

FUTURE OF RELIGION: THE PROBLEM OF HUMANISM

By Rudolf J. Siebert

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In 1989 the title of the international course was the "Future of Religion: The Problem of Humanism." The course lasted from April 17-28. The course took place in the Inter-University Center for Post-Graduate Studies in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. It was the 13th international course on the "Future of Religion" in the IUC, since the initiation of the whole project in 1975 by my late wife Margaret and myself and our many friends in Eastern and Western Europe, in North and Latin America and in the Near East.

Scholars from eight different countries and nine different disciplines met in the IUC this year, in order to have discourse with each other on the relationship between secular humanism and religion in East and West, in South and North. Previous courses on the "Future of Religion" had dealt specifically with themes such as "Crisis and Response," "Religion: Source, Product or Negation of Alienation," "Religion towards the Third Millennium: Alternative Solutions, Theory and Praxis," "Modern Scientific and Social Revolutions and the Problem of God," "Communicative Praxis-Communication Community," "Contemporary Crisis," "Theology and Historical Materialism," "Culture, Class and Nation," and "New Movements-Old Institutions." Professor J. Reimer has edited and collected the most outstanding papers of these courses in his book Critical Theory and the Future of Religion: Religious-Marxist Discourse in Yugoslavia, Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990.

This year's discourse partners understood discourse in the humanistic sense as future-oriented remembrance of human suffering--the innocent victims of society and history--with the practical intent to diminish this suffering. They combined the religious, philosophical and scientific discourse form. They defined their discourse further as rooted in the human potentials and evolutionary universals of language and memory aiming at mutual understanding and truth, and in the struggle for recognition aiming at mutual respect and universal solidarity, as based on the ideal speech situation; as situated in a power-free zone, as aiming at an universal communication community, as ideology and mythology critique, as given by objections, as containing innovative speech acts, as being under the law of universalization, as argumentation reaching results to be decided upon on the basis of the best reasons alone.

The discourse partners shared the background conviction that the social theories in the humanistic tradition of Hegel and Marx are at least to some extent able to fill the gap left behind by existentialism. A humanistic theory of society can at least provide a perspective and offer hypotheses, hopes and starting points for the conquest of the

unhappiness and misery of the individual, which are generated by the unjust structures of social life in the highly complex systems of human condition and action systems, including culture, society, personality, and behavioral organism. However, all discourse partners were also in agreement that even the most humanistic social theory can do nothing to overcome the chronicle fundamental negativities of human existence, such as guilt, abandonment, loneliness, meaninglessness and fear of sickness, aging and death. No humanistic theory of society can awaken the dead. No social theory can offer ultimate consolation. No theory of society has any bearing on the individual's need for redemption.

Some resource persons and participants in our discourse pointed out that Marxist-humanist hopes are, of course, directed towards a collective project: the realm of freedom on the basis of the realm of necessity. Such humanist hopes hold out to the modern individual the prospect that forms of life with greater solidarity will be able to eradicate, or at least to diminish, that element of meaninglessness, abandonment, guilt, loneliness and fear of sickness, old age and death, for which present social repression and exploitation bear the responsibility, by pointing in theory and in praxis toward alternative Future III--a reconciled society, rather than towards Future I, the totally administered society, or Future II--the thermonuclear holocaust.

However, it was clear to all discourse partners that this humanistic prospect even at its best can only be a poor substitute for the ultimate consolation which was once promised by the great world religions: e.g. the individual's salvation, eternal happiness, the resurrection of the flesh. Some resource persons even stated, that a consciousness of the radical absence of consolation--or of Transcendence or of God is fostered in the first place by theories with secular-humanist intent, which inform us about the stages of social evolution, more humane forms of social organization and the revolutionary praxis, i.e. strategies and tactics, through which new and better social formations can be brought into existence. In so doing these secular-humanist theories seem even to repudiate religious notions of a Rescuing Reality, as asserted communicatively in almost all great world religions, of Transcendence, God, redemption, resurrection, eternal happiness, ultimate reconciliation and liberation.

In discourse, resource persons and participants asked the core question of all great religious, philosophical and aesthetical world views--the theodicy question, the question of evil, of pain and suffering, of meaning as negation of contingencies--in its most radical modern form: how can there be universal solidarity, as e.g. Marxist humanism promises it with the innocent victims of merciless scientific-technological historical progress, when past crimes, the sufferings, the humiliations and the misery of past generations appear irreversible to the secular-humanist perspective, and beyond redress. How can any society of the future be called just, when its genesis is rooted in the sweat, blood and despair of innumerable innocent victims whose hopes and aspirations can never be realized, since history is closed once and for all and since what society has done to the innocent victims can never be undone?

Some discourse partners pointed to W. Benjamin's political theology, in which he combines Judeo-Christian mysticism with historical materialism. Benjamin groping for a response to the horror and terror in nature and particularly in society and history, developed the rather demanding idea of an anamnestic solidarity with the innocent victims of society and history, which could bring about atonement through the power of remembrance. Of course, Benjamin knew very well that ultimate reconciliation can not be the result of the power of remembrance alone: only the Messiah can connect the innocent victims of the past with God's Kingdom of reconciliation and liberation in the future. Benjamin's political theology could make Marxist humanism immune against metaphysical objections. In discourse we discovered in Benjamin's political theology the outlines of a way of thinking which attempts a serious answer to the all pervasive theodicy question: an answer supported by mystical religion as well as by secular humanism.

Professor Srdjan Vrcan of Split, Yugoslavia, delivered the most outstanding paper in this year's international discourse: "Religion and the Spiritual Situation of Our Age." In his empirical-sociological paper, stimulated by J. Habermas, Vrcan discussed several strategies which religious groups and organizations employ in the present world historical situation, in order to deal more adequately with the contemporary crisis of modernity as well as of traditional religion: with the phenomenon of post-modernity, post-enlightenment, post-history, post-marxism, post-Christianity, shortly the whole "postism" which is usually emphasized less by philosophers of action, than by neo-conservatives and philosophers of departure from modernity or de-constructionists. Vrcan identified the following general religious strategies: the New Religious Consciousness; fundamentalism and integralism: the New Christian Right; liberal theology; and the Religion of the Citizens. Concentrating on Roman Catholicism in particular, Vrcan described the following specifically Catholic counter-crisis strategies: nationalist Polish Catholicism; the Catholic Concentration: Catholic movements against the Left, as e.g. Opus Dei, Communion and Liberation, Knights of Malta, Legatus, Word of God, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, Catholic Citizens, Movement for the Fundamental Values of Modern Liberal State, and Liberation Theology. It is more than all other strategies concerned not only with solidarity, but with the autonomy of the individual as well. For his analysis of the specifically Catholic strategies to deal with the crisis of modernity as well as of the Church, Vrcan used Catholic neo-conservative sources, as e.g. Cardinal P. Poupard, as well as Catholic dissidents, as e.g. P. Ladriere, and finally also Catholic sources, which try to mediate between the restorative neo-conservative center of the Roman Catholic Church and the critical progressive periphery, as e.g. P.M Zulehner.

In a concluding presentation, Professor R.J. Siebert, summed up the result of all the 20 papers given in the 13th international course on the "Future of Religion: The Problem of Humanism." The discourse resulted in a notion of humanism in which a critical Judeo-Christian monotheism is connected with the most radical enlightenment, understood as freeing people from their fears and making them into masters of their fate. Most resource persons and participants of this year's discourse came to agree with J. Habermas's universal pragmatic theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, that only an unreified Transcendence--the Theon Agnoton of the negative theology--can make possible

the liberation of the subject from the pressures coming from his or her external natural, social or cultural world as well as from the compulsions arising from his or her own inner world: and thus the realization of the individual's sovereignty as well as the solidarity between the one and the other. Only such a non-objectivating monotheism can make possible a radical humanistic enlightenment and emancipation. There is no true human sovereignty or solidarity in the humanistic or the religious sense without such non-reified Transcendence: the totally Other than the prevailing cruel natural and social structures of facts and extant laws governing the processes of nature and history: the God beyond the cruel God; the God of the "Sermon on the Mount," who does not resist evil with evil. Without such Transcendence there is only a new paganism in civil and socialist society and the consequent rise of new fears and a new natural, social and psychic dependance: the end not only of religion, but of enlightenment as well, the end of autonomy as well as of solidarity.