

## TO THE TANNER LECTURE DISCUSSANTS

I am grateful for your willingness to discuss these lectures. A word of explanation.

I avoid writing out lectures before I give them. I prefer to think them out before, and to write them out afterward, in the hope of keeping something of what belongs to speaking rather than to writing. The Tanner Lectures people nevertheless asked me to provide notes on your account.

Here they go, typos and all, in the form of a Word file for each of the two lectures. You will see that the notes become more detailed as they go along, and closer to a full script. Not everything may fit into the space of two fifty-minute talks. Some of the material now assigned to the second talk may end up reassigned to the first one.

The line of the argument should nevertheless be clear enough. My personal email address is: [unger@law.harvard.edu](mailto:unger@law.harvard.edu)

Many thanks,  
Roberto Mangabeira Unger

## THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

### Introduction

1. Is everything alright? The most fundamental form of progress in the history of religion is the progressive detachment of our religious beliefs from the attempt to console us for the two basic reasons why everything will never be alright.

a. Our mortality, belying the fecundity of our experience. The shadow our mortality casts over all our connections and engagements.  
b. Our groundlessness: our inability to look into the beginning and end of time and to understand the whole of reality and therefore as well our place within it. We cannot get to the bottom of things; the bottom is bottomless.

c. The asymmetry in the relation between the significance of groundlessness and the significance of mortality. If we were undying, our groundlessness could be more readily dismissed; there might always be time to discover the meaning of life.

On the other hand, if we were able to place our lives in the context of comprehensive insight into the world, such understanding might or might nor reconcile us to our mortality. It would depend on its content. The permanent temptation to presume to such an understanding and indeed to an understanding that consoles rather than to one that disturbs. A simple criterion of progress in the religious consciousness of humanity is success is resisting this urge.

2. The plan of these two lectures.

a. The first lecture, The Future of Religion, will develop the following propositions.

1. There are three main orientations in the history of religion. One of them displays unrivalled power, inspiring the political and spiritual revolutions that have set the world on fire; the others now react and contain. This third orientation has roots and expressions in the near-Eastern salvation religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and in the secular ideologies of emancipation that these religions helped inspire.

2. The advance of the religious consciousness of humanity now depends on a deepening of the distinctive content of this third orientation. To be faithful to what made this orientation persuasive and powerful in the first place, we must radicalize it against both established institutions and dominant beliefs. Such a radicalization would in turn change our view of the substance of what we would be radicalizing: the content of the message. It would amount to a revolution in religion as well as in society and in culture, although not one that is likely to take a form that fits easily with our inherited picture of spiritual and practical revolution.

3. The radicalization can take place with or without reliance on belief in a narrative of divine intervention in history. The difference between these two paths matters. Nevertheless, the profane and the sacred forms of this transformed religion are closer to each other than either of them is to much of conventional organized religion and to much of the familiar secular humanism

The second lecture, The Religion of the Future, examines the content of the transformed religion, in its secular register.

My central theme throughout is the need and the potential for a revolution in our religious beliefs.

## Two obstacles to thinking about religion

1. To advance in such a direction, we need to overcome two obstacles to thinking about religion.

2. The first obstacle to overcome is the taboo against the religious criticism of religion. The origins of this taboo lie in the privatization of religion and the overcoming of the religious wars of the early modern period.

Why this taboo is unacceptable on political and constitutional grounds: the invidious and sectarian character of the attempt to wall religion off from politics and public debate (with help from the classical-liberal distinction between the right and the good).

Why this taboo is unacceptable on religious grounds: the refusal to leave the public world alone as a corollary of the dialectic between transcendence and immanence in the tradition of religious belief that I take as a starting point for the exercise in radicalization.

3. The second obstacle to overcome is the sentimental attitude to religion. The false supposition that, with respect to claims about God and about God's work in history, there is some middle position between believing in their (literal) truth and not believing in their (literal) truth. The slide from Feuerbach to Bultmann and beyond as an expression of a will to believe combined with a monumental dose of self-deception.

There is no such middle position. A common intellectual confusion allows us to pretend that there is one. It is one thing to suppose, in the tradition of Christian theology for example, that the narrative of transactions between God and humanity deepens (by analogy) truths already manifest to us in our relations with one another. It is another thing to turn the analogical imagination into a pretext for equivocation about the truth or falsehood of our religious beliefs.

The sentimental attitude to religion weakens the power religion to undermine us and our societies, and makes it easy for us to turn its scandalous provocations into a play with words. One of these sentimentalists about religion tells us that today we have belief without belonging. We are more likely to entertain pretend belief as a ticket to belonging.

In practice, the sentimental attitude to religion serves an institutionally conservative social democracy. It is window dressing: a metaphysical upgrade of the same moral prejudices habitually embraced by the prevailing secular humanism.

### Three directions in the religious history of humanity

1. Overcoming the world. Most fully exemplified in early Buddhism and, within the West, in the philosophy of Schopenhauer.
  - a. Its metaphysical structure: denial or demotion of the phenomenal world and of its manifest distinctions, including the real individual.
  - b. Its moral horizon: benevolence toward others (on the basis of shared participation in the underlying, unified reality) and indifference to suffering and change. It seeks serenity, to be achieved through invulnerability.
  - c. The permanent seductive power of this view as a response to mortality and groundlessness as well as to our disappointments in failed or flawed projects of social transformation and self-transformation. Its enemy are the claims of life.
2. Humanizing the world. Most fully expressed in Confucianism as well as in the contemporary secular humanism.
  - a. Its metaphysical structure: the creation of meaning in a meaningless world. The human domain exists at the edge of a precipice of meaninglessness. It is always at risk of being undone by the sacrifice of solidarity to selfishness and self-regard. The self-foundation of the human world.
  - b. Its moral horizon: the spiritualization of our power-driven and interest-dominated social relations. The core role played in the program of humanization by our role-based claims on one another. The failure of the dominant traditions of modern moral philosophy to do justice to the central place of role-based thinking in our living morality.
  - c. The thrust of the conventional contemporary secular humanism in line with this tradition: the effort to soften the cruelties of a world we despair of reimagining and of remaking.
3. Struggling with the world. The core element in the near-Eastern salvation religions -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam -- as

well as in the secular ideologies of emancipation, liberalism and socialism chief among them.

a. Its metaphysical structure. The assertion of the singularity of the one real world, of the reality of time, and of the depth of individuality. The vindication of the distinct structure of the manifold and manifest world. In the history of Christianity, the containment or subversion of these views by the dominant premises of speculative philosophy and by the most influential interpretations of modern science.

b. Its moral horizon. Two ideas and impulses are paramount. Both stand in stark opposition to views that have prevailed in the world history of philosophy and religion.

1. The organizing principle of the moral life is love rather than altruism. The central problem is not to master self-interest for the sake of the enhancement of solidarity. It is imagine and to accept the other person. Love given from above and at a distance is lower, not higher, than love among equals. The price of giving or receiving the higher form of love is the acceptance of vulnerability: to cast down our shields. Invulnerability is the solution, not the problem.

2. We are the infinite caught, or embodied, in the finite. Our social and cultural worlds make us who we are. There is nevertheless always more in us, individually and collectively, than there is in them. We must keep the last word for ourselves. We cannot advance our most powerful ideals and interests without rebelling, from time to time, against these collective contexts of our activity. We must not, however, be content periodically to smash them. We must do more: we must create social and cultural worlds in which we can engage, wholeheartedly, without surrendering, as a condition of our engagement, our capacity to resist and to transcend.

3. What is the relation, in this tradition, between the love idea and the infinity idea? In love, we can most fully recognize and accept one-another as the context-shaped but context-transcending originals we all know ourselves to be. However, we are not yet such individuals fully. We must make ourselves into them by ceaseless projects of transformation and self-transformation. History is, within this tradition, the decisive stage, rather than the meaningless backdrop, of our rise to a larger share in the attributes of divinity.

4. It is this third tradition -- struggling with the world -- that has in fact won the allegiance of much of humanity, over the last two centuries, either directly or in the form of the secular ideologies of emancipation that it has helped create.

Two ways of understanding why a revolution in the religious consciousness of humanity, and in particular in Christianity, is now both necessary and possible

1. The central problem today is different from the problem, or from the complex problems, to which the great world religions (including the three religious orientations I have enumerated), formed in the period from the middle of the first millennium B.C to the middle of the first millennium A.D., gave a response.

These religions affirmed that the divisions within humanity -- of caste, class, gender, race, culture, and statehood -- are all shallow. The prophets of these religions spoke to the unity of mankind. And, in so doing, they also rejected the authority of the virile-heroic ideal -- the ethos of the proud ruler and the vengeful warrior -- that had exercised so large an influence over the great states and civilizations of world history.

One idea common to the teachings of Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus is that we are, deeply and truly, one in the world. Another idea is that we should not aspire to feel or to live as adolescent boys, who are unable to forgive being disrespected.

The warring and ruling caste was the supreme enforcer and beneficiary of the social and cultural order that divided humanity and that claimed divine authority for its divisions. The rebellion against its ethic was inseparable from the tearing down of those walls. Humanity -- all of it -- would be lifted up and recognize in world-renouncing benevolence, in world-humanizing solidarity, or in world-transforming love and resistance a force higher than honor and a good greater than worldly triumph.

We cannot say that this teaching has been implemented to any great degree in the world. We can say, however, that it enjoys unrivalled authority in the eyes of mankind.

As it has risen to this position of authority, another, deeper problem has become apparent. This problem draws its force from the

forms of consciousness associated with the effects upon the consciousness of humanity of the beliefs I have described under the label "struggling with the world."

This difficulty is the almost universal experience of belittlement from which we almost all suffer, for most of our lives, even when not for all of them. The religions and ideologies associated with the struggling-with-the-world orientation affirm our participation in the qualities they attribute to God. Our ordinary experience in contemporary societies, however, is one of contingency and constraint. We live our lives in a half-awake state. Our trajectory is shaped, all too obviously, by accident or luck. We find ourselves almost always forced to choose among limited and limiting social roles, each of them equipped with its built-in script. The force exerted upon us by institutional and conceptual presuppositions we fail to control and barely understand, becomes fully manifest to us only under the pressure of crisis.

If we cannot overcome the world by escaping it, how can we divinize humanity, in thought and in action, without denying either death or groundlessness? How can we transform the world -- and ourselves -- so that we can live as the infinity-caught-in-the-finite that we know ourselves to be? And how should we live, without betraying ourselves or acquiescing in our enforced belittlement, in this untransformed world?

2. The other way of stating the problem follows immediately from this one. To understand it, consider it from the standpoint of the relation of Christianity to the established society as well as to the ideas that prevail in the high culture.

The established religion has, for the most part, made peace with the existing order in at least three crucial respects: (a) the acceptance of the class structure of society; (b) the acceptance of money transfers as an adequate basis of solidarity outside the family; and (c) the acceptance of political, economic, and social institutions as well as of cultural practices that continue to make change depend on crisis. This third aspect of acquiescence in the established order may seem less clearly connected than the other two to the ideas and attitudes of the religion, but it overshadows the other two. The insulation of institutional arrangements against challenge and change

is one of the conditions for the reproduction of the class structure of society as well as for the habitual circumscription of solidarity to family life. It is also increases, by design, the difficulty of engaging in a social and cultural world and challenging it at the same time. In this way, it diminishes us; it shrinks our part in the attributes of divinity.

At the same time, the established religion continues to make peace with some of the ideas that exercise greatest influence in the high culture. Among these ideas, two hold an especially prominent place in our ideas, including the ideas that continue to prevail in natural science.

The first of these ideas is the demotion of the singularity of the one real world (in opposition to the idea of many possible worlds). With this demotion, there goes an idea of the possible – of each possible state of affairs -- as a specter, ready and waiting to come on to the stage of reality. On the view implicit in the struggling-with-the-world orientation, there is only one world. Its dramatic, irreversible history is the decisive setting of human life.. The real possible is the adjacent possible: where, within this history, of nature and of humanity, we can get to from where we are now.

The second of these ideas amounts to an incomplete radicalization of the idea of the reality of time. An example is the notion of an immutable framework of natural laws. (The physics of the twentieth century reaffirmed this notion even when it overthrew the conception of an invariant space-time setting for natural phenomena). The disentanglement of Christianity from Greek philosophy remains unfinished.

The global popular romantic culture is, together with what is left of the nineteenth and twentieth century ideologies of liberation (liberalism and socialism in particular), the chief voice of the struggle-with-the-world orientation in our time. But is the established religion its friend or its enemy?

3. The religion of the future would rebel against these constraints. It would radicalize against them the beliefs and attitudes that have driven the struggle with the world. In so doing, it would respond to the problem of belittlement, the diminishment of our share in the attributes of divinity. Its commanding aim would be the enhancement of life, not of power, and of power only insofar as power serves life.

Life for everyone, as a condition of life for everyone. It would amount to a revolution in the religious history of humanity. The program of this revolution is the subject of the next lecture.