Alvin J. Reines

THE FUTURE AND THE HOLY

A Consecration Sermon

Reality is not revealed to man as a gift. In the primordial world of the infant—as in the primitive state of the human race—reality and illusion commingle in a coruscating kaleidoscope. Only slowly, with great effort, does the human consciousness come to distinguish its dreams and imaginations from the true world. The discovery of reality is a difficult task, fraught with obstacles both internal and external. Man does not always wish to know the real; the real, on the other hand, is not often easily known. Yet if the quest for reality is a difficult task, it is also one that is irresistible. The quality as well as the continuation of human life is bound to its success. Hence engaged in the discovery of reality, we find philosophy, science, and religion, among the noblest of human enterprises. Philosophy and science clearly and explicitly undertake the quest; it is less obvious to the common understanding that religion pursues this goal as well. Yet such is the case. The search for the meaning of the term God is as much a pursuit of reality as the search for the meaning of essence or atom. Thus philosophy, science, and religion share in common the pursuit of reality. True, the facets of reality upon which these different disciplines concentrate can be distinguished—from essences, to atoms, to God—but the distinctions are not drawn by a sharp line of demarcation. Philosophy and science blend into religion as they also blend into one another. In the quest for reality, the complete man is at once philosopher, scientist, and religionist. Human limitation and practicality force a separation of these existentially inseparable activities.

Beyond the discovery of reality, religion takes on a purpose and function different from those of philosophy and science. Philosophy and science, generally regarded, are unconcerned and disinvolved disciplines; they seek reality for the sake of truth. Religion, however, is a concerned and involved discipline; it seeks reality for the sake of man. "What are the true and the real?" ask science and philosophy, that man with his mind may comprehend them; "What are the true and the real?" asks religion, that man with his being may respond to them. In this difference lies the primary function of religion. Reality having been determined, however this is accomplished, the task falls upon religion to provide man with responses appropriate to it, saving and fundamental responses of being, that finite man, child of limitation and vulnerability, must make to meet a pressing and demanding existence.

In responding to reality with his being, man reacts with his fundamental subjective structures, the profound moods and volitions that constitute the basic I of his life. In religious response, these moods and volitions, the building-stones of self, are formed into attitudes, not such attitudes as are lightly and fleetingly taken, but the pervasive and

constant attitudes that constitute the enduring self. These are the ultimate attitudes man makes toward himself and his world. One can say, therefore, that in religion man responds with the essence of his being, since the ultimate attitudes he takes are constitutive of the self. It can also be said that in religion man creates himself, for not only is he constituted of the ultimate attitudes he takes, but they are, as well, the products of his own activity. Among these ultimate attitudes is the attitude of the holy.

The holy is an attitude. It is not a property that exists independent of man, but a quality he creates and projects onto existence. The holy is not innate. At birth but a rudimentary capacity for it exists. The capacity of the holy may, in fact, never be realized; it can be left to wither and die (as many capacities do) so that no sense of the holy remains. Neither is the attitude of the holy an absolute. The creation of man, it is influenced by his constitutional endowment and environmental experiences. Even when realized, therefore, the capacity of the holy develops differently in different times, and among different peoples and religions. In our time, one concept of the attitude of the holy is generally dominant. According to this concept, the attitude apprehends the object of holiness as divine, of ultimate importance, mysterious and awesome, but taboo, fearful, and untouchable. Hence even though the holy object is viewed as divine or as associated with divinity, its holy character is beyond rational good and evil. The holy is taboo to man, not to be touched by mind or body, and open, therefore, neither to human understanding nor use. All attempts to lift the veil of the holy mystery are dangerous; the holy object is awesome in its power, barely restrained from bursting its limits, and threatening always to overwhelm the subject.

While dominant in the present age, this view of the holy has increasingly met with difficulties; not only among avowed liberals who pursue the religious enterprise rationally and scientifically, but among all who are touched by the spirit of modernism. The greatest concrete goods of our time, from the conquest of disease to an accurate understanding of the Bible, have come from reason and the scientific method. In the attitude of the holy as projecting taboo and danger onto existence, the universe is arbitrarily hidden from man and forbidden to his view. This attitude is opposed to reason and the scientific method. Here nothing is exempted from human study and inquiry; nothing possible to man is beyond man. From the highest heavens above him to the recesses of psyche deepest within him, everything is the proper object of human inquiry, all is open to the touch of the human mind.

A further objection to the attitude of the holy as projecting taboo and danger onto existence is that to the mature religionist this attitude is in actuality an infantile vestige, a mode of consciousness surviving from an earlier, primitive stage of human development. Shadows are here taken for realities,

and man frightens himself with his own dreams and imaginations. The mature religious consciousness can find no divine reality that would command human ignorance and limitation, no divine reality that arbitrarily keeps any good thing from man's grasp. As was so often repeated by the ancient and medieval thinkers, "There is no niggardliness in God." All that is possible for man to know, he may know; all that is possible for him to use, he may use. To the divine goodness, nothing man can reach is beyond his reach.

The difficulties this presently dominant attitude of the holy has encountered have led increasingly to widespread disuse of the holy. The attitude is, after all, only a potentiality given to man, who may realize or reject it, as he chooses. It is neither innate nor necessary to him. As the holy becomes incongruous with modern life, it is discarded, as are other anachronistic potentialities, physical and psychic. (Unused limbs atrophy and unused eyes become blind.) True, a modes attempt has been made to retranslate the meaning of holy from taboo and mystery into ethical terms, so that what is meant by the quality of holiness is essentially "goodness." Thus if we say of some being or thing that it is holy, we signify that it is good. But is this not in effect a total surrender of the holy? Ethical retranslation preserves the word, but destroys the attitude.

Does an appropriate use of the attitude of the holy exist, a use that is at once relevant, mature, and significant: relevant, in that the attitude retains its essential sense of mystery, untouchability, and awesome divinity; mature, in that the attitude has for its object a reality appropriate to such a sense, one that is truly a divine and awesome mystery, not a pseudo-mystery created by infantile phantasy; and significant, in that the attitude so employed directs us to matters of ultimate importance. There is, I feel, a reality that is mysterious, untouchable, and divine, an ultimately significant object that calls for a corresponding attitude on the part of man—this object I suggest to you is the future.

How well the future fits the requirements for the holy object! First of all, the future is mysterious—truly so, not because the commonplace and everyday are artificially obscured, but because the future remains hidden no matter how clear to us its image appears to be, or how convinced we are that behind the image an actuality lies waiting. And, too, the future is untouchable—not because it is taboo, forbidden us by a tenebrific and capricious deity, but because it is out of reach of our limited powers, and cannot be grasped accurately with mind or body. And, of course, the future is divine—it is nothing other than the unending possibilities of being stored in the infinite recesses of the Godhead. So, too, are the other component emotions of a mature attitude of the holy relevant to the future—awe, fascination, reverence—for contained within the future is the power of all existence and good, our individual fates and mankind's destiny.

Yet is it significant to take the future as the holy object? Does the future

as holy attract and direct us to matters of ultimate importance? The answer, certainly is "yes," for the future is itself of ultimate importance. It is the object of all hope, and the hope of all existence. Perhaps never before as in our time has it been of such importance to recognize the character of the future as holy. For the image of the future looming over against us is not an ordinary one; rather, it is the image of a radical future. The radical future unlike the ordinary kind, does not slip smoothly and unnoticed into the vacua left by the ever-retreating present—it does not slip at all. On the contrary, it overthrows and tears down; it plucks up the present that it succeeds by the roots. The radical future finds existing institutions, economic, political, social, and religious, inadequate to contain its creative burst. Its emergent force is not able to be expressed by the beliefs, symbolism, and even morality of the age it supersedes. The radical future discovers new truths and realities, embodies them in new institutions, and enshrines them in new forms of religion.

To those whose interests, spiritual as well as material, are vested in the present, the radical future is alien, strange, threatening. As its first waves begin to lap softly the shores of the present, men become increasingly disturbed, their spirits uneasy. Particularly are they distressed at the most visible sign of the new, the developing generation, which, being inchoate and fresh, is more sensitive to its emanations, and more responsive to its whispers. It is here that the significance of acknowledging the future as holy lies. Radical futures have rarely been well received by the presents that preceded and spawned them. Human narcissism invariably supports the tendency of the present to regard its economics, religion, and mores, as the only true or good ones. This tendency is intensified by the anxieties felt in the face of a radical future. The more novel the future, the greater its threat, and the greater, consequently, the defense of the now. Out of fear and inadequacy the present glorifies itself; the past is reinterpreted to make today the culmination of history and the fulfillment of ancient promise. The will of God is soon seen as commanding the eternal importance and validity of the now; the future on the horizon is satanic, to be valiantly resisted. Solemnly, the present declares itself holy, and the past, created in its own image, sacrosanct.

The view that the proper object of the holy is the future stands in direct opposition to this position. It is not the past that is taken as holy; the past is non-existent, living on as relics and in the human imagination. Neither is the present holy; the now is no more than it appears to be, commonplace and ordinary. It is the future that is holy; the future still residing in the Godhead that is sacred. To see the future as holy, therefore, is to understand its divine sanction and inevitability. It means, at the very least, to be open to its image, to listen to its whispers, to heed its pleas for life. Beyond this, the holy attitude toward the future calls us to

action, to communication and dialogue with its onrushing possibilities.

For those who take the future as holy, there is wasteful tragedy in the position of those who resist its coming. To resist the future utterly is to be utterly annihilated. Not physical, but spiritual annihilation is meant; it is to become irrelevant, disregarded, impotent—to be treated as nonexistent. The loss of a cooperating present is a tragedy because the future as holy is beyond human good and evil. As potential existence, it contains the seeds of both. The present era is aging and rapidly drawing to a close. Still it enjoys the virtues of its defects. With age come experience and wisdom. The inchoate future sorely requires for development those who will bring to it this experience and wisdom. Such cannot be accomplished by the self-excommunicated who have become invisible and irrelevant; only those engaged in compassionate and sympathetic dialogue with the future can realize the promise for good it brings. The beliefs of the future may be uncomfortable, the symbolism strange, and the morality new, but the faces of the future should be familiar—they are the faces of our children.

It is in this spirit that I understand your consecration tonight. You have been set apart to the future, the holy object, and as you serve the holy so are you holy. The future that stands over against us will be your greatest task—and your greatest challenge. Your ministries will span momentous if not decisive years for Jewish religion in particular, and the spiritual concerns of the human family in general. I wish I could say to you that we, your teachers at the College, have given you all that will be required in the eventful years ahead, as you engage in the everyday struggle to wrest good from the diverse possibilities of existence, the ethical from the holy. We did not, of course. I console myself with the belief that we could not. The good of the radical future cannot be realized by distant Messiahs. Only those in the concrete situation can bring about its extraordinary possibilities for good. We here cannot know which or any of the present beliefs and symbols will be competent for the future. We do not yet know the sacrifices we will be called upon to make at the altar of the future God.

Yet of this I am sure; there can be no religion more appropriate than Reform Judaism for the belief that the future is holy. Reform Judaism, the child of change, has incorporated within itself the acceptance of change. Even in the view of the future as radical, no greater good can be conceived than its abiding ideals: the freedom of the individual, and his right to creativity and authenticity. These ideals, I believe, will serve you well in meeting the demands that will be made upon you in your ministries as you strive to serve a radical future. They give you the power to envision new truths and realities, the right to fashion new attitudes and responses, the charge to continue the creation of Reform Judaism.