid, he remembers what once consoled him by seeming to make a hole where he looked through into underlying brightness, and lifts his eyes to the church window. It is, because of church poverty or the late summer nights or just carelessness, unlit, a dark circle in a stone facade (p. 254).

Ironically, then, Rabbit's "faith" sets him apart. The darkened window of the church attests not only to the marginal character of that agency that once mediated *Faith*, but it points as well to the singular nature of the religious pilgrimage in spite of its collective manifestations. The streetlights are what he sees now, and Summer Street, asphalt pavement, patches of light. Rabbit "doesn't know what to do, where to go, what will happen," a thought that seems to make him infinitely small in a great vastness (p. 254). "How is one to decide," asks Luckmann, "whether the new social form of religion is 'good' or 'bad'? It is a radically subjective form of 'religiosity' that is characterized by a weekly coherent and nonobligatory sacred cosmos and by a low degree of 'transcendence' in comparison to traditional modes of religion." (p.117). Updike, it seems, is not content with these alternatives—sacred cosmos vs. radical subjectivity. Rabbit is poised between them. "Funny, how what makes you move is so simple and the field you must move in is so crowded."