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MODERNITY EXHAUSTED

Samuel Dresner

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A Parable of Alienation

Once a father and child were traveling together by wagon, when they reached a glen with an abundance of delicious berries. Attracted by the fruit, the child asked the father to stop so he could pick some. The father agreed but reminded his child to be quick, for the journey was long and time was short. The child, however, delighting in the sweet taste of the berries, wandered further into the forest.

"We must be on our way, for the moments are fleeting and the road still lies before us," called the father. To no avail. The child's desire overcame him.

"Were he not my only child whom I love, I would punish him," thought the father. He gave him one final warning. "Wherever you are, my child, hearken to these words of mine, lest, in your search for the berries you lose yourself in the forest:

"When you cry out, 'my father, my father,' I shall answer, 'my child, my child.' So long as you hear my voice, you can safely return to

me. But, beware! Should you no longer hear my voice, know that you are lost in the thickets of the forest. Then you must run to me with all the speed at your command, until you find me."

Though first told in Eastern Europe some two hundred years ago by Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, the parable rings true for modern man, and, particularly, for the modern Jew. It is a parable of alienation, a parable of those who no longer hear the "voice."

The incredible opportunities for power, pleasure and fortune which this new age has made possible has led many on a frantic search to drain every pleasure to the dregs, to exploit all the instruments of power and to collect an endless array of glittering gadgets. In the process, many Jews have lost their faith and abandoned the kingdom of God for the kingdom of Caesar. Their inner life has turned sour. Sated with sensuality, drugged with success, they wander ever deeper into the fabled jungle of delights, oblivious of the warning.

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax 972-2-619112. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0334-4096.

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The Decline of Religion

Daniel Bell, a profound student of American culture and former secularist, who has rediscovered the transcendent, has written:

At the end of the eighteenth century and into the middle of the nineteenth century almost every enlightened thinker expected religion to disappear in the twentieth century. That belief was based on the power of *reason*. Religion was associated with superstition, fetishism, and unprovable beliefs, a form of fear used as protection against other fears, a form of security one associated with children and which they believed had arisen in the "childhood" of the human race.

One of the signs of modernity is the commonality of this argument. It was heard during one's college years, pronounced by sages and popularizers with such dogmatic gravity that it became an unshakable catechism, at the very least for the social sciences. Religion was tantamount to magic, superstition, fear of the unknown, emerging during the childhood of man, acceptable to the uncultured, a crutch for the ignorant, a sop to the bewildered, an "opiate for the masses" — but maturity and reason would cure everyone of the affliction.

A more rational answer, coming from the Greeks, was philosophy, whose task it was to uncover the hidden order of nature. Aristotle, and later Hegel and Marx, proposed that while the infant crawls with religion, adult man walks with reason, which will clear up all those puzzles and mysteries confounding humankind since the primary years of civilization. Both Hegel and Marx project the perfect society at the end of time when man, not God, would be fulfilled.

From the nineteenth century onward, reason was replaced by *rationalization*, through which the technical order is established by means of bureaucracy and efficiency. The network of family bonds, for example, gives way to the "efficient" welfare state. Such a society is transformed into what Max Weber called "an iron cage." "With the progress of science and technology," he wrote, "man has lost his sense...of the sacred. Reality has become flat and utilitarian, leaving a great void in the souls of men, which they seek to fill by furious activity and through various devices and substitutes."

Modernism, according to Bell, can be characterized by several factors, the first of which is secularization, the withdrawal of religion from politics and aesthetics to ritual and leisure time. No longer coterminous with life itself, religion is but a single option among others.

As aesthetics is separated from religion, releasing art from moral bounds, so government is no longer censored by ethical requirements. Religious acts themselves become secularized. Homilies substitute politics for scripture, Latin is replaced by the vernacular, ancient chants are supplanted by young men and women with guitars, priests and nuns shed their distinctive garb. The authority and influence of tradition is diminished as the religions of politics, impulse and culture replace classical faith.

The Idolatry of Politics

The phenomenon of totalitarianism sprung from the idolatry of *politics*, where a child reports his father to the state as a traitor, knowing the severity of punishment which may be meted out, because fealty to the state has transcended loyalty to parents. Totalitarianism does, indeed, possess all the trappings of religion. Its divinity is the state; its prophet, Marx or Hitler; its holy scripture, *Mein Kampf* or *Das Kapital*; its ritual, the phantasmagorias of Munich or Lenin Square. Hitler used a three foot by two white vellum-bound copy of *Mein Kampf* on a podium during the Munich rallies much as a missal at St. Peters Church.

Two of the key theoreticians who formulated the Communist creed of "purification by terror," by which the Party would achieve the messianic fulfillment of history, were the Jew, Georg Lukacs, and the playwright, Berthold Brecht. In his "Praise of the Party," Brecht argued that it is correct to put a comrade to death if it is in the interest of the Party. Lukacs justified evil in the name of the higher good, proposing "the double theory of evil" where the purposeful violence of the revolution was superior to the meaningless violence of the old corrupt world. One had to enslave the world in order to heal it. One signed a "devil's pact."

Under the old capitalist system, the legitimate drive for economic success was modified by religion, which was labeled the "Protestant ethic." It meant pride in one's work, frugality, honesty, a day's work for a day's pay. With the removal of the force of religion and the so-called Protestant ethic from economic society, capitalism as we know it today has turned into pure hedonism — the hot pursuit of pleasure and power as a way of life. The purpose of work in our time is not so much pride in what one makes as the sheer enjoyment of what derives from it — houses, food, clothes, cars, vacations — usable "things," momentary impulses. Quite simply, the engine of capitalism is impulse. Yet, as one result, Detroit cars are less acceptable because

they simply do not match the Japanese car produced by the work ethic abandoned in America.

The Religion of Impulse

The religion of *impulse* is all around us, in literature, fashion, photography, advertising, television, and travel. One result has been the replacement of morality by psychology. One hears less about what is "good or bad" and more about whether we feel "comfortable" with this or that. Indeed, "to feel comfortable" is one of those expressions which has come to symbolize the new age, pointing to the ever-widening dimension of modernity "beyond good and evil." The newer non-moral therapies seek to free the individual from moral restraint, so that one can more easily express one's impulses. In the old days one felt guilt if one committed adultery; today, quite the reverse, we are taught to feel guilt if we fail to follow the demands of our impulses.

The Worship of Culture

The third substitution for religion which Bell describes is that of *culture*. More than a century ago Saint Simon proclaimed: "Christianity is worn out: a new culture is needed to inspire us — art"; and Nietzsche announced that man's true destiny is not immortality but art. In literature, it was no longer religion but poetry that was sacred. In the new theatre, the most unspeakable became acceptable. With the substitution of the expressive arts — culture — for religion, man not only abandoned restraint, but the demonic impulses once sublimated by religion gradually embraced and pervaded all aspects of modern culture. The consequence is that nothing is now unutterable or untouchable. There is no longer any sacred grove which cannot be trespassed.

The Exhaustion of Modernism

Bell believes "that the 'ground impulses' behind aestheticism and political religions are exhausted. These were the impulses to abolish God and assume that man could take over the powers he had ascribed to God and now sought to claim for himself."

In the area of *culture* some artists, writers and thinkers are turning their back on what formerly bewitched them, for the simple reason that they have tasted the fullness of its fruit.

Society has always included an avantgarde, an outlandish Bohemian "counterculture." The difference today is that the avantgarde has become the man-on-the-street. Bohemia is Broadway. The filthy jokes former-

ly restricted to burlesque houses and certain nightclubs now exhume from films and TV for the millions. Las Vegas is no longer a city but a condition. Books formerly kept apart but available upon special request now flood the shelves of our libraries.

Once there were middle-class values — patriotism, church, family — supported by the popular culture, while the underground promoted anti-social values for the radical enclave. In our age the underground has taken over, its values dominating the new pop-culture. The TV soap opera today can hardly be recognized from its parent of 30 years ago. A family TV script under consideration was returned to its author with the following suggestions: one male should be a homosexual, the love scene should lead to rape, the forty-five-year-old female should fall in love with the teenager, substitute a shot-gun blast for the punch, and find a way to introduce a scene that may later turn into incest. Indeed, for every child born in wedlock on a soap opera, five are born out of wedlock; and for every married couple viewed in bed, ten unmarried couples are so filmed. More scenes are shot in bordellos than churches and the prostitute has replaced the nun as the model of compassion, while serious religion is taboo. For the ten or twelve-year-old, who by that age may already have been instructed in what used to be considered exotic sexual activities during his or her latest AIDS prevention class, all of the above have become part and parcel of the American scene much as Tarzan or the Bobbsey Twins were in what seems like another age.

Within his blistering attack on the film industry as destructive of American values by its "glorification of ugliness, [its] assault on the family, and [its] attempt to undermine organized religion," Michael Medved, co-host of "Sneak Previews," described the highly acclaimed 1990 film, "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover," as a sample of his concern: "This is not a film for the faint-of-heart — or the delicate of stomach. It begins with the brutal beating of a naked man [and]...ends with...the most vivid and horrifying scene of cannibalism ever portrayed in motion pictures. In between, we see [scenes of] unrelieved ugliness, horror, and depravity at every turn. Naturally, the critics loved it."

Modernism is exhausted because it has been realized *politically*. Sixty years of Communism did not bring the millennium. The promise of the classless society was confounded by the high walls of Lubianka prison and the vast cemeteries of the Siberian tundras. In the name of liberation, suffering peoples seeking freedom

were cynically manipulated into Communist police-states in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and even in Central America. Now, as chaos and hunger rule, the Russians themselves admit that the Communist dream was a nightmare and are taking the first halting steps toward democracy.

Finally, modernism is exhausted because, as with culture and politics, the religion of *impulse* has been realized. Drugs, originally perceived as the refuge of marginal figures, have in our time been transformed into a "drug culture." The social diseases of family collapse, massive illiteracy, and now AIDS are the harvest we reap for the new "freedom." Sexual liberation has not been the high road to mental health but, rather, to the Russian roulette of unwanted pregnancy and/or unwanted disease.

In the belief that "faith is no longer possible," writes Bell, fascinating and tragic substitutes were proposed which sought to reach the heights of religious experience. Their proponents learned, alas, that "art or impulse can erase the self only momentarily in the...frenzy of the Dionysian act...But intoxication always passes, and there is the cold morning after, which arrives inexorably with the break of day. This inescapable awareness of the future, this eschatological anxiety, leads inevitably to the feeling, the black thread of modernist thought, that each person's own life is at the end of time."

The Role of the Jews

In fashioning modern man's society, where the idols of politics, culture and impulse were worshipped, Jews have played a central role. This is so, in part, because in the world's largest Jewish community of Eastern Europe, the Middle Ages did not gradually give way, as in the West, to the influences of the Enlightenment's gifts of science and reason. For most of East European Jewry, the Middle Ages extended down to the nineteenth century and even beyond. Many of the grandparents of present-day American Jews emerged overnight, it seemed, from benighted villages little touched by the secular worlds of culture into the bright lights of modernity with its abundance of new knowledge and undreamt-of opportunity. It should occasion no surprise, then, that Jews, mesmerized as they must have been by what they saw and read and heard, should have been among the chief advocates of modernity, as Bell has defined it.

They became, for example, disciples of the new politics of Communism. Some 30 percent of the early leaders of the revolution are estimated to have been

Jewish. Emancipated from their ancient faith by the onslaught of modern thought which the antiquated Judaism of the time was ill-prepared to refute, they transferred their yet unexpended messianic fervor into the new religion of Marx. Such sacrifice, intelligence and idealism as theirs was hard to duplicate and catapulted many to the very highest offices of the new regime. Out of idealism, there were Jews who signed "a pact with the devil" and who believed in the double theory of truth. During the dark years of the Depression, many Jews, ignorant of or alienated from Judaism, became radical intelligentsia who fought the bourgeois middle-class values of home, faith and nation.

Historian Jacob Talmon cites the case of Rosa Luxembourg which provides a special insight into the Jewish condition of the time. She was a Polish Jewess whose fiery devotion brought her to the leadership of German Communism during World War I, until she was murdered by rightist hooligans. While imprisoned, she wrote to a Zionist friend: "Why do you pester me with your Jewish sorrow? There is no room in my heart for the Jewish troubles." Her single-minded efforts for universal peace permitted no pause for particular sympathies. (The same letter, nonetheless, expresses concern for "the South African Bantus and the Chinese coolies.") Talmon makes the telling observation that "twenty-five years later, after the Germans had occupied it, there was not a single Jew left alive in Rosa's native Zamosc."

The religion of impulse likewise found significant Jewish involvement. An unusually high percentage of the material on sexual liberation was written by Jews, as well as significant representation among its advocates.

Jews have been loyal supporters of the new aesthetics. Literature, art and music are fields in which Jewish influence is clearly significant. While they were leaders in advancing high culture, they were likewise among those who transformed what were formerly avant-garde enclaves into the mass-media of TV and Hollywood and into cheap literature. As well, Jews are represented among the leaders of the goddess-feminist movement, among those who argue for a return to paganism and polytheism, while the best-known American witch, Starhawk, is a Jew.

The Parable Today

Many modern Jews, alas, in their search for passion and pleasure and power have lost themselves in the kingdom of Caesar. Is it not ironic that the descendents of those who offered prayer to the world became,

according to all accountings, the least worshipful; those whose ancestors gave themselves to the mastery of the Law were among the most anarchical; those who taught "Thou shalt not" were more alert to the dangers than the benefits of tradition's restraints; and those who revered the sacred became the architects of the secular? The Chosen People seemed to flatten into normality, becoming what the prophets had warned against: "like all the nations." Perhaps that is why so many young Jews, raised in a society where the profundities and the restraints of Judaism were abandoned, sought the strong communal bonds and the rigid norms which they found in the cults.

A young man once came to a rabbi, complaining, "Rabbi, I have so many worries, my wife, my job, my health. I am terribly worried. What should I do?" "Pray," advised the rabbi. "But I don't know how to pray," answered the young man. "Ah," said the rabbi, "then you really have something to worry about." Is that not the predicament of the modern Jew?

Having explored the kingdom of Caesar to its full and found it wanting, some Jews are now inquiring into the kingdom his ancestors once inhabited, the kingdom of God. The post-modern mind is no longer satisfied with the answers of the philosophers or with what the poets, the painters, and even the musicians can offer. The secular divinities they knelt before do not nourish the innermost spirit. They never did. Solutions believed to have solved all problems proved to be no solutions at all, or, at best, only to lead to further problems; towers built so painstakingly turned to dust.

Many post-modern Jews have discovered a puzzling truth. No license has replaced the Law; no symphony, the Psalms; no chandelier, the Sabbath candles; no opera, Yom Kippur; no country club, the synagogue; no mansion, the home; no Jaguar, a child; no mistress, a wife; no banquet, the Passover Seder; no towering metropolis, Jerusalem; no impulse, the joy of doing a mitzvah; no man, God.

Nietzsche said "God is dead"; and Dostoyevsky, "If there is no God, all things are possible." Jews have tried all things.

For some time now those who worshiped the idols in Moscow, Paris, and New York — both the older generation who witnessed the debris of their youthful

fantasies and the younger generation who never knew the fantasy but only see the debris — have begun to wonder if God is truly dead. There is a yearning which will not be silenced by any of the old songs, or stilled by any of the old potions.

A Return to Some Conception of Religion

"What holds one to reality if one's secular system of meanings prove to be an illusion?" asks former secularist Daniel Bell. "I will risk an unfashionable answer — the return of Western society to some conception of religion."

"What religion can restore is the continuity of generations, returning us to the existential predicaments which are the ground of humility and care for others." Religion is not simply magic or illusion, it speaks to the human condition. Religion provides "a set of coherent answers to the core existential questions" — birth, death, success, failure, illness, health, temptation, happiness — codifies its answers in a creed which has meaning for those who believe in it; celebrates them in rites which provide an emotional bond for those who participate; and establishes congregations for those who share this creed and celebration.

This is the terrible dilemma of those who are lost in the wilderness of delight. The fabled supports are gone; dreams have become nightmares; utopias jungles; while liberation from restraint and guidance, breaking loose from the yoke of Heaven, has made of many, "messengers who have forgotten the message" (Heschel). That is the meaning of the parable with which we began. We have exhausted modernity. We have eaten all the berries we can. We are surfeited. Our souls are sated and our minds are exploding with passion, power and pleasure. Now we seek the recovery of the sacred, the renewal of the transcendent, even the Law.

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Dr. Samuel Dresner is a Professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary and a Fellow of the Washington-based Jewish Policy Center. He is the author of the forthcoming volume *Rachel* to be published by Fortress Press.

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Netanel Lorch, one of Israel's most prominent military historians, served as Secretary General of the Knesset from 1972 to 1983, following a distinguished career in both the Israel Defense Forces and the diplomatic corps. He is a former President of the International Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments.

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