

# RELIGION AND THE MAKING OF SOCIETY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that Unger has identified an insight basic to modern society and to modern social and political theory: society is an artifact. I fully endorse his attempt to consistently work out the implications of that basic insight against the constant temptation of human beings to give unconditional authority to conditional forms, thus concealing from themselves the process of imagining and making society and its institutions. Unger is right in supposing that viewing society as an artifact combines the liberal/leftist aim of freeing society from structures of dependence and domination with the modernist goal of rescuing subjectivity and intersubjectivity from rigid roles. I find no difficulty, then, in responding favorably to Unger's work as a major contribution to our thinking about society. The clarification of our freedom to reimagine and remake the social worlds which we have constructed and in which we live is undoubtedly the way forward from our present situation.

At the same time, coming to the question of society from the study of religion and the philosophy of history, I confront a series of difficulties and objections in embracing the thesis that society is an artifact. In the pages that follow, I will sketch out some of these problems.

Although religion has sometimes fueled revolution, it has historically more often been a factor of social integration. It has secured the social order by declaring that order sacred (or at least of sacred origin), thus giving it what Unger would label a false necessity and a mistaken unconditionality. It is true that, in the Christian West, the frequent conflict of church and state has forged a distinction between the sacred and the secular. Nevertheless, because the Church with its sacred institutions often legitimized and solidified the state and other parts of the social fabric, society was frequently conceived as an affair of divine ordinance rather than a product of human freedom. Unger's argument, then, poses a problem for religion: how can one free social forms from an unnecessary rigidity without denying religion a role in the making of society? Is there no relationship between the authority of the social world and the authority of ultimate reality? Must every attempt to establish a relationship be an illegitimate conferring of unconditional authority upon conditional forms?

I assume that Unger does not want to deny validity to all forms of religious faith. But any religious faith implies privileged beliefs. As a complex of symbols and as a cultural institution, religion claims in some form to provide answers to questions of ultimate meaning, questions about the nature and destiny of human beings. And religion, unlike comprehensive ideologies (such as Marxism), seeks its answers in a transcendent realm, in an appeal to some form of superhuman power. Inevitably, therefore, a religious person will hold that human life—and human society—are founded upon transempirical truths. To the religious, certain principles of faith and morality stand over the whole order of social life, whatever its particular form. All this implies constraints upon human freedom to imagine and make society. Religion sets criteria for judging what human beings do with their social life. It insists that not everything human beings imagine or make is good and worthwhile. It questions whether we are right to regard as valueless everything we have not made ourselves.

That last sentence echoes the comment of Schumacher on the modern economic order. In criticizing the modern tendency to dissipate unrenewable natural resources and to treat irreplaceable capital as though it were income, Schumacher writes: “[W]e are estranged from reality and inclined to treat as valueless everything that we have not made ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> His comment illustrates that viewing society as an artifact might be troublesome not only to the religious, but to any perspective that holds society to be more than the sum of its current members.

The Unger thesis, if unqualified, overlooks the ambiguity of modernity. The critique of modernity has been an increasing preoccupation of philosophers and social theorists, especially since the rise of critical theory and the work of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School. Reason, once hailed as an instrument of liberation, has become (it is argued) a means of entrapping us in an iron cage of unfreedom, pushing us towards a totally administered, bureaucratized society. The theoretical critique of modernity has become linked with a variety of causes promoted by social activists. There is profound dissatisfaction, both theoretical and practical, with the modern project and its presuppositions. A consistent argument that society is an artifact must come to terms with the reaction against modernity on the Right (which seeks a return to authority and tradition), and on the Left (which seeks anarchism and quietism).

To contend that society is an artifact would seem to betray an uncritical acceptance of modernity. To call society an “artifact” is to view the formation of society as a *poiesis* (a making) demanding *techne* (a skill), rather than as a *praxis* requiring *arete* (virtue) as well as skill. Such a view adopts one of the presuppositions of modernity—that all human

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<sup>1</sup> E.F. SCHUMACHER, *SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL: ECONOMICS AS IF PEOPLE MATTERED* 15 (1975).

action can be described as a series of techniques, which can be judged by an instrumental rationality in terms of usefulness or success. Human action understood in that way results in a product, but that product may not have been freely chosen by the maker and it may not remain under the maker's control. It may be used for ends the maker does not want or approve.

In contrast, the view that human action is *praxis* emphasizes doing, not making. The doing is intrinsically formed by ends freely chosen by the agent. What results may be virtuous or vicious conduct, with morally good or morally evil consequences for social interaction and the cumulative social situation. As individuals choose and follow norms, they are engaged in a process of communication with others that leads to agreements about the institutionalization of norms in the social order.

We can agree that society is the result of free human action. It is not a structure given from above by a superhuman power nor determined from below by natural necessity. The key issue is how we conceive that human agency in the formation of society. Is it as a *making*, requiring only technical skill and to be judged in terms of efficiency or success? Or is it a matter of *doing* (and hence ultimately of *being*), to be judged by norms embodied and pursued in the conduct that intrinsically constitutes social relationships?

These are the principal difficulties I perceive between religion and the Unger thesis—even assuming a fundamental agreement with and sympathy for the thrust of Unger's work. In the remainder of this essay, I will try to explain how, despite a critical attitude towards modernity and an acceptance of the permanent validity of religious faith, I still see society as a conditional result of human freedom.

## II. RELIGION AND THE PROJECT OF MODERNITY

What is modernity? There have been a variety of answers to that question, though the answers converge in a way that suggests an underlying unity of conception.

Some identify modernity with autonomous self-consciousness. According to this conception, those who are modern have appropriated their own inner freedom, so that they are fundamentally independent of truth-claims, traditions, laws, or norms that cannot be recognized as originating in the inner dynamism of their own consciousness. Modernity's immanence refuses submission to anything that attempts to impose itself upon human consciousness from without in the name of knowledge or of value. Hence for moderns, knowledge must be immanently generated or at least subject to intersubjective verification, not making a purely external claim in the name of tradition or of revelation from on high. As for morality, moderns are self-legislating persons, following moral norms that they themselves have created in a process of reaching agreement with others concerning common needs, interests, and values. The project

of modernity, not yet completed, is to release human autonomy from constraints that are in fact self-imposed, but have taken on an illusory force of nature-like necessity.

For other thinkers, modernity chiefly implies a contrast with the culture of traditional societies. From this standpoint, the characteristic feature of modernity is differentiation. Traditional cultures are compact. They form undifferentiated totalities. Within them no clear distinction is made among kinds of value or types of meaning. Modern culture is differentiated because it separates value and meaning. In particular, the cognitive is clearly distinguished from the normative and subjective. Although not all knowledge is scientific, that which is cognitive is often defined as that which can be objectively verified as true. In other words, modernity implies the transition from *mythos* to *logos*, because myth mixes together knowledge, norms, and subjective expression.

Another understanding of modernity is to see it as a process of rationalization—the gradual rise of reason in history. This was Max Weber's approach. However, Weber had a narrow conception of reason and of rationalization. He identified rationality with *Zweckrationalität*, the instrumental rationality of technique and calculation, of organization and administration. For Weber, reason could not determine the norms by which we guide our lives; it could not lead us to higher values. Thus, reason did not, in Weber's view, lead to universal human freedom. Rather, it led to what he called the "iron cage" of bureaucratic rationality from which there was no escape. This problem can be called "the pathology of modernity": rationality stifling rather than expanding freedom, combined with a relativism that denies any rational foundation for moral and spiritual norms and values. Is this the fruit of reason?

Jürgen Habermas argues that the pathology of modernity is not due to rationalization as such, but to the one-sided way in which it has thus far developed.<sup>2</sup> There has been a failure to realize in social institutions all the different dimensions of reason. Habermas distinguishes two different types of action: purposive-rational action and communicative action. Each type of action requires a distinct process of rationalization. Weber's rationalization (the growth of *Zweckrationalität*) corresponds with purposive-rational actions. The rationalization of communicative action—neglected by Weber—is radically different. It means overcoming the forces that systematically distort human communication, hinder social interaction, and produce structures of domination.

Of course, Habermas' critique of Weber and the alternative interpretation of rationality he offers do not alter the fact that modern society is increasingly dominated by instrumental, calculative, bureaucratic ration-

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<sup>2</sup> This is the thesis of his recent major work, J. HABERMAS, *THEORIE DES KOMMUNIKATIVEN HANDELNS* (1981). Volume I of this two volume work has been translated as *THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION I: REASON AND THE RATIONALIZATION OF SOCIETY* (1984).

ality. It is not therefore surprising that some thinkers see a profound incompatibility between religion and modernity. Robert Bellah, the sociologist and religionist, is one of those who finds an incompatibility between modernity and religion. Following Schumacher, he believes that the ideology of the modern West is subsumed under four general concepts: positivism, relativism, reductionism, and evolution.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, if modernity is correctly defined by those “isms,” it is indeed incompatible with religion. But it is possible to show that each of those concepts mirrors only a distorted facet of modernity, which, when seen more clearly, is free from the pathology of modernity and compatible with religion.

*Positivism*, as normally understood, is the view that valid knowledge must be derived from scientific methods. Adherence to this view has produced disastrous consequences. It has led many to deny that human value judgments can have any objectivity, thus implying that our choices of values are purely arbitrary decisions based on subjective emotions. It wrongly excludes the form of knowledge found in the historical-hermeneutic disciplines, where access to the object studied could be attained only through the understanding of meaning (that is, these disciplines can only derive knowledge from the interpretation of texts, taking into account the context and prior judgments of both the authors and the interpreter himself). Positivism has also excluded from knowledge the type of critical reflection that uncovers hidden forms of domination and repression (a potent emancipating knowledge).

However, despite the one-sidedness of positivism, it contains an important insight that, in undistorted form, is compatible with a more benign view of modernity. That insight is the differentiation that has marked off the cognitive realm of meaning from the normative and the expressive cultural realms. Cognition or knowledge is the discovery of what can be verified objectively. It differs from the normative, which consists of meanings not discovered but created by human beings. However, norms are not created out of nothing. They are formed out of the needs, interests, and wants of actual human beings. The normative thus presupposes and builds upon the factual truths about human beings established in the cognitive sphere of culture; but the normative should be distinguished from the cognitive. Human beings come together in society, creating norms and embodying them in institutions through a process of social interaction.

Unger rejects positivist social science on grounds of its narrowness. It limits itself to seeking narrowly framed explanations for narrowly described phenomena, and gives up the search for comprehensive social or historical laws. That critique may be well founded. Nevertheless, as soon as one clearly distinguishes the cognitive from the normative and

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<sup>3</sup> Bellah, *Faith Communities Challenge—and Are Challenged by—the Changing World Order*, in *WORLD FAITHS AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER: A MUSLIM-JEWISH-CHRISTIAN SEARCH BEGINS* 148-68 (J. Gremillion & W. Ryan eds. 1977).

expressive, one has to recognize that human knowledge is limited and fragmentary, changing and relative. Comprehensive explanations remain largely hypothetical. To say this implies that I am inclined to opt for ultra-theory rather than for super-theory.<sup>4</sup> But the point I want to stress is that positivism, though admittedly in a distorted and exaggerated way, has rightly insisted that knowledge requires the strict observance of criteria to be valid, and thus must be clearly distinguished from the free creation of norms and the expression of subjective attitudes and feelings.

This qualified acceptance of positivism has inescapable application to religion. Religion, as embodied in religious traditions and in the practices of religious communities, includes a large measure of normative expression and does not always claim absolute truth. Religious beliefs that are authoritatively asserted as dogma are primarily community rules and only indirectly make propositional truth-claims. However, insofar as they do claim to embody valid knowledge, religious beliefs are subject to the relativity, mutability, and cultural limitations of all human knowledge. A large part of the struggle between religion and modernity has stemmed from the reluctance of organized religion to recognize this fact. Overcoming the distortions of positivism should allow the religious to acknowledge the measure of truth in the resistance of positivists to religion's claim to a higher knowledge. It should also allow human creativity to imagine and make society free of the false necessity imposed upon social institutions and practices by religion's excessive claims to higher knowledge.

The second of Bellah's "isms" is *relativism*. Relativism views reason as a tool for self-preservation and self-interest. Reason is merely a technical instrument for ordering the basically irrational components of human life into systems of manipulation and control. Such systems necessarily have only a relative truth, determined by their usefulness in dominating a particular situation. The diversity of situations gives rise to a diversity of formal systems for their control, each relatively true.

Here again I want to distinguish the valid insight from its distortion. Pluralism captures the positive elements of relativism. The liberal opts for pluralism. Conservatives tend to oppose pluralism. They insist that there is only one valid account of reality. Truth for them is absolute and exclusive, and they denounce liberals as relativists. It is true that liberals have often made only unsatisfactory attempts to conceive and express the goal of pluralism. Pluralism may very easily slip over into relativism. But in a deeper sense, pluralism goes back to a different concept of reason. Reason is understood as an unrestricted openness to reality. Reason is not a mere instrument of calculation, but a way of participating in reality, and ultimately in the Infinite, the Transcendent. But reason re-

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<sup>4</sup> For Unger's account of the difference between super-theory and ultra-theory, see SOCIAL THEORY at 165-69.

mains finite, a limited participation in the Unlimited. Pluralism in this context is the response of finite intelligence to a reality so rich that it constantly escapes existing categories and calls for the convergence and complementarity of various cultures and modes of experience. Pluralism is the counterpart of finitude. Where pluralism is denied, finitude is forgotten, and faith is corrupted into an idolatrous absolutizing of one of its particular expressions.

From the standpoint of religion, the insistence upon society as an artifact and the rejection of an alleged necessity that would exclude our freedom to remake the institutional order of society is the overcoming of idolatry and superstition. At the same time, one can only regret the use of the concept of "artifact," which is redolent of a calculative or purely formal rationality.

Our third "ism" is *reductionism*, which is defined by Bellah as the belief that all higher manifestations of life are nothing but disguised expressions of class interests, libidinal energies or other lower determinants. Reductionism in that pejorative sense makes of analysis a sort of pathology. Unger's work is the very opposite of reductionistic, because his analysis (particularly his distinction between routine and framework) specifically seeks to counter lower-level determinants and to release human imagination and freedom in the transformation of society. We are not completely governed by the established imaginative and institutional contexts of our societies, says Unger; nor are these contexts entirely determined by general laws (hence Unger's rejection of the deep-structure social theory of Marx). Unger's analysis will tend to quiet religious fears of reductionism. But is the religious claim that man is not the highest authority compatible with such a radical interpretation of social freedom?

Bellah's fourth and last constituent of modern ideology is *evolution*. But evolution, as applied to social phenomena and history, can be interpreted in two fundamentally different ways. Bellah and Schumacher view evolution as a natural and automatic process, determined by such biological factors as competition and the survival of the fittest. This implicitly denies the human ability to revise not only the routine, but also the context of human action. It is incompatible with the anti-naturalistic social theory of Unger. It is also incompatible with religious hope.

But there is a second way of understanding social evolution, which is to see it as the effect of human rationality in history. Reason follows an orderly (or "logical" in the wider sense of that term) sequence in the answering of questions and the solution of problems. The answering of one question opens up a new question; the solving of one problem makes it possible to discern the solution to another related problem. There is nothing automatic about the process. People can ignore, forget, or suppress answers to age-old problems. There can be regress as well as progress in human history. Nevertheless, insofar as rationality governs

human action, there is a development or evolution in human knowledge and practice. The evolution is more marked in the sphere of science and technique where moral values are not directly a factor. But even in the sphere of ethics, some development is discernible.

The modern ideology of evolution has a complex relationship to traditional religious belief. It reinforces the Western religious view that history is linear, but clashes with the Eastern conception of cyclical history. It shares with religion a hope in eventual human perfection, but secularizes that hope, denying its transcendent source. In its secular form, it often swings from hope to despair, producing dystopias as well as utopias.

Is, then, modernity compatible or incompatible with religion? The answer is bound to be qualified. Modernity designates a fundamental shift in human culture, which can be roughly circumscribed with key words—freedom, science, rationalization, differentiation. In contrast, traditional culture is tied to such words as authority, perennial truth, reason, compactness. That shift, I contend, has taken place in a one-sided fashion, producing distortion. In their distorted form, represented by positivism, relativism, and a purely calculative rationality, the insights of modernity are incompatible with religious faith. In their authentic form they are not, though their acceptance demands a transformation in the conventional understanding of religion. I now examine that transformation in its relation to the making and the reform of society.

### III. OBEDIENCE OR CONSENSUS?

Upon what does the social and political life of human beings rest? What is the foundation of human society? There are undeniably pre-rational factors: blood-relationship; a particular natural environment; the pressure of basic needs for food, shelter, and protection; the continuance of common interests. However, if we are to distinguish human society from the horde, we must acknowledge the intervention of human rational intelligence in articulating common needs and interests, and in further developing and institutionalizing the manifold instances of social interaction. Society thus becomes a project of human intelligence, a work of human reason. We can therefore ask: What is the scope of human creativity in the making of society? What is the rational foundation, the foundation within human reason, upon which society is built?

Society as the product and expression of human rationality can rest upon the empirical sciences, which produce not ultimate truths, but only probable findings. Those sciences deal with facts, not values or norms. Admittedly, fact and value are inextricably intertwined in the social sciences, so that non-trivial judgments of fact always presuppose some prior judgments of value. Nonetheless, scientific methodology is not appropriate for answering questions of value. As noted above, positivists give a purely decisionist or emotivist account of values, denying them any ra-



tional foundation. But society as a human, rational enterprise cannot be built upon empirically determined fact alone. The moral norms so essential to society are less concerned with what human beings are than with what they ought to be. To try to draw norms from empirical fact alone is to identify success, however achieved, with moral goodness. Such an approach canonizes the existing order, because there is no basis from which to criticize it. It hands society over to the technocrat, and makes the process of efficient goal-attainment supreme over the public discussion of the goals and values themselves. We have witnessed this process in our own time—an unquestioning devotion to the process of continuous economic expansion—and have seen how it can have disastrous consequences and, indeed, can call the entire project of modernity into question.

For the building of society, we must therefore appeal to a higher order of truth than mere empirical fact. We must ask fundamental questions: What is the human condition? What is the order of the values governing human action? What is the nature of human relationships? What may human beings reasonably expect? Such questions can be tackled only through religious and philosophical argument. Kant summed up his work as a critical philosopher in three questions: What can we know? What ought we to do? What can we hope for? The answer we give to each of those questions will profoundly affect the manner in which we endeavor to transform society. Even so, does that mean a turning back to the dominance of politics by metaphysical or theological systems, and the imposition of a pre-written script upon social and political experience? If we organize society in the light of unchanging truths, shall we not give to social institutions a supremacy they should not have?

Certainly, that was the pre-modern, traditional approach, reinforced by an appeal to religious truth as found in divine revelation. The social order was seen as part of the cosmic order, created by God. Although the fall of man and his sinfulness affected the social order, established institutions generally enjoyed divine providence. Such varied theologians as Augustine, Martin Luther, Robert Bellarmine, and Leo XIII have taught that divine providence sanctions human rulership, so that political authority is invested with sacredness. Though exceptions to the duty of submission have always been allowed (often reluctantly), the usual attitude inculcated through Christianity has been unquestioning obedience to the ruling powers. Behind such an attitude lay the conviction that life in society rested upon universal truths about the human condition, human nature, and human sinfulness. Although rebellion might at times be helpful in rescuing society from a tyrant, no radical remaking of society should follow. Furthermore, the universal truths suggested that only one type of social organization was ideally suited to the human condition.

The modern acceptance of pluralism—in particular, ideological plu-

ralism—and the individual freedom that follows from pluralism has changed all that. How can a society be founded upon pluralism? I find the answer to this question in a statement of Thomas Gilby: “Civilization is formed by men locked together in argument. From this dialogue the community becomes a political community.”<sup>5</sup> This process of rational deliberative argument within political associations, John Courtney Murray has commented, is a unique feature of human society.<sup>6</sup>

What is the argument about? According to Murray, it has three major themes: public affairs (matters requiring public decision and action by government); affairs of the commonwealth (matters outside the scope of government but bearing upon the quality of common life, such as education); and the constitutional consensus (matters that give a society its identity and sense of purpose). As Murray notes, the argument does not cease when agreement is reached. On the contrary, argument presupposes a context of agreement. This is so with scientific and philosophical argument, and it is likewise true of political argument. If there is a civilized society, there will be a context of agreement, from which argument can proceed. What is the content of the social agreement? Murray, whose general stance is conservative, sees the agreement as a patrimony of substantive truths, a heritage of rational belief, a structure of basic knowledge. While there is thus an ensemble of agreed affirmations, argument continues because the content of the consensus must be constantly scrutinized and developed in light of ongoing political experience.

We may grant Murray that every civilized society has a patrimony of agreed truths and values that serve as the initial context and starting point of argument. But given the present struggle between liberal pluralists and fundamentalists, between those who welcome and advocate radical changes in our traditional beliefs and those who staunchly insist upon the total validity of established tradition, we should not overstate the extent of our common social ground. Rather, we must identify the minimum level of consensus required to base society on rational argument. I suggest that, at a minimum, we must agree to those truths and values implicit in the acceptance of rational argument as the appropriate basis for political society.

This suggestion directly links the generally conservative Murray to the neo-Marxist Habermas. In his communicative theory of society, Habermas distinguishes two types of human action: purposive-rational action and communicative action.<sup>7</sup> Purposive-rational action is directed at success—that is, the efficient achievement of ends by appropriate means. Communicative action is directed to mutual understanding, lead-

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<sup>5</sup> T. GILBY, *BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY* (1953), quoted in J.C. MURRAY, *WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS: CATHOLIC REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN PROPOSITION* (1960).

<sup>6</sup> See generally J.C. MURRAY, *supra* note 5, at 5-24.

<sup>7</sup> See J. HABERMAS, *COMMUNICATION AND THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIETY* (1979).

ing to an agreement. Communicative action, as suggested earlier, is essential for an emancipated society. Purposive-rational action alone leads to the "iron cage" of bureaucratic rationality.

All communicative action takes place in the context of consensus, but that consensus may break down. Since consensus requires acceptance of the validity claims raised in communicative action, the consensus breaks down when these validity claims are questioned or rejected by the participants. Consensus must then be restored, Habermas suggests, by moving to "the level of discourse"—that is, to argumentation. Discourse or argumentation is governed by what Habermas calls the "ideal speech situation," an ideal-type or counterfactual hypothesis of a situation where the only force is the force of the better argument, with all other types of coercion or domination being excluded. The ideal speech situation provides both a model and a rational foundation for an emancipated society. It provides a model, because it embodies the essential values of such a society: freedom, equality, and justice. It provides a rational foundation, because these values are implied in the ideal speech situation. Thus, for Habermas as well as Murray, a civilized or emancipated society is an association built upon the permanence of rational argumentation, based on a consensus about the truths and values necessarily implied in rational argumentation itself.

In this conception of a pluralistic society, built upon consensus rather than obedience, what is the function of religion? Here I must distinguish my views from Habermas, for whom religion is obsolete, and from Murray, for whom religion is an orthodoxy, and give my own interpretation of the role of religion in modern society.

It is first necessary to distinguish faith and beliefs. Faith is the fundamental religious response. It is an orientation towards the Transcendent, an unrestricted opening of the mind and heart to Reality as Unlimited, or to the Infinite. It can be described as a basic trust in Reality or as a universal love of Reality. It is not merely relatively transcendent, but absolutely so, inasmuch as it is a thrust beyond every human order of meaning, beyond all the particular forms through which it is mediated in the different religious traditions. As an orientation it has a term, the Transcendent, but no object, because the Transcendent remains unknown. The term of the response of faith is mystery, because we have no proper knowledge of the Transcendent. We cannot grasp the Transcendent as an object; we can merely indicate the Infinite, the Unlimited, through symbols.

The response of religious faith as an awareness of the Transcendent constitutes a fundamental stance on the subject which, like an originating idea, takes possession of the mind and heart and widens the horizon within which the person thinks, judges, decides, and acts. This, in turn, gives rise to a body of religious beliefs. The fundamental stance or originating idea provokes and governs the apprehension and judgment of

values. Judgments of value constitute the first type of religious belief. The second type is judgments of fact. Factual beliefs arise as the mind, animated by faith, strives to interpret a profusion of data about the external world and the interior world of consciousness. Both kinds of religious belief—judgments of value and judgments of fact—are thus the product of interpretive reflection by the human mind within the horizon opened up by faith. The function of religious beliefs in shaping society is to form part of the patrimony of truths and values that are debated through politics. Societies begin not with a *tabula rasa*, but with an inherited tradition; religious beliefs are always part of that tradition. Like all human creations, however, religious beliefs are relative, mutable, and limited by culture. To suppose otherwise is to fall into idolatry, making the conditional unconditioned and confusing religious beliefs with religious faith. Religious beliefs are the changing, limited, culturally particular manifestation of religious faith. Therefore, in political argument, religious people must be prepared to see their religious beliefs challenged. They must refrain from using any weapons to advance their beliefs other than the force of the better argument. To act otherwise is to substitute the political argument of civilized society for the brute force of barbarism. The religious, and religious institutions, can only help to complete the project of modernity (that is, releasing the social enterprise from all false necessity) if they advance their beliefs as something other than unchanging and unquestionable. Those beliefs can then enter fruitfully into the political argument.

Does religious faith have a role in this process that is distinct from the role of particular beliefs? Yes; it has the vital role of keeping the argument open. Religious faith may be seen as following a narrow ridge between the two abysses of nihilism and idolatry. Nihilism denies the validity of all truths and values and reduces human life and human society to a contest of unrestrained selfishness and exploitation. Idolatry, in contrast, makes one set of truths and values absolute and seeks to freeze human life and society into conformity with those beliefs. Both nihilism and idolatry refuse the authority of rational political argument; both remain content with a purely calculative rationality. It is a mistake to suppose that human beings easily relinquish their prejudices or readily allow their cherished convictions to be questioned. Political arguments that touch deep-seated truths and values cannot be sustained unless the members of society can transcend their individual selves (and, indeed, transcend humanity itself) to open out to Unlimited Reality with an unlimited response. Religious faith is best viewed not as a set of beliefs, but as an unrestricted openness to Reality. As such, it is a critical foundation for the permanent argument that constitutes political society. Human rationality, when taken beyond the efficient adaptation of means to ends, is a more fragile and elusive achievement than we often realize. Paradoxically, it requires religious faith for its survival.

Religion has historically played both socially integrative and revolutionary roles in society. Both religious belief and religious faith have contributed to each role. First, consider the role of religious beliefs. Some beliefs support submission to the existing institutions of society and strengthen the established order; for example, the belief in God as author of the cosmic and social order. Other beliefs, such as the teaching of the Hebrew prophets on social justice or the Gospel message of concern for the poor and the outcast are revolutionary in their implications. Within the same religious tradition are specific teachings that can be selected to support opposing views. This does not mean that religious beliefs are simply used to bolster pre-existing prejudices. The possibility of diverse interpretation simply shows the need for argument.

The role of religious faith in society is primarily a revolutionary one (though perhaps I should say “transforming” to avoid some of the intellectual baggage that comes with the word “revolutionary”). Religious faith, by pushing us towards the Transcendent, relativizes every existing order. In so far as any existing social order absolutizes itself, religious faith becomes subversive and revolutionary in the usual political sense. The difference between revolution and other kinds of social change is that revolution calls into question the principles of rulership and the legitimacy of the existing social order. Since every social order tends to make itself absolute, it is the constant function of religious faith to remind human beings that even basic principles are subject to revision as human understanding grows. Religious faith protects human creativity from social inertia.

There are two reasons, however, why it is misleading to speak of religious faith as revolutionary in the ordinary, political sense. Revolutionary movements and ideologies often yield to the temptation to absolutize themselves and their cause. But religious faith rejects all absolutism—both that of the existing order and that of particular revolutions. Authentic religious faith resists the fanaticism of both Right and Left, of both revolutionary millenarianism and the ideology of Christendom. There is a utopian element in religious faith (for example, unending hope), but unrestricted utopianism is a corruption of faith, forgetting as it does that the term of religious faith is mystery, not a product of human desire.

The second reason why religious faith is not necessarily revolutionary is that “revolution” stresses the overthrow of the old rather than the emergence of the new. But religion is primarily concerned with transformation and only secondarily with destruction. The old is renewed, not annihilated. Even when religion speaks of apocalypse, it is far more concerned with the coming of the new order (for example, the new Jerusalem) than with the destruction of the old.

If some have found these reflections too wide-ranging, I can only plead that they attempt to respond to a very wide-ranging book. I hope,

however, that the central thrust of my reply to Unger is clear. He has set out to develop the idea of society as artifact to the hilt. As a religious thinker I find myself in agreement with that aim, in part because it provides a better framework for defining the relation of religion to society than other social theories. But I have one major proviso: Unger's project should be cleansed of a narrow conception of reason (as merely a calculative instrument or tool for efficient manipulation), and should embrace the wider conception articulated by Habermas (which includes reason as a means to communicative action). The narrower conception of reason is unfortunately reflected in the programmatic sentence: "Society is an artifact." I am calling attention to the need to free the project of modernity from the pathology of modernity.