

# *The Conservative Role of Religion*

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**T**HIS is not "A Conservative View." On social change in general, I might be found among the more radical spokesman in this series. But since the series is devoted to a consideration of lessons to be learned from various experiences of social change, and since many of us are particularly interested in the usefulness of religious concerns and organizations as instruments of social change, I am going to try to assess that usefulness. In an attempt to introduce what I consider anthropological, sociological and historical realism about the way "religion" as an institution operates in respect to social change, I shall try to demonstrate that it operates not radically but conservatively.

In the current situation in the churches, we are somewhat bemused by a bevy of "young Turks" who are (rightly) impressed by the urgent need for social change, but who—because their occupational lot is cast within organized religion—have sought to use religious organizations for initiating and accelerating social change, and have found them by and large rather refractory for that purpose.

## **"TOOLING UP" FOR "PROPHETIC" ACTION IN THE CHURCHES AND SYNAGOGUES**

The "churches" and synagogues—or at least an articulate and active minority in them—were able a few years ago to help bring about the enactment of the first major civil rights bill in recent times, and we have been preening ourselves ever since on our effectiveness as agents of social change. But the

increasing "backlash" against further implementation of the first feeble steps toward true equality of citizenship has caused us to wonder whether we ever really had the bulk of church members with us—and, of course, we didn't.

The same could be said of efforts in the churches and synagogues to bring about change in our nation's foreign policy or to engage church people actively in the "war on peverty" at the congregational level. We have discovered among our constituents a great inert or resistant mass which does not respond to our pleas for social change, — which, in fact prefers things the way they are. Not change, but stability and security are what they desire, and—what is more to the point—they look to their churches and synagogues to undergird that stability and security rather than fomenting social change!

Gerhardt Lensky, in *The Religious Factor*, reported that laymen in the churches of Detroit were often more attached to the tribal reflexes of their socio-ethnic in-group than they were to the ideal values preached to them by their religious leaders. Glock and Stark, in *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism*, found in the most orthodox members of the most stable and substantial churches (Southern Baptist, Missouri-Synod Lutheran, American Lutheran) a "conservative" attachment to strong in-group beliefs—that their church and their faith had the "truth" and that those outside the faith were inferior and alien (what Glock and Stark call "particularism"). These findings I consider completely consistent with the contention that organized religion plays a conserving role for most of its members, and that this is mainly a functional rather than a dysfunctional characteristic.

This conservative quality of organized religion poses problems for those

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who would call the adherents of religion to a more vigorous devotion to what is not yet but ought to be. The "prophets" of all ages have faced a difficult and thankless task in trying to stir up the faithful to participate in social change, and the result has often been schism or the early demise of the "prophet."

We face this same prospect today in the growing resistance by rank-and-file laymen to the leadership of those "out front" in the struggle to accommodate the institutions of the present to the demands of the future. A widening gap appears between the leaders who call for social change and the "followers" who are increasingly less inclined to follow in that direction. The result may well be another rash of schisms between "liberal" and "conservative" churchmen (over social rather than theological issues this time).

### **INSTITUTIONALIZING "CULTURAL LAG"**

Of course, this problem is not unique to religious institutions. "Cultural lag" is a condition common to all social groups, and there are constant schisms in all of them between the "leading edge" and the more or less distant segments of society in respect to social change. In fact, one might think of human society as one vast pilgrimage strung out across the hills of time, with the "liberals," the "prophets," the "reformers" far out ahead, the more responsive and mobile followers in the van, trying to keep up with the pace of march, and the slower elements lagging farther and farther behind, trailing in clumps that may eventually become separated from the rest.

We expect and accept a certain amount of this lag in human affairs, knowing that it will take time for the following waves of humanity to reach the point where the leaders are now. We know that some will come to a complete halt or will regress or retreat, forming static enclaves which only death can wear away.

But the thesis of this paper is that, while all institutions are particularly prone to cultural lag, religious institutions are pronest of all, they are indeed institutionalizations of conservatism, embodiments of cultural lag. Why is this? The main reason, I suggest, is that the institutions of religion are the repositories of the meanings and values that are most ultimate and intimate for their members. They are designed to conserve and treasure and transmit the ideals and qualities that earlier generations have found good. As such, they tend to face backward rather than forward and to be concerned with conserving the old rather than exploring or experimenting with the new.

This conserving quality of institutions in general and of religious institutions in particular is basically a healthy and functional trait which gives coherence and continuity to human society. If there is a fault to be found with it, the fault is often that they conserve uncritically whole patterns of the immediate past rather than conserving selectively the few great goods distilled from many generations. Thus churchmen of every age cling to the "good old hymns" of the previous generation—many of which are unworthy of such attachment—rather than to the really great old hymns—much older—that have survived the centuries. Thus many a prophet is merely trying to call or recall his hearers to the ancient teachings of the faith, but is persecuted for neglecting or rejecting the more familiar and lesser attachments of the immediate past.

So part of the problem may be not that the churches are too conservative but that they are not conservative enough! The disturbing and unsettling prophet may be trying to call his hearers from the indiscriminate worship at the "high places" of suburbia of the lares and penates of split-level comfort to a more selective devotion to the duties proclaimed by the prophets of Old

Testament or New. But the fact that the good to which he calls them is not continuous with the good they know and are loath to leave means that his call is viewed as radical rather than conservative, and is rejected by those who want continuity, not change.

### HOW ABOUT RACIAL RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS?

There have been radical cells and movements within the broader religious institutions, and these are indeed the greatest instruments of social change the world has ever seen, as Eric Hofer points out in *The True Believer*. The early Christian movement, the Protestant Reformation, the Puritan Revolution, the Wesleyan Revival, the Hasidic movement, the Mormon migration, and countless other sect-groups, colonies of dissent, and ecclesiolaes, have had a radical effect upon their members and upon the enviroing society and the history of the world.

But they were not designed to achieve desired social changes. They were monumental heavings and stirrings of the human spirit directed toward "religious" objectives, of which the social effects were more or less incidental by-products. They could no more have been conceived and generated to accomplish specified social, political or economic reforms than a volcano could be induced to erupt in order to destroy a slum and thus advance urban renewal.

Not only can such movements not be directed toward specified social ends, it is doubtful that they can be turned on or off or directed at all—at least with our present degree of social knowledge. Christians have a word for the kind of unpredictable spontaneity seen in such movements; they blame it on the "Holy Spirit" which "bloweth where it listeth," and perhaps that is as good a way as any to account for such movements until we learn more of their dynamics.

At any rate, even such radical and

sometimes "prophetic" movements quickly solidify into institutional forms, and then they too resist the demands for change voiced by the "prophets."

### EXAMPLES OF THE PERSISTENCE OF THE FAMILIAR

Suppose the prophet calls his people to a deeper devotion to justice and freedom by supporting the removal of shallow rituals of routine Protestant culture-religion from the public schools. A roar of outrage will arise from those who feel they have been deprived of a mainstay of their faith, which apparently consisted largely of such formal collective cultural rites handed on by habit and tradition. They will find it difficult to understand that such rote recitations are a trivialization of true faith as the prophets defended it, and will reject such sophisticated (and demanding) abstractions.

As one of my parents' friends demanded at a prayer breakfast in my home town, "Why doesn't the National Council of Churches support the Dirksen (prayer) Amendment rather than oppose it?" To him, the church should be a repository and defender of the things he held dear, and if it could not or would not defend these, what good was it? Not for him the "intellectualized" effete contention that a faithful follower of the Christian way should not need or desire the intervention of the state in the practice of the faith. He wanted everybody to be allowed to pray in public school as he did, and if they didn't want to, let them go back where they came from and leave our precious "Christian" institutions as they were!

To such "reflex" religionists it is inconceivable that the institutions of their religion should stand for something other than they stand for. It is not only inconvenient and incomprehensible for these institutions to be preaching change from the accepted ways, it is disloyal! After all, have the faithful not lavished their hours, their dollars and their de-

votion upon the institutions of their religion? How can those institutions now turn upon them and denounce the very foundations upon which the believers' "faith" is based? It does no good to answer that perhaps the believers' faith was based upon recent cultural customs rather than upon the more ancient Word of God—for that is the kind of evasive and abstract circumlocution that preachers are always using to excuse their failure to defend the faith!

The same thing can be seen in civil rights. It may be possible to indulge the eccentricities of the preacher who becomes exercised over the sufferings of the heathen in a far country, even in Alabama or Mississippi, but when he undertakes to disrupt the "sacred" (ie. familiar) homogeneity of the holy community here (the neighborhood) by outlandish devices like open housing covenants, he is attacking the very pillars upon which the temple stands! "Doesn't he know that it is the function of the institutions of religion, in which we have reposed all that we hold dear, to defend the sanctity and security and stability of the way of life which we have arduously shaped to preserve the good things we have won? How dare he, then, propose to shatter the accepted structures of our community for the sake of idealistic "notions" he picked up in seminary? It is not we who have failed the faith, but he! Let him leave us in our hard-won and hallowed community and go to Alabama or somewhere—and stay there!"

It is not my intention or desire to suggest that this reaction of the laity is pagan or perverse. Rather, I am trying to suggest that it is precisely what we should expect of the stoutest pillars of the institutions of religion! If they were not interested in preserving and protecting the good and true and beautiful things of life for their posterity, they would not be interested in the institutions of religion. They would be investing their time instead in business, in

academia, in science, in entertainment, in enterprises of novelty, as are the people who respond most readily to the appeals for "social change"! A church or synagogue devoted to "social change" seems a contradiction in terms! I say this as one who has pastored several congregations—the most devoted and dependable groups imaginable. There was nothing they would not do for their church—except leap into the turmoil of change! I can testify that some of the laymen I have most trusted and respected have responded to some of my "far out" appeals for social change with bewilderment, anxiety and not a little dismay and hurt, wondering how their own familiar pastor could make such strange and inexplicable demands upon them!

Several of them—bless their earnest hearts—remonstrated with me patiently for my perverse insistence that Sabbath-observers should be permitted to open their places of business on Sunday if they closed them for religious reasons on Saturday. "Why, it wasn't natural! It would contribute to the commercialization of the sanctified Christian Sunday!" These were the best men in my congregation—men who cared what happened to Sunday. It would have been easier for them to say, "What does it matter? Let them open on Sunday, and we'll have some place to buy the things we forgot to buy during the week." But they wanted to preserve the sacred ways as they had found them. In the end, they sadly gave up on this subject—not that I convinced them or they me—and we agreed to disagree on Sunday closing laws. But I think they were hard put to it to avoid concluding that I somehow let them down, and not just them but the Holy Faith!

### THE CHURCH OR SYNAGOGUE A SOCIAL-ACTION BARRACKS?

These are the people—the salt of the earth—whom we confront when we address the institutions of religion in a clarion call for social change. It is any

wonder that they are puzzled to know why we do it or how they ought to respond? I am not now talking about reactionaries, who wish to return to an earlier Golden Age and who reject the present as the domain of Satan. I am talking about good people who deeply want to know the right and do it, and who look to their beloved church or synagogue to help them, and we give them—"social change"! Their instinctual test of what is good is not derived from the thin exhortations of the preacher, however liked or respected he may be, but from the tried and tested patterns of experience, which they have sought to preserve and protect as best they can for the coming generations. A few words from the pulpit, or many, are not going to convince them that the familiar and trusted patterns in which they have invested their lives are no longer good and must give way to some experiment of "social change".

What I am trying to present is a serious and genuine application of the pillars of our churches and synagogues as the indispensable bulwarks of social stability and continuity. Without them, society would disintegrate. But what thanks do they get for their devotion to what they have found good and worthy of perpetuation?—Denunciation by a clutch of young clerical upstarts as "stick-in-the-muds" and "obstacles in the path of progress"! Theirs is not simply a selfish clutching at the status quo because it has been good to them, and they have or covet the power to keep what they've got. They are devoted to "the way things are" because they feel it is basically good for everyone and therefore should be preserved. And they have looked to their institutions of religion for a community of devotion to the things they have found good and trustworthy and important, and by and large they look to these institutions rightly, for that is what they are for—to preserve, to conserve, what is good in life.

The church or synagogue has praised and perpetuated the reliable continuities of life; it has helped its members through the difficult hours of trouble and tribulation; it has found them together in strength and mutual reinforcement when beset by chaos and catastrophe, peril and persecution; it has upheld them in the face of disease, death and disaster, and they look upon it as a tried and trusted bulwark against the storms of life. That is its basic business—to be a sustaining community for its members in confronting and enduring the experiences in life that are both unpleasant and unavoidable.

As such, it attracts and serves and keeps as members those persons who particularly need this supportive experience and who feel and live out a continuing appreciation and devotion for it. If now the leaders of this institution expect to call their followers suddenly to allegiance to widespread and rapid social change, they are simply calling the wrong collection of people! The churches and synagogues are not just social-action barracks where the troops of militant reform are kept in readiness to charge forth in the excursions and alarums of social change. Rather they are the "conservatories" where the hurts of life are healed, where new spiritual strength is nourished, and where the virtues and verities of human experience are nurtured. To rally those within in an effort to storm the bastions of the status quo is like trying to lead into hand-to-hand combat a band of nurses, teachers, physicians and gardeners—people who are capable, responsible and responsive—at something else!

The people who spring into aggressive action at the mere mention of a petition or a picket-line by and large are not in the churches or synagogues. Their interests lead them in a different direction—not a better or a worse direction, but different. The religious institutions tend to select out from the general popula-

tion a special set of adherents—those oriented toward conserving the good things of life, and it is natural and desirable that this is so.

### **FROM A LESSER TO A GREATER GOOD**

Are the institutions of religion doomed then to be obstacles to social change? Is it inevitable and unavoidable that they should resist the rightful pressures for equal citizenship, for freedom and justice? No, the truly conservative institution is selective and far-sighted in its conservatism. Our shallow mode of religious life and nurture has permitted the lesser goods of the familiar immediate past to eclipse the greater goods handed down through the ages. We cannot suddenly overcome this neglect with a few sermons and pamphlets, and we should not expect to. Neither can we transform the conservative community

of the faith into the shock-troops of revolution.

But we can help them to see the justice and necessity of social reconstruction, even if they cannot lead it or wholeheartedly identify with it. And we can help them best if we start with the recognition that they are gathered in the institutions of religion, not to reject the ways they have found good but to conserve them. Then we can perhaps suggest that not all the accepted ways are equally good, and that some will have to be transformed if greater good is to be realized. But it will be at best but a corrective to a basically conserving enterprise, and that is as it should be, for the business of religion is to conserve, not just the good but the best of man's life as God has given and redeemed it, and if the institutions of religion do not perform this selective conservation, it will be left to the unthinking reactionaries and regressivists.

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