

F.F. ; Intro.

Final Lecture

C.B.'s final lecture, resume

The last three or four centuries in our Western society have seriously weakened the hold, certainly for a very great many, of the traditional Judaeo-Christian cosmology (world-view, eschatology, "meaning of life", right on down to what seems to be merely a matter of the psychology of the individual, that is, Erikson's "identity crisis"). All sorts of adjustments in the older and firm cosmology (i.e. book of Genesis) have been made. At one extreme is what I call the religion of the Enlightenment, rationalist and materialist, a pretty complete rejection of the tradition, through various compromises on down to what I suppose is commonest among the educated classes, a kind of carrying water on both shoulders, one Christian, one Enlightened. But one possible adjustment I think is very rare - that is, complete dismissal of any concern with such matters as the "meaning of life."

Both the rationalist and the optimistic strands in pure Enlightenment and in the various compromises strongly influenced by the Enlightenment - the 19th century variants of the doctrine of Progress are central here - both rationalism and optimism have come under severe attack in our 20th century. Even in the U.S., where hangovers from innocent economic interpretation of everything, à la Charles Beard, are still very prevalent, indeed are the common underpinning for the American world-view, the younger generation is clearly anxious and worried.

For the historian of ideas the important fact - for it is a fact - is that most modern efforts to adjust or supplant the old world-view are based on an appeal to history, an appeal neatly

summarized in the title of a book by the Enlightened Australian anthropologist, V. Gordon Childe, "Man Makes Himself." If man has made himself what he now is, the obvious clues - the only clues - to what he might make of himself in the future can be found in the study of the past. Hence the great preoccupation of our time with what I call the literature of "Whither Mankind", or more academically put, the philosophy of history. Even Arnold Toynbee, who would list himself as a Christian, has sought for these clues in history. Central to all these appeals to history, it must be repeated, is the effort to explain the universe and man's place in it - in short to create the theological-metaphysical basis for a religion that would not present the incongruities (basically with the picture the natural sciences give of the universe) that Christianity presents. A good example is the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa oration a few years ago made by the psychologist Henry Murray; Professor Murray, after rejecting entirely the Christian world-view, suggested that what is needed is a new New Testament, put together by a committee of superior Enlightened minds.

I think the historian of ideas, who must certainly concern himself with these attempts to "invent" a new religion, has to conclude that none have been very successful, above all that none have got into the hearts - and heads - of the many the way the higher religions we know about - Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam - have done. Orthodox Marxist Communism is the most widespread of these "historicisms", but I think clearly inadequate as a higher religion. To be personal, I may say that it seems to me likely that out of the present confusion in all

fields from the arts, literature, on to philosophy, there will emerge - must emerge - a world-view, "understanded of the people." But I have no idea what it will be like. As a historian, I do not believe that history alone will supply this new world-view, to be frank, this new religion. History does suggest some negatives. This religion is unlikely to emerge from Academia, or indeed from any intellectual milieu.

Professor Murray's new New Testament is unlikely to be written by men like himself - or Tillich, or the Christian existentialists or Arnold Toynbee, or the devotees of bringing East and West together. Yet I do not wish to conclude on a purely negative note. Human beings and their cultures are tougher than we intellectuals think. Most of you are going to witness that fated year, 1984. I think it will not be much like Orwell's nightmare, will indeed be not altogether unlike 1967.