

The Sacred Canopy

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Every human society is an enterprise of world-building. Religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise. Our main purpose here is to make some general statements about the relationship between human religion and human world-building. . . .

Society is a dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer. Society is a product of man. It has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness. There can be no social reality apart from man. Yet it may also be stated that man is a product

of society. Every individual biography is an episode within the history of society, which both precedes and survives it. Society was there before the individual was born and it will be there after he has died. What is more, it is within society, and as a result of social processes, that the individual becomes a person, that he attains and holds onto an identity, and that he carries out the various projects that constitute his life. Man cannot exist apart from society. The two statements, that society is the product of man and that man is the product of society, are not contradictory. They rather reflect the inherently dialectic character of the societal phenomenon. . . .

The fundamental dialectic process of society consists of three moments, or steps. These are externalizations, objectivation, and internalization. . . . Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment by the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness. It is through externalization that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality *sui generis*. It is through internalization that man is a product of society. . . .

The socially constructed world is, above all, an ordering of experience. A meaningful order, or *nomos*, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals. To say that society is a world-building enterprise is to say that it is ordering, or *nomizing*, activity. . . . Man, biologically denied the ordering mechanisms with which the other animals are endowed, is compelled to impose his own order upon experience. Man's sociality presupposes the collective character of this ordering activity. The ordering of experience is endemic to any kind of social interaction. Every social action implies that individual meaning is directed toward others and ongoing social interaction implies that the several meanings of the actors are integrated into an order of common meaning. . . .

The socially established *nomos* may thus be understood, perhaps in its most important aspect, as a shield against terror. . . . The anthropological presupposition for this is a human craving for meaning that

appears to have the force of instinct. Men are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality. This order, however, presupposes the social enterprise of ordering world-construction. To be separated from society exposes the individual to a multiplicity of dangers with which he is unable to cope by himself, in the extreme case to the danger of imminent extinction. Separation from society also inflicts unbearable psychological tensions upon the individual, tensions that are grounded in the root anthropological fact of sociality. The ultimate danger of such separation, however, is the danger of meaninglessness. This danger is the nightmare *par excellence*, in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror. To be in society is to be "sane" precisely in the sense of being shielded from the ultimate "insanity" of such anomic terror. Anomy is unbearable to the point where the individual may seek death in preference to it. Conversely, existence within a nomic world may be sought at the cost of all sorts of sacrifice and suffering—and even at the cost of life itself, if the individual believes that this ultimate sacrifice has nomic significance. . . .

Whenever the socially established *nomos* attains the quality of being taken for granted, there occurs a merging of its meanings with what are considered to be the fundamental meanings inherent in the universe. . . . When the *nomos* is taken for granted as appertaining to the "nature of things," understood cosmologically or anthropologically, it is endowed with a stability deriving from more powerful sources than the historical efforts of human beings. It is at this point that religion enters significantly into our argument.

Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a

sacred mode. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience. This quality may be attributed to natural or artificial objects, to animals, or to men, or to the objectifications of human culture. There are sacred rocks, sacred tools, sacred cows. The chieftain may be sacred, as may be a particular custom or institution. Space and time may be assigned the same quality, as in sacred localities and sacred seasons. The quality may finally be embodied in sacred beings, from highly localized spirits to the great cosmic divinities. The latter, in turn, may be transformed into ultimate forces or principles ruling the cosmos, no longer conceived of in personal terms but still endowed with the status of sacredness. The historical manifestations of the sacred vary widely, though there are certain uniformities to be observed cross-culturally (no matter here whether these are to be interpreted as resulting from cultural diffusion or from an inner logic of man's religious imagination). The sacred is apprehended as "sticking out" from the normal routines of everyday life, as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life. Although the sacred is apprehended as other than man, yet it refers to man, relating to him in a way in which other non-human phenomena (specifically, the phenomena of non-sacred nature) do not. The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man. The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order.

On one level, the antonym to the sacred is the profane, to be defined simply

as the absence of sacred status. All phenomena are profane that do not "stick out" as sacred. The routines of everyday life are profane unless, so to speak, proven otherwise, in which latter case they are conceived of as being infused in one way or another with sacred power (as in sacred work, for instance). Even in such cases, however, the sacred quality attributed to the ordinary events of life *itself* retains its extraordinary character, a character that is typically reaffirmed through a variety of rituals and the loss of which is tantamount to secularization, that is, to a conception of the events in question as *nothing but* profane. The dichotomization of reality into sacred and profane spheres, however related, is intrinsic to the religious enterprise. . . .

On a deeper level, however, the sacred has another opposed category, that of chaos. The sacred cosmos emerges out of chaos and continues to confront the latter as its terrible contrary. This opposition of cosmos and chaos is frequently expressed in a variety of cosmogonic myths. The sacred cosmos, which transcends and includes man in its ordering of reality, thus provides man's ultimate shield against the terror of anomy. To be in a "right" relationship with the sacred cosmos is to be protected against the nightmare threats of chaos. To fall out of such a "right" relationship is to be abandoned on the edge of the abyss of meaninglessness. It is not irrelevant to observe here that the English "chaos" derives from a Greek word meaning "yawning" and "religion" from a Latin one meaning "to be careful." To be sure, what the religious man is "careful" about is above all the dangerous power inherent in the manifestations of the sacred themselves. But behind this danger is the other, much more horrible one, namely that one may lose all connection with the sacred and be swallowed up by chaos. All the nomic constructions, as we have seen,

are designed to keep this terror at bay. In the sacred cosmos, however, these constructions achieve their ultimate culmination—literally, their apotheosis.

Human existence is essentially and inevitably externalizing activity. In the course of externalization men pour out meaning into reality. Every human society is an edifice of externalized and objectivated meanings, always intending a meaningful totality. Every society is engaged in the never completed enterprise of building a humanly meaningful world. Cosmization implies the identification of this humanly meaningful world with the world as such, the former now being grounded in the latter, reflecting it or being derived from it in its fundamental structures. Such a cosmos, as the ultimate ground and validation of human *nomoi*, need not necessarily be sacred. Particularly in modern times there have been thoroughly secular attempts at cosmization, among which modern science is by far the most important. It is safe to say, however, that originally *all* cosmization had a sacred character. This remained true through most of human history, and not only through the millennia of human existence on earth preceding what we now call civilization. Viewed historically, most of man's worlds have been sacred worlds. Indeed, it appears likely that only by way of the sacred was it possible for man to conceive of a cosmos in the first place.

It can thus be said that religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building. Religion implies the farthest reach of man's self-externalization, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings. Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant.

Religion and World-Maintenance

All socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious. Supported by human activity, they are constantly threatened by the human facts of self-interest and stupidity. The institutional programs are sabotaged by individuals with conflicting interests. Frequently individuals simply forget them or are incapable of learning them in the first place. The fundamental processes of socialization and social control, to the extent that they are successful, serve to mitigate these threats. Socialization seeks to ensure a continuing consensus concerning the most important features of the social world. Social control seeks to contain individual or group resistances within tolerable limits. There is yet another centrally important process that serves to support the swaying edifice of social order. This is the process of legitimation.

By legitimation is meant socially objectivated "knowledge" that serves to explain and justify the social order. Put differently, legitimations are answers to any questions about the "why" of institutional arrangements. A number of points should be noted about this definition. Legitimations belong to the domain of social objectivations, that is, to what passes for "knowledge" in a given collectivity. This implies that they have a status of objectivity quite different from merely individual cogitations about the "why" and "wherefore" of social events. Legitimations, furthermore, can be both cognitive and normative in character. They do not only tell people what *ought to be*. Often they merely propose what *is*. For instance, the morals of kinship, expressed in a statement such as, "You ought not to sleep with X, your sister," are obviously legitimating. But cognitive assertions about kinship, such as, "You are X's brother and she is your sister," are legitimating in an even more fundamental sense. To put it a little crudely, legitimation

begins with statements as to "what's what." Only on this cognitive basis is it possible for the normative propositions to be meaningful. Finally, it would be a serious mistake to identify legitimation with theoretical ideation. "Ideas," to be sure, can be important for purposes of legitimation. However, what passes for "knowledge" in a society is by no means identical with the body of "ideas" existing in the society. There are always some people with an interest in "ideas," but they have never yet constituted more than a rather small minority. If legitimation always had to consist of theoretically coherent propositions, it would support the social order only for that minority of intellectuals that have such theoretical interests—obviously not a very practical program. Most legitimation, consequently, is pretheoretical in character. . . .

It will readily be seen that the area of legitimation is far broader than that of religion, as these two terms have been defined here. Yet there exists an important relationship between the two. It can be described simply by saying that religion has been the historically most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation. All legitimation maintains socially defined reality. Religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality. The tenuous realities of the social world are grounded in the sacred *realissimum*, which by definition is beyond the contingencies of human meanings and human activity.

The efficacy of religious legitimation can be brought home by asking an, as it were, recipe question on the construction of worlds. If one imagines oneself as a fully aware founder of a society, a kind of combination of Moses and Machiavelli, one could ask oneself the following question: How can the future continuation of the institutional order, now established *ex nihilo*,

be best ensured? There is an obvious answer to the question in terms of power. But let it be assumed that all the means of power have been effectively employed—all opponents have been destroyed, all means of coercion are in one's own hands, reasonably safe provisions have been made for the transmission of power to one's designated successors. There still remains the problem of legitimation, all the more urgent because of the novelty and thus highly conscious precariousness of the new order. The problem would best be solved by applying the following recipe: Let the institutional order be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its *constructed* character. Let that which has been stamped out of the ground *ex nihilo* appear as the manifestation of something that has been existent from the beginning of time, or at least from the beginning of this group. Let the people forget that this order was established by men and continues to be dependent upon the consent of men. Let them believe that, in acting out the institutional programs that have been imposed upon them, they are but realizing the deepest aspirations of their own being and putting themselves in harmony with the fundamental order of the universe. In sum: Set up religious legitimations. There are, of course, wide historical variations in the manner in which this has been done. In one way or another, the basic recipe was followed throughout most of human history. And, actually, the example of Moses—Machiavelli figuring the whole thing out with cool deliberation may not be as fanciful as all that. There have been very cool minds indeed in the history of religion.

Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference. The historical constructions of human activity are viewed from a vantage

point that, in its own self-definition, transcends both history and man. This can be done in different ways. Probably the most ancient form of this legitimation is the conception of the institutional order as directly reflecting or manifesting the divine structure of the cosmos, that is, the conception of the relationship between society and cosmos as one between microcosm and macrocosm. Everything "here below" has its analogue "up above." By participating in the institutional order men, *ipso facto*, participate in the divine cosmos. The kinship structure, for example, extends beyond the human realm, with all being (including the being of the gods) conceived of in the structures of kinship as given in the society. Thus there may be not only a totemic "sociology" but a totemic "cosmology" as well. The social institutions of kinship then merely reflect the great "family" of all being, in which the gods participate on a higher level. Human sexuality reflects divine creativity. Every human family reflects the structure of the cosmos, not only in the sense of representing but of embodying it. Or, for another crucial case, the political structure simply extends into the human sphere the power of the divine cosmos. The political authority is conceived of as the agent of the gods, or ideally even as a divine incarnation. Human power, government, and punishment thus become sacramental phenomena, that is, channels by which divine forces are made to impinge upon the lives of men. The ruler speaks for the gods, or *is* a god, and to obey him is to be in a right relationship with the world of the gods. . . .

To repeat, the historically crucial part of religion in the process of legitimation is explicable in terms of the unique capacity of religion to "locate" human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference. All legitimation serves to maintain reality—reality, that is, as defined in a particular human

collectivity. Religious legitimation purports to relate the humanly defined reality to ultimate, universal and sacred reality. The inherently precarious and transitory constructions of human activity are thus given the semblance of ultimate security and permanence. Put differently, the humanly constructed *nomoi* are given a cosmic status.

This cosmization, of course, refers not only to the over-all nomic structures, but to specific institutions and roles within a given society. The cosmic status assigned to these is objectivated, that is, it becomes part of the objectively available reality of the institutions and roles in question. For example, the institution of divine kingship, and the several roles representing it, is apprehended as a decisive link between the world of men and the world of the gods. The religious legitimation of power involved in this institution does not appear as an *ex post facto* justification of a few theoreticians, it is objectively present as the institution is encountered by the man in the street in the course of his everyday life. Insofar as the man in the street is adequately socialized into the reality of his society, he cannot conceive of the king *except as* the bearer of a role that represents the fundamental order of the universe—and, indeed, the same assumption may be made for the king himself. In this manner, the cosmic status of the institution is "experienced" whenever men come into contact with it in the ordinary course of events.

The "gains" of this kind of legitimation are readily evident, whether one looks at it from the viewpoint of institutional objectivity or from that of individual subjective consciousness. All institutions possess the character of objectivity and their legitimations, whatever content these may have, must continuously undergird this objectivity. The religious legitimations, however, ground the socially defined reality of the institutions in the ultimate reality of the universe, in reality "as such."

The institutions are thus given a semblance of inevitability, firmness and durability that is analogous to these qualities as ascribed to the gods themselves. Empirically, institutions are always changing as the exigencies of human activity upon which they are based change. Institutions are always threatened not only by the ravages of time, but by those of conflict and discrepancies between the groups whose activities they are intended to regulate. In terms of the cosmic legitimations, on the other hand, the institutions are magically

lifted above these human, historical contingencies. They become inevitable, because they are taken for granted not only by men but by the gods. Their empirical tenuousness is transformed into an overpowering stability as they are understood as but manifestations of the underlying structure of the universe. They transcend the death of individuals and the decay of entire collectivities, because they are now grounded in a sacred time within which merely human history is but an episode. In a sense, then, they become immortal.