FAITH AND THE SUBLATION OF MODERNITY: KIERKEGAARD, QUIXOTE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF FIDEISM

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At a 1988 conference on fundamentalism at Berkeley, Robert Bellah spoke of "Enlightenment Fundamentalism," suggesting that the recent global upsurge of religious traditionalist movements came about as a reaction not only to modernity but to the narrow scientistic intolerance that frequently coincided with such – i.e., the "cribbed and confined" world view of the general academy, dedicated to an exclusionary tactic of eliminating anything beyond the purview of what Habermas has called the "technical-rational paradigm for understanding the world."[1] This is an important point towards the realization that the general worldview that we call "fundamentalism" has roots in a particular way or style of *belief* in a truth, i.e., one that is transcendent, non-contingent, exclusionary, and even imperialistic; and in a *faith* that rises above what is rational and empirical – and ultimately beyond what is human.

At the same time, modern fundamentalism gains support from a widespread anti-intellectualism that questions the validity of academic attempts to transform or reinterpret the purity and strength of faith. Gabriel Daly insists that this protest cannot be simply dismissed as "irrationalism," as it poses an important question, not only to church-affiliated theologians (as Daly suggests), but also to anyone concerned with the ramifications of moral pluralism and the ongoing absolutism-relativism debate, or interested in the effects of their faith and belief may have in a pluralized post-modern world. The question is: "How is it that when religious belief and practice are brought into harmony with reasonable requirements of the secular world, so often they lose their power to attract and satisfy?"[2] This, indeed, is the crux of the matter: religion within the limits of reason alone, whether *à la* Kant, Comte, or John Dewey, seems to be little more than secularism disguised with the use of an abstract quasi-theological terminology. Moreover, rationalism and positivism neglect the non-rational element that appears in all religions and that plays a vital role in conversion and religious experience. Indeed, as Daly notes, it "sometimes seems that a church which squares up with modernity loses precisely the 'Dionysian' element which fundamentalism so often preserves."[3]

But must the rest be silence? Must we choose between Descartes and Dionysus, with Nietzsche's hero the only figure around which to center the revolt against the Kafkaesque world of late modernity? The Dionysian element, the most non-rational aspect of religion, is, in essence,

faith. It seems safe to conclude that faith cannot be abjured nor vindicated by reason or logic. But then what are we to make of faith, and can there be any truth at all, except what resides within the individual? There can surely be faith without knowledge or proof, but can there be faith without foundation, without a surety – a certitude that excludes variations? If, as theologian Hans Küng has argued, truth and falsity are not monopolized by any religious tradition, and in fact have no "vertical" allegiance to any one conception of transcendence, but rather run "horizontally" across all faiths, then fundamentalism, as a horizontal phenomenon, stands before us as a possible "falsehood" *vis-à-vis* particular faith traditions – and the "truths" embedded in such.

WITHOUT FEAR OR TREMBLING

Fundamentalism is clearly a reaction against the limits of modernism – if not post-modernism. Both Ernst Gellner and Alasdair MacIntyre cite Søren Kierkegaard as an anti-fundamentalist hero; a pivotal figure in the transformation of Western understandings of religion. The son of a Lutheran minister (like Kant),[4] Kierkegaard picked up as his starting-point Kant's failure to revoke Diderot and Hume and justify morality by reason alone, the Dane calling in the act of choice to do the work that Kantian reason could not accomplish. Steeped in Lutheran morality, Kierkegaard attempted to establish a new practical and philosophical underpinning for an older and inherited way of life, relying to some extent upon the tradition of fideism dating back to Occam. Kierkegaard may have been the first to counter the illusions of objectivity made manifest in the tendency "to smother the vital core of subjective experience beneath layers of historical commentary and pseudo-scientific generalizations," and in a concomitant "proneness to discuss ideas from an abstract theoretical viewpoint that took no account of their significance for the particular outlooks and commitments of flesh and blood human beings."[5] Whereas Kant wanted to make room for faith – albeit a faith of pure practical reason securely founded in the authoritative deliverances of the moral consciousness – for Kierkegaard there was much more at stake than a particular set of cognitive claims. Faith is a pervasive way of looking at things that color one's world, and has its source in a particular *attitude* to life from that cannot be dislodged by logical or rational argument. Yet *pace* Luther, faith cannot be left entirely on its own, to justify the whims of its beholder, but must be accompanied by an enlargement of an individual's self-understanding and critical self-awareness, which Kierkegaard found could best be achieved by the "ironic" method and the use of literature, rather than by abstract instruction, the inculcation of salutary precepts, or the reaffirmation of tradition.

Thus, if Kierkegaard is a Jamesian pragmatist in his conception of truth and belief, he is also an ironist of the Rortyan neo-pragmatist sort, seeking to enable his readers to acquire a more perspicuous insight into their own situation and motivations, but without the didacticism of "objective" modes of discourse, whether scientific or theological. His program is a distinctively literary one, eliciting, with the help of the imagination, the emotional foundations and practical implications of one's beliefs and behavior, while at the same time revealing the differences in contrasting outlooks and approaches. This is the only path open to the modern emotivist self, who is effectively without *telos* (having lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end upon the acquisition, as it were, of personal sovereignty).[6] As such, the emotivist self has its own kind of social definition *vis-à-vis* the definition of those characters that inhabit and present the various social roles of the epoch. Ethics become a somewhat quixotic, yet still vital and necessary, quest for identification.[7]

Kierkegaard represents an important advance in the development of a style of belief I would like to call narrative fideism: whereas both Kant and Hegel (in different ways) sought to assimilate and subordinate the notion of religious faith to other categories of thought, Kierkegaard (in, e.g., *Fear and Trembling*) puts forth a form of faith that possesses a wholly independent status, lying beyond the province of ethical thinking and resisting elucidation in universal or rational terms, but nonetheless consistent with critical thought and development of self by means of archetypal characters.

BELIEF AGAINST BELIEF

For the fideist, belief must involve a "leap" – a willful longing rather than an assumption based upon an avowed proof or given evidence. For Kierkegaard, it is to be understood not so much as a *conclusion* as a *resolution* – a voluntary act that, although originating form doubt, must strive to overcome doubt. Though it is of course impossible to know *why* people believe what they believe, it seems plain that religious *belief* is quite different from a belief in, say, trees, people, or even black holes or quarks. Belief in God, or in Scripture, or in Revelation through a particular transcendent referent or tradition is not based upon (and does not claim to require) evidence of the sort that natural science requires. As Paul and Tertllian knew, Christian belief, in particular, requires the professor to accept something that is not only improbable but *offensive* to reason and the understanding, namely the Christ-event and its cosmic redemptive significance.

Thus Christian belief requires not just a mere "leap of faith," but a headfirst dive into the rationally unthinkable. Miguel de Unamuno, a

Spanish disciple of Kierkegaard, found the motivation for this leap in the hope of transcendence, not least because of a dread fear of the nothingness that would entail without immortality. "To believe in God is to long for His existence and, further, it is to act as if He existed; it is to live by this longing and to make it the inner spring of our action."[8] For the Dane (e.g., in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), Christianity only has truth as a subjective phenomenon; objectively, he argues, it has none whatsoever: "its basic tenets being more properly taken to be expressive of a moral vision or to embody spiritual values than as constituting assertions that purport to be true in some literal or specifically factual sense."[9] As terrible as this pronouncement may sound to traditional ears, Kierkegaard's formulation can serve as the basis for a revivified Christian humanist ethic of the Erasmian sort, one that bypasses the terrible rigor of fundamentalism yet need not founder upon the rocks of Kierkegaard's own existentialist subjectivism.

As William James noted, we cannot will ourselves to believe what is *contrary* to the facts at our disposal. Belief in God, however, is and must be a transcendent belief, and thus is quite different from belief in, say, flying goats, not just because belief in the latter serves no purpose, but also because it is so clearly *contrary* to the evidence we possess with regard to sedentary and avian mammals. Clearly, our creeds are not produced by our intellectual nature alone. But does this justify any and all beliefs with religious content? No, for just as we cannot affirm that there is Truth, neither can we deny the possibility outright, and in the meantime we must deny those beliefs whose particular manifestations run contrary to – as Jeffrey Stout would have it – the shared pidgin moral and ethical vocabulary we now possess. Truth may be best reconceived in terms of *possibility*, in an empiricist and not an absolutist sense.[10]

Moreover, this brings up the oft-neglected issue that is of vital import to a consideration of faith, belief, and truth – namely, the assumption that our human minds are equipped to know the Truth if and when it comes to us. This conceit, which may be fundamental to the religious impulse, is based on the notion that we are somehow "made for" the Truth. Thus we are stuck at several removes from what Heidegger would call the *earth:* not only may we not be fitted to receive the truth, but our words may not be able to adequately express what is beyond our purview, even if it can be glimpsed in silence. Yet giving up objective certitude does not require giving up entirely the quest or the *hope* of truth. As James and Borges would agree, it is also venturesome to think that of all the attempted illuminations of truth, of all those "illustrious co-ordinations" of words and phrases, that one of them, "at least in an infinitesimal way, does not resemble the universe a bit more than the others."[11] "Science says things *are;* morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things: 1. The best

things are the more eternal (transcendent) things; (and) 2. We are better off if we believe the first affirmation to be true."[12] In the end, of course, faith can only be judged by the manifestation of such in an interpersonal or social situation, and this is where fideism leads – to the action of the everyday believer.

Like the humanist Erasmus before him, Kierkegaard sought to bring Christianity down to earth by centralizing its practical ethics and emphasizing patterns of behavior – always based upon, though not *justified by,* the priority of faith. For several centuries now, philosophers and critics have successfully discredited attempts at substantiating religious predispositions (concerning the nature of God, immortality, and so on). But these objections need no longer (as Schleiermacher may have been the first since Occam to realize) be considered as inherently destructive to religion; they may in fact, by sweeping away such superfluities, have indirectly helped to draw attention to the core of the Christian message as conceived by the humanist Erasmus, and the existentialist Kierkegaard. Truth in this sense is a modest, but vital claim, which involves *moral action* as its last result. It has been suggested (by, I believe, Buckminster Fuller) that God is not, in fact, a noun, but a verb, and for the modern fideist truth must be conceived in the same way. Rightly understood, human existence takes the form of a constant striving – a seeking after fulfillment, "which is attainable by our fiercely committing ourselves to a power that transcends objective knowledge and rational comprehension."[13]

This, for Kierkegaard, is, in so many words, the *formula of faith.* There can be no faith, no belief, without prior skepticism, without doubt; but it may be possible for the anxiety of doubt and uncertainty to issue in a qualitative leap that takes the believer neither into a state of alienation nor into one of dogmatic certitude, but into an absurd but strong sense of *hope*: "Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible, and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance."[14]

IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE: CHRISTIAN PRAXIS

For all the talk of the privatization of religious conviction in the modern West, the fact remains that an individual's understanding of truth, her personal beliefs and convictions, and her faith will affect, if not *define*, how she will act interpersonally, socially, and politically. Though the roots and basis of faith can only be, as Kierkegaard was so adamant about getting across, subjective, the results of such, when made manifest on the more than private level, can and must be measured accordingly – and this measurement, being a critical reflexive one, may in turn transform or

develop one's beliefs. Simply put, though God, as the wholly Other, the transcendent point of reference is, by definition, *transcendent*, the fruits of faith are necessarily *immanent* and thus "anthropological." Religion cannot be a separate realm (as, say, are poetry and physics) into which one assumes a role when necessary; for most people religion is manifest on the level of daily activity, most particularly and forcefully in the sphere of daily human interaction.

Thus, it may be that *practical* religion is best conceived as *ethics.*[15] As Martin Marty states, in our age we need hardly (as James, and Kierkegaard before him tried to do) legitimize the private aspects of religion, particularly in a culture and a world that finds criticism of its socialized forms rather easy.[16] Surprisingly, however, outside the rather confined sphere of dogmatic theology (and perhaps psychology), there have been few serious attempts to find out exactly where religion, and Christianity in particular, may have "gone wrong," and lost its claim on many modern folk as a guide to a better life. Tolstoy conceived of religion in these terms: Religion is not, he says,

> as some scientists may imagine, a manifestation which at one time corresponded with the development of humanity, but is afterwards outgrown by it, [i]t is a manifestation always inherent in the life of humanity, and is as indispensable, as inherent in humanity at the present time as at any other.[17]

Second, says Tolstoy, religion is always the theory and practice of the future, and not of the past, and thus must be continually renewed.

In developing this notion of humanist Christian praxis, we may learn from that philosophical tradition known as pragmatism, shaped in large part by James, who avowed his lifelong debt to both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Though the pragmatist interest in religion was virtually discarded by James's heir John Dewey, it re-emerged in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, who utilized theology and religious symbols in dialectical concert with an acute historical consciousness and a feeling for the "signs of the times." Niebuhr was most interested in the relation of God and the self, and both of these to history, as well as what the relationship means (or could mean) for human possibilities, and how it sets the direction for relevant public action. His "theological anthropology" had as its aim the ethical reconstruction of society (i.e., *bricolage*) by forging a religious imagination that sustains a strong commitment to public life and gives, by way of faith, *hope* in the very moment of despair. Christianity, therefore, must wage constant war on the one hand against "political religions" (such as fundamentalism) that imagine some proximate goal and some conditioned good as humanity's

final good *(telos),* and, on the other hand, against forms of otherworldliness that give these political religions seeming validity.[18]

Yet, for all these aspects of fideism in his work, Niebuhr lacked a clear sense of the interpersonal imperative of religion, its implications for ethics and for a transforming way of life in dialogue with not only political theory and philosophy but also with literature and poetry. It was a poet, Gottfried Lessing, who said, two centuries before Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, and three before Niebuhr, that Christian faith proves itself not in reasoning, nor even in believing, so much as in right praxis.[19]

THE NARRATIVE QUEST: QUIXOTE AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN

Pre-Enlightenment moral thinking, whether of the Greek, medieval, or Renaissance variety, inevitably involved the telling of stories. Adopting a stance on morals and ethics was to adopt a stance on the narrative character of human life. Such a motif is not unfamiliar to the Western mind, but is in less evidence since the Enlightenment and the birth of "fiction" as an autonomous category of writing.[20] The platitude that one can only learn by doing, by experiencing, is at once confirmed and countermanded by the narrative conception of life, which, while emphasizing the questing and experiential element of the life itself, is often revealed in the text, which is on the one hand at one remove from direct experience, but on the other the most potent and direct way of learning about the quests of *others* who exist in distance of space or (especially) time. A play by Lessing illustrates this idea nicely. The plot of *Nathan the Wise* revolves around a parable of a ring of great power, which is to be bequeathed to a person, with the catch that it is not the attainment of the ring itself that reaps rewards, but the *way* it is acquired; i.e., not in the possession, but in the striving to show oneself worthy of the gift, that the true gift is revealed. Of course the notion of the pilgrim journeying on the questing life had a place in Western literature long before Lessing, most notably in three paradigm figures: The pilgrim of Dante's late medieval poem, entrenched in the concentric spheres of an uncompromising Catholic worldview; Bunyan's Pietist Christian, enduring personal trials and overcoming all by his simple faith and his "valiance for Truth"; and, finally Cervantes's knight of the sorrowful countenance, emerging from the medieval world of chivalry to find that the unity of standards and values had disappeared.

It has been said that the modern world began, not in front of the Wittenburg cathedral doors in 1517, but rather in 1605 Spain, when the Hidalgo of La Mancha left his village to explore the world, only to perceive, for the first time, "the rupture of a world based on analogy and thrust into differentiation."[21] Quixote's challenge remains ours, now that

the world Cervantes saw beginning has come, with Dostoevsky, Kafka and Broch, to a close. How to accept the diversity, plurality, and changefulness of the world, while retaining the mind's power for analogy, unity and coherence so that the world, and our lives, do not become meaningless? *Don Quixote* tells us that being modern is not a question of sacrificing the past in favor of the new (and not of re-invoking a mythical purified past); but of maintaining, comparing, and remembering values created by our forebears, making them modern so as not to lose the value of the modern. Thus, not only, as Lionel Trilling has said, is all prose fiction a variation on the theme of *Don Quixote,* but we might say the whole of modern life is based upon the fundamental Quixotic problem of appearance and reality, of belief and truth.

It is of no coincidence that Cervantes was a dedicated Erasmian, sharing with the Dutch scholar at least three themes: 1) a sense of the duality (or multiplicity) of truth; 2) the illusion of appearance; and 3) the (often ironic, but at times sincere) "praise of folly." Cervantes borrows the Erasmian method of comic debunking to show his unorthodox vision of the double truth: the learned but "mad" Quixote speaks the language of universals, of belief, which seems to be outdated; the simple but "sane" Sancho Panza speaks that of particulars, of doubt. Yet neither is vindicated: each character's appearance is diversified, obscured, and opposed by the existence and persistence of the other. This point Cervantes shares with Erasmus; in *Praise of Folly,* the latter attempts to head off the danger of making reason absolute: if reason is to be reasonable, it must see itself through the eyes of an ironical madness (the eyes of Quixote). This has implications on the personal level: "If the individual is to assert himself, then he must do so with an ironical conscience of his own ego, or he will flounder in solipsism and pride."[22] Quixote, the knight of unwavering belief, meets a faithless and lawless world, and neither knows any longer where the truth really lies. At heart, as Carlos Fuentes suggests, *Don Quixote* outlines a possible reunion of love and justice, a utopia found not in a nihilistic sweeping away of the past, nor of the present in favor of the past, near or remote, but in a fusion of the values that come to us from the past and those we are capable of creating in the present. Specifically, in Cervantes's case, the values of an age of chivalry acquire a democratic resonance, while the values of democratic life acquire the resonance of nobility.

Integrity, or *constancy* is a central virtue for the questing knight, perhaps *the* virtue, and is recognized by MacIntyre as the virtue that reinforces his argument that

> unless there is a *telos* which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life... conceived as a unity, it will *both* be the case that a certain

> subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life *and* that we shall be unable to specify the content of certain virtues adequately.[23]

Integrity cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of life. The narrative form counters the post-modern trends of relativism and the analytical atomization of human behavior, as well the deconstructive emphasis on the text in its isolation. Yet again we are dealing more with *use* than *meaning*: "It is because we understand our own lives in terms of the narrative that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others."[24] The narrative concept of selfhood requires two things: first, that I am the subject of a history that is my own and no one else's, one that has its own peculiar meaning; and second, that I am not only accountable to others, I can also ask others for an account, as I am as much a part of their story as they are of mine. This is the sociological aspect of "inter-textuality": "the narrative of any one's life is part of an interlocking set of narratives." Though we have no apparent, revealed, or consensual *telos*, no final Good to be reached, it is the quest for a conception of the good that,

> will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of the good which will extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of the good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good.[25]

To paraphrase Dio Chrysostom, *a fully comprehended Good is no Good at all.*[26]

IRONY, LITERATURE AND RELIGIOUS TRUTH

Modern aesthetic theory has seen a multitude of opinions as to the place and meaning of art in modern society, running the gamut from the propagandistic misomusy of socialist realism to the social irresponsibility of the *l'art pour l'art* movement. If anything, post-modern aesthetics, under the semiotic-deconstructionist hegemony, has swung back to a conception of the ultimately isolated and complete work-in-itself, freed from author, history and society, and left to the deconstructive talons of the all-powerful critic. Art is perhaps best conceived somewhere in the middle; like religion it is ultimately a mode of expressing otherness, a form of circumspectual pedagogy. Here we can follow Proust over Kierkegaard (who conceived of the *aesthetic* life as a dissolute and disunified one, contrary to the *ethical* life): "The only true voyage of

discovery," the former relates in the waning pages of *Remembrance of Things Past,*

> the only really rejuvenating experience [remaining to our world, is] not to visit strange lands but to *possess other eyes,* to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we can do with (the help of the artist, the writer, the musician).[27]

Art can be pedagogical without being didactic; this is especially true of literature, which unfolds other narratives. The ironic mode of writing, favored by Erasmus and Kierkegaard, as well as by many writers including Austen and Joyce, can be identified by the use of characters who see and say more and other than what they intend to, the purpose being, in some sense, revelatory: the reader may appropriate or dismiss the values and actions of the characters' performances. Literature grew largely out of the humanist movement, who placed great emphasis on creative thought.[28] Erasmus was himself a master of "redescription" in the Rortyan sense; his *Praise of Folly* is a work that, in the author's own words, does not seek the Truth but rather *to speak with ingenuity*, to describe things in novel and possibly enlightening ways. This is the crux: Erasmian Christianity is based upon more than a lofty morality of the secular humanist sort (for then the term Christianity would be superfluous); rather it is based upon a particular mode of faith (what I have been calling *fideism),* as well as a recognition of the power and importance of ameliorative redescription, edification and the narrative concept of human life.

The humanist-fideist perspective, as it evolves out of Erasmus, Lessing, and Kierkegaard, is one that is sympathetic to art and literature, believing in the moral possibilities of both and in the significance of storytelling to the fashioning of the narrative self. A self-conscious fideist would never resort to book burning, keeping in mind the words of the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine – now posted at a concentration camp/museum in Germany – that "once they begin burning books, they end by burning people." In contrast, in December of 1520, Luther effectively and dramatically sealed his breach with Rome by publicly burning the latest papal bull along with copies of canon law and scholastic theology, defiantly proclaiming: "Since they have burned my books, I burn theirs." And, as Heine predicted, it was not long before, at Münster, much more was burned – the radical Anabaptists facing the fate of Savonarola, Thomas More and Giordano Bruno. The more recent pronouncement (and later reaffirmation) of the religious leaders of a certain Middle Eastern nation with regard to not only a book but also the book's author, along with threats to publishers and the firebombing of

bookstores, underscores the danger felt by fundamentalists with regard to subversive literature. In *Don Quixote,* the knight's well-meaning friends burn his library in order to put an end to the madness of his impending quest.[29]

Richard Rorty's "ironist" is also a bibliophile, and a fideist who refuses to make the Kierkegaardian leap of faith: she is rather the sort of person who "faces up to the contingency of her own most central beliefs and desires, someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance."[30] Rejecting theological as well as scientific or metaphysical certainties, Rorty's ironist hopes to *create* solidarity by increasing our (individual and collective) sensitivity to the particular and very specific details of the pain and humiliation of others, best revealed in the narrative of a story, in literature. In the absence of a single meta-vocabulary, we must settle instead for narratives that connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other. Most importantly, the quest for utopia is and must regard itself as an endless process: "an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth."[31] Though we need not go so far as Nietzsche, whose "inverted Platonism" asserts that a life of self-creation can be complete and autonomous, we *can* think of any human life as the always incomplete, and in this sense somewhat comic, quixotic, yet sometimes tragic and heroic, reweaving of a web in which we are continually connecting and confronting other worlds.

Yet Rorty's neo-pragmatist vision of an ideal liberal ironist community is one that is "secular through and through"; one "in which no trace of divinity remain[s] – either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self."[32] He thinks it imperative that the notion of God should go the way of Truth: the process of de-divinization would culminate in "our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meaning of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings."[33] Here Rorty rejects William James in favor of John Dewey as pragmatist muse; his steadfast reliance on Deweyan secularism refuses to acknowledge both the prevalence but the potential latent in conceptions of transcendence and the faith impulse.[34] Like many thinkers of today, Rorty is only able to see religion as an (institutionalized) crutch that enlightened men and women can and should finally discard in order to live by their own authority.

Rorty might well accept a compromise with religion (as does Gellner, and as Rorty himself does with the self-creative yet socially limited impulses of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Foucault), relegating such to the strictly personal level to ensure that one does not "slip into a political

attitude which will lead [one] to think that there is a social goal more important than avoiding cruelty."[35] There are two problems with this conception: first, unlike aesthetic self-creative tendencies, which can perhaps be privatized with little effort, religious impulses are *by nature* interpersonal – i.e., they manifest themselves in human interaction; and second, there is no fundamental or necessary discrepancy between mainstream religious values and the liberal invective against cruelty; in fact, Erasmus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King have shown that just the opposite can be the case.

Erasmus would no doubt agree with the first two principles of Rorty's ideal ironist: 1) she has radical and continuing doubts about her own vocabulary, impressed as she is by the vocabularies taken as final by others, whether encountered in people or in books; and 2) she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve the doubts of others, or vice versa. Yet the third principle is one that fideists would have some difficulty accepting in its entirety (one that does not necessarily result from or correlate with the first two): though a fideist may not think that her vocabulary is "superior" to another's, in the sense of it being closer to a transcendent truth, she will quite probably believe that her own vocabulary *is* in touch with a power greater than her own. There is no such thing as faith in immanence. Yet such does not preclude the awareness of the (possible) contingency of one's vocabulary, and, ultimately of one's own being.

Ironists may employ Occam's razor against the so-called "metaphysicians" who, in ostensibly preaching "common sense,"[36] fail to question their own assumptions. An ironist is, like the fideist, ultimately a *nominalist*: since nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary, our doubts about our own character and culture can be resolved *only* by enlarging our acquaintance; for the fideist this comes about in part through a particular orientation of faith. Literature, with its multiplicity of visions (Proust's "hundred universes") of peace, freedom and humanity, as well as of pain, humiliation and cruelty, offers descriptions of alternative future(s). But literature cannot stand on its own. As George Steiner points out, "[t]he simple yet appalling fact is that we have little solid evidence that literary studies do very much to enrich or stabilize moral perception, that they *humanize*."[37] In the "poetry after Auschwitz?" vein, it would be starry-eyed to posit that aesthetics can, in and of itself, *replace* not only reason but also religion as the basis for morality. Yet, Steiner sees a need for literature, as a realm of non-neutral description that awakens us to greater vision, as it were. Following Kafka, he says, a book must be not a comfort, but rather "an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside is;" altering our personal and communal existence, and reshaping "the landscape of our being."

TRADITION: THE USE OF HISTORY

A recognition of contingency is one thing, and the appreciation of the moral possibilities of art another, but what of *tradition* – what of the trump card offered by sundry fundamentalists as the embodiment of Unity and Truth? What is the fideist to make of the authority embedded in a shared past or in socio-cultural memory? The narrative self is steeped in history (unlike, says MacIntyre the selves of Sartre or Goffman): I am born with a past, and to try to cut myself off from that past in the individualist/subjectivist mode is to deform my present and future relationships with others. The possession of a historical and a social identity coincide. In fideist terms, tradition must neither be contrasted with reason (as in Burke) nor used to justify stagnancy or stability. Tradition, as history, always embodies continuities of conflict; what is required is a *traduttore traditore* – a translation of tradition that is both a frank acknowledgment of "cultural baggage" *and* a attempt to relativize this past through comparison and criticism. As Walter Jens remarks *vis-à-vis* Lessing, these two things do not exclude but rather *presuppose* each other, and *must* if humane behavior is to become the law of the world.[38]

Yet, as Tolstoy observes, history is a realm of disappointment. One gets the feeling, he says, "that history, as it is written by historians, makes claims which it cannot satisfy, because like metaphysical philosophy, it pretends to be something it is not, namely a science capable of arriving at conclusions which are certain."[39] Again, the quest for Certitude is ultimately doomed. History does not and cannot reveal "causes" in the strict sense; it will never reveal the connections between good and evil, between science and morality, and so on. History *can* be an important guide to the future; like art, it reveals, or presents worlds, but that is all; it can neither be disdained as meaningless ("bunk"), frightening ("nightmare"), nor worshipped and sanctified under the exclusionary rubric of tradition, for the true *reality* of history is only what is made of it in the present. In order to keep up with the changing epoch, history must be *sublated.*[40] In another sense, history is a stockpiling of values, since life can be comprehended only in the category of value, "yet these values can only be thought of in reference to an ethically-motivated value-positing subject."[41] Culture is, in some sense, a value-formation; it needs the assumption of a style- and value-producing *Zeitgeist* that brings the values together. But what does this tell us about history, and the relativity of values? Only that the immanence of values, their "in-the-worldness," points away from an a-historical, transcendent, and absolute value-system. If at bottom truth is conceived as *transcendent* then it cannot be equated with a particular historical (or mythical) epoch, but must be eternal, beyond time and chance; if it is *immanent* (which, for fideists truth *is*, unlike faith), then it is *contingent*, in the sense that it must evolve with the

changing vocabularies and styles of an epoch. Truth is, in a sense, both made (in the living quest) and found, gradually, through the living of the life reinforced by hope.[42]

CONCLUSIONS

Every significant transformation of religious ideas has arisen in response to the challenge of changing times; yet, as in art, in religion too every form may not be absolutely appropriate to every age. Religion at these times of transformation must change or die. Fundamentalism professes to reject modernity, but it actually continues modernity in several ways: in the use of modern technology, and in the usurpation of the vocabulary of absolutism. Christian fundamentalism is not simply a backward form of faith, it is in fact a continuation of Lutheran and later, positivistic severity and inflexibility in an age of perceived moral laxity. What is most significant is not the purported "retrieval" of values, but the way, the *style* in which these values are spoken of – a style that ill-befits the new world situation, and indeed the world situation since the Renaissance, when new possibilities were first explored in the West. Fundamentalism is a style of faith that denies possibility, and this is its danger.

As Stout says,

> [i]t is becoming increasingly clear that the real 'philosophical' action is going to occur... not in debates over the logical status of religious ethics or the Kripkean metaphysics of ethical wrongness, but rather in whatever forces, rational or non-rational, incline people toward religious faith or against it in the first place."[43]

As we know, perhaps all too well, "[r]eligions have a way of getting to the parts of the human psyche that secular ideologies no longer reach."[44] Hans Küng foresees an imminent "rebellion against the Kafkaesque world" of late modernity and the opening of a new horizon of meaning in post-modernity, a world in which religion can be more than a solace from the storm, but can have an eminently humanizing, liberating function. *Immanence* – the immanence of fideist truth as conceived in the form of the narrative quest – must be bound up in a humanly liberating way with *transcendence* – a non-rational but not absolute faith in the possibilities of divinity and the transcendent *vis-à-vis* the world of humanity.

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NOTES

[1] John A. Coleman, "Catholic Integralism as a Fundamentalism." In *Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective*, edited by L. Kaplan (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 79.

[2] See Coleman, "Catholic Integralism," p. 92.

[3] "Catholicism and Modernity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 53 (1985), pp. 795-6.

[4] Broch considers Kantian philosophy the belated formulation of Lutheran theology, developed in connection with Platonic and idealistic forms: "Kant's attempt to establish a retrospective Protestant theology did indeed wrestle with the task of transferring the substance of religious Platonism to the new positivistic science, but it was far from seeking to set up a universal theological canon of values on the catholic pattern" See Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers,* tr. M. Tanner (London: Quartet Encounters, 1986), pp. 485, 523.

[5] Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 2.

[6] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory.* London: Duckworth, 1992), p. 34.

[7] It is ultimately up to the individual, as a free and autonomous being capable of choice, to decide on her way of life and what course to follow to perfect or improve herself; yet the underpinnings and implications of contrasting life-views must be presented and explored before this choice can be made, and this is what Kierkegaard sought to portray in *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling,* and *Stages on Life's Way.*

[8] Unamuno continues: "This longing or hunger for divinity begets hope, hope begets faith, and faith and hope beget charity. Of this divine longing is born our sense of beauty, of finality, of goodness." Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, tr. J. E. C. Flitch (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), p. 187.

[9] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 116.

[10] William James recognizes the difficulties in such; with Santayana he saw that even the greatest empiricists are only empiricists upon reflection; when left to their own instincts they "dogmatize like infallible popes" William James, *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy / Human Immortality* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 13; also see George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955).

[11] Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths - Selected Stories & Other Writings*, tr. Donald A. Yates, James E. Irby, Anthony Kerrigan, L. A. Murillo, Dudley Fitts, John M. Fein, Harriet de Onás, and Julian Palley (New Directions, 1962), p. 207.

[12] James, *Will to Believe*, p. 25.

[13] Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, p. 109.

[14] James, *Will to Believe*, p. 90.

[15] "Who is truly Christian?" asks Erasmus – "Not he who is baptized or anointed, or who attends Church. It is rather the man who has embraced Christ

in his innermost feelings of his heart, and who emulates him by his pious deeds" (cited in Richard L. DeMolen, ed. *Essays on the Works of Erasmus* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978], p. 5).

[16] Martin E. Marty, "Introduction" to William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. xxv.

[17] Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You: Christianity Not as a Mystic Religion But as a New Theory of Life*, tr. C. Garnett (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 87.

[18] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life – Selected Writings*. L. Rasmussen, ed. (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1988), p. 18.

[19] Lessing's motto: "Denique nemo est barbarus, qui non inhumanus et crudelis est" (No one is a barbarian except for those who are inhuman and cruel) would stand as well for Rorty's liberal ironist.

[20] "Each life will then embody a story whose shape and form will depend upon what is counted as a harm and danger and upon which his success and failure, progress and its opposite, are understood and evaluated" (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 144).

[21] Carlos Fuentes, *Don Quixote, or the Critique of Reading* (Austin: University of Texas, 1976) , p. xi.

[22] Fuentes, *Don Quixote*, p. xii. As the great maximist LaRochefoucauld put it: "Sometimes in life situations arise which only the half-crazy can get out of."

[23] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 204. *Constancy* is not quite the same as *consistency*, the latter being judged by results, the former by intent. Sometimes a constancy of faith may imply an inconsistency in action, particularly when the contingency of truth is taken into account.

[24] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 212.

[25] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 219.

[26] Dio's words were: "A comprehended God is no God."

[27] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of things Past: Volume III: The Captive* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), pp. 259-60.

[28] Stefan Zweig, *Erasmus and The Right to Heresy*, tr. E. and C. Paul (London: Souvenir Press, 1979), p. 71. The danger, of course, remains, and in fact pragmatism has been criticized throughout its hundred-year history for a certain air of intellectual detachment, despite the rhetoric of engagement and praxis. According to Stout: "Without being supplemented by detailed social and political reflections, Rorty's remarks are apt to have the effect of encouraging everybody to share the rich aesthete's complacency and insensitivity" (Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1988], p. 231).

[29] One of the conflagrants, the curate, is said to be "such a good Christian, and so much a friend of truth, that he would not be guilty of an equivocation for the entire universe" – thus the irony of Cervantes.See Miguel de Cervantes, *The Adventures of Don Quixote de La Mancha*, tr. T. Smollett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), p. , p. 54.

[30] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xv.

[31] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. xvi.

[32] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. 43. He goes on to say that "[a] postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable."

[33] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. 65.

[34] "Religious fermentation is always a symptom of the intellectual vigor of a society; and it is only when they forget that they are hypotheses and put on rationalistic and authoritative pretensions, that our faiths do harm" (James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. xx).

[35] Elsewhere, Rorty admits that, "for a few people (Christians) for whom the search for private perfection coincides with the project of living for others, the two sorts of questions ('What shall I be?', 'What can I become?', 'What have I been?', and 'What sorts of things about what sorts of people do I need to notice?') come together" (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. 143).

[36] Which Rorty defines, in seeming homage to Ambrose Bierce, as "the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated" (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. 74).

[37] George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 156.

[38] Walter Jens, "Lessing's *Nathan the Wise:* Nathan's Attitude Has Been Mine All Along." In *Literature and Religion,* ed. H. Küng and W. Jens, tr. P. Heinegg (New York: Paragon House, 1991), p. 97.

[39] Cited in Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Orion, 1978), p. 14.

[40] As Jeffrey Stout has put it, to find oneself in a cultural tradition is the *beginning,* not the *end* of critical thought. Cornel West proposes a "prophetic pragmatism" which acknowledges the "inescapable and inexpugnable" character of tradition – the "burden and buoyancy" of that which is transmitted from past to present. The present is intelligible only as a commentary upon and response to the past, in which the past is transcended, yet "in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point-of-view." (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 137).

[41] Broch, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 501.

[42] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 146.

[43] Herbert Marcuse made a similar point when he said: "The liberation of man depends neither on God nor on the nonexistence of God. It is not the idea of God which has been an obstacle to human liberation, but the use that has been made of the image of God." (Herbert Marcuse, *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, Vol. 3, ed. Douglas Kellner [New York: Routledge, 2005], p. 116).

[44] Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, p. 175.