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Irony Culture and Polysymbolic Religiosity

At the distance of a decade, we can see that the Death of God movement signaled a far deeper crisis in theological scholarship than was evident from its initial, raucous faddishness. It not only marked the end of the Barthian era, but it also led to the conviction among many contemporary American theologians that any future theology must be post-Christian and post-modern. An impressive body of writing has not as yet emerged from this radical wing in American theology; there is still too much faddishness, too much work in piecemeal, and too much reflection of the cultural scene. What is important, however, is the problematic, and this problematic has defined the major working context of a whole generation of theologians. Even though I share this problematic, I want to argue that the cultural location of this emergent "*atheistic theology*" is more soberingly constrictive than its presently discernable lineaments would permit one to think.

1.

A fresh preoccupation with *religion* seems to be the widest common feature of this new theology.¹ While God for these theologians is definitely dead, religion as a human reality continues to live and to offer rich material for a theological consciousness appropriate to a post-modern era. Of course, this radical fringe does not monopolize the new contemporary interest in religion. Given the post-Barthian crisis, a trend has arisen within more or less traditional theology to see the persistent religiosity of man as the basis for a modern theological reconstruction.² As Lonnie Kliever summarizes it: "If religion is necessary, then God is possible; if religion is uneradicable, then God is unavoidable."³ In contrast, religion becomes important for radical theology precisely because God and all traditional theological strategies are dead.⁴ The significance of the movement derives from its serious effort to comprehend the lasting human meaning of religion for an age in which the "alienated theologian"⁵ himself has internalized an atheistic secularization.

¹ N. O. Brown, *Love's Body* (1966); R. J. Lifton, *Boundaries* (1969); R. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (1970); J. Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (1972); W. C. Shepherd, *Religion and the Counterculture: Sociological Inquiry* 42, 1 (1972); R. S. Ellwood, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in America* (1973); W. C. Shepherd, *On the Concept of "Being Wrong" Religiously: Journ. of the Amer. Acad. of Religion* 42 (1974); W. Hamilton, *On Taking God Out of the Dictionary* (1974); D. L. Miller, *The New Polytheism* (1974); J. Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology* (1975).

² Cf., e.g., L. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (1969); L. Dupré, *The Other Dimension* (1972); A. M. Greeley, *Unsecular Man* (1972).

³ Lonnie Kliever, *Polysymbolic Religiosity* (unpublished mimeograph, 1977), p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

⁵ Van A. Harvey, *The Alienated Theologian: The Future of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Rob. A. Evans (1971).

The intellectual force most decisively marking the new theological consciousness is the encounter with relativism and pluralism. Indeed, more than anything else, this encounter sets off the experience of the death of God from the Barthian era. It also makes impossible any simple return to nineteenth century liberalism. While many themes in liberal theology were set by relativism and pluralism, the experience of the historicity of all cultures, standpoints, and symbols has accelerated and immeasurably deepened in the twentieth century. The new theological consciousness has experienced this challenge and absorbed its impact more profoundly than any other contemporary theological movement.

William Shepherd's phrase, "*polysymbolic religiosity*",⁶ catches both these features of the new theology: the lasting human significance of religion after the death of God and the encounter with relativism and pluralism. It is a form of religiosity because it recognizes that religious symbolism and action contain a richness which no merely scientific or secular system can approach. But it is a polysymbolic, polymorphic religiosity. The modern experience of relativism and pluralism contains both limit and license: no singular symbolic tradition can root itself deeply enough in the contemporary psyche to offer a paradigm for world-orientation, but contemporary man is, consequently, freed to embrace the entire breadth of religious symbolism in its human significance. Despite the rather obvious difficulty in holding both of these claims together, much contemporary theology, nevertheless, attempts to exploit the polymorphic possibilities of modern pluralistic culture precisely in its potential for the formation of new, "protean" religious identities.⁷

This affirmation is possible, however, only against the background of a more or less explicit atheism. A protean, polysymbolic religiosity becomes possible only when the transcendent ontological rootage of religious symbols has been undermined and surrendered, for this rootage supports the largely unreflective, but nevertheless universal, convergence in all traditional culture of religious symbolism and "reality" and "truth".⁸ Because of this convergence, pre-modern religion always constituted a bulwark against pluralism. For the same reason, pluralism has always been a profound threat to traditional religious identity.⁹ The fragmentation of symbolic universes in modern societies sunders this onto epistemic foundation

⁶ Shepherd, *On the Concept* (n. 1), pp. 77–81.

⁷ Cf., R. J. Lifton, *Protean Man*: *Partisan Review* (Winter, 1968).

⁸ Cf., A. F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (1966). As J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (transl. by Th. McCarthy 1975), p. 119, makes the point: "The 'meaning' promised by religion has always been ambivalent. On the one hand, by promising meaning, it preserved the claim – until now constitutive for the socio-cultural form of life – that men ought not to be satisfied with fictions but only with 'truths' when they wish to know why something happens in the way it does, how it happens, and how what they do and ought to do can be justified. On the other hand, promise of meaning has always implied a promise of consolation as well, for proffered interpretations do not simply bring the unsettling contingencies to consciousness but make them bearable as well – even when, and precisely when, they cannot be removed as contingencies." Habermas speaks of ambivalence here because he simply takes for granted that for modern modes of world orientation the consolations promised by religion are illusory and known to be such. Cf., *ibid.*, p. 121.

⁹ Cf., Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), pp. 29–52, 126–171.

and accounts for the increasing privatization of religion.¹⁰ To appropriate this fragmentation for purposes of positive theological construction requires the same surrender of transcendent reality and truth, but now carried through self-consciously.

Consequently, in its final defining characteristic, polysymbolic religiosity joyously and polymorphously embraces the fictive status of all symbols, myths, etc. For the future, not ontology or metaphysics but the imagination, the fictive, mythopoetic imagination is to provide the material for theological reflection. Thus, it is no accident that much of the most recent theological writing shows greater similarity in form and style to literary criticism than it does to traditional theology.¹¹

What we may call “constructionism” and “symbolic formism” provide the warrants for such a fictive religious imagination. The term constructionism designates the recognition in the sociology of knowledge that all cultural products, including religion, are human constructions, the necessity for which is rooted in the peculiar conditions of human “neoteny” and “infantilization”.¹² That is, all symbolic universes are human projections. The crude materialist epiphenomenalism seemingly implicit here can be qualified by a dialectical recognition that cultural products, once created, have a life of their own and act back upon their creators. But this does not lessen the radicality of the position. The ultimate reference of such products does not thereby become an independent, objective “reality” somehow correlated with projections but the social structure in which they are embedded.¹³ This radicality, of course, subverts the onto-epistemic foundations of traditional religion; indeed, it is nothing less than a theoretical formulation of pluralism and relativism. But it provides the basis for a fictive, polysymbolic religiosity. Recognizing religious symbols as human products permits one to explore their human significance – not just descriptively or critically but constructively. For some the claim is even stronger, for constructionism provides the warrant now actively to exploit human symbolic plasticity – thus, polymorphous religiosity.¹⁴

In a typology of contemporary approaches to symbolism, Lonnie Kliever terms constructionism by the phrase “symbolic formism” and contrasts it to “symbolic

¹⁰ Cf., *ibid.* and T. Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (1967).

¹¹ Habermas (n. 8), p. 78: “Bourgeois art has become the refuge for a satisfaction, even if only virtual, of those needs that have become, as it were, illegal in the material life-process of bourgeois society. I refer here to the desire for a mimetic relation with nature; the need for living together in solidarity outside the group egoism of the immediate family; the longing for the happiness of a communicative experience exempt from imperatives of purposive rationality and giving scope to imagination as well as spontaneity. Bourgeois art, unlike privatized religion, scientific philosophy, and strategic-utilitarian morality, did not take on tasks in the economic and political systems. Instead it collected residual needs that could find no satisfaction within the ‘system of needs.’” Cf., also, Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms* (1975), and R. Bellah (n. 1), on “Transcendence in Contemporary Piety”.

¹² W. LaBarre, *The Human Animal* (1968); H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928); A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch* (1940).

¹³ Berger (n. 9), p. 179 ff. It should be noted that even Berger’s attempt to re-ground religion in the relativizations of the sociology of knowledge does not avoid but presupposes exactly this radicality: *idem*, *A Rumor of Angels* (1969).

¹⁴ Cf., Shepherd (n. 1).

reductionism" and "symbolic realism".¹⁵ According to Kliever, symbolic reductionism and realism both suffer from an "objectivistic" bias ultimately deriving from a "correspondence" ideal of reference. They are insufficiently aware of the symbolic character of their own interpretations of symbols. In contrast, symbolic formism recognizes that there are "symbol systems which do not represent any ontological reality, whether visible or hidden, physical or metaphysical. These symbol systems represent symbolic realities which, even though imaginary, play decisive roles in human life."¹⁶ This recognition then forms the basis for an interpretation of all human culture on a constructionist basis:

Symbols represent conceptions of significant experience... Man experiences himself and his total environment through the symbolic media of linguistic forms, mythical tales, religious rituals, artistic images, collective representations, and scientific abstractions. These symbol systems constitute the warp and woof of all human life... Reality is constituted by meaningful human experience rather than by objective ontological entities. If each world has its own special and distinctive style of meaning for existence, each world is real after its own fashion.¹⁷

Kliever acknowledges that among the contemporary theories representing the convergence toward symbolic formism there is no agreement "over the scope of religious influence on human life".¹⁸ Nonetheless, symbolic formism in some version must clearly ground a polysymbolic religiosity. By himself speaking of "self-induced belief systems",¹⁹ Kliever openly advocates such a grounding and thereby implicitly recognizes the fictive character of such a religiosity.

2.

Aside from the up-beat optimism with which polysymbolic religiosity embraces symbolic formism, the first question for polysymbolism must be whether it can be given a religious meaning at all. Symbolic formism there may be; but can it be religious? Kliever only half recognizes this problem. While he does see the wide differences about the scope of religion within symbolic formism, he fails to point out that precisely those theories which ground symbolic formism²⁰ also subvert their use for a *re-constitution of religious meaning*. The differences, that is, have largely to do with the importance to be accorded to religion in the interpretation of cultural artifacts. Further, religion has something of a special status here because this subversion does not occur when symbolic formism promotes the constitution of alternative meanings in mundane, non-religious spheres of cultural life.

To see the force of this problem, we must examine more closely the cultural

¹⁵ Lonnie Kliever, Alternative Conceptions of Religion as a Symbol System: Union Seminary Quarterly Review 27 (1972).

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 100 f.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁰ E.g., the sociology of knowledge, Parsonian symbolic action theory, game and play theory, and systems theory. Cf., ibid., p. 100 and Habermas.

location of polysymbolic religiosity. At one level, “cultural location” simply means the social differentiation, fragmentation of symbolic worlds, relativism, pluralism, and religious privatism characteristic of modernized societies. In this sense polysymbolic religiosity accurately mirrors the contemporary cultural situation which it has actively grasped for purposes of theological construction. But “cultural location” reflects a deeper issue, an epistemological crisis which bears more forcibly on polysymbolic religiosity than its proponents seem prepared to acknowledge.

Ernest Gellner’s *Legitimation of Belief* is a powerful statement of the problem. Gellner is concerned with the grounds for cognitive certainty in the contemporary world. He shows that, taken in its full scope, the history of modern philosophy has been an attempt to locate the grounds for cognitive certainty after the framework of traditional Western certainties came to an end with the rise of the sciences and those social, economic, and political forces which polysymbolism mirrors. Acknowledging that pluralistic epistemologies (paralleling polysymbolism) are all the vogue today, he nevertheless forcefully shows that this philosophical pluralism (e.g., “any language in use, is in order”) flies in the face of a much more powerful “critical monism” which represents the true force of several centuries of philosophical and social formation.

To make this point, Gellner draws the enlightening distinction between viewing theories of knowledge as descriptive or explanatory accounts of knowledge and seeing them as selectors which prescribe norms “to govern and limit our cognitive behaviour”.²¹ This distinction clears aside an enormous amount of underbrush from the intramural fights in modern philosophy, for seen as selectors, and placed in terms of cultural location and importance, modern epistemologies do converge upon a surprising consensus. Two such selectors determine this consensus: empiricism and a materialistic machine or structural model. Each representing very broad intellectual currents, Gellner describes them respectively: (1) “A claim to knowledge is legitimate only if it can be justified in terms of experience”; and (2) “A claim to knowledge is legitimate only if it is a specification of a publicly reproducible structure.”²² Broadly speaking again, empiricism draws its strength from enjoining the kind of data which can count in defending a cognitive claim, whereas materialism/mechanism mandates the kind of theory that will count as an explanation.

In this form, of course, the two massive selectors in modern intellectual history are in systematic conflict.²³ But in terms of the cultural location of knowledge in modern societies, there is a convergence. What is important about materialism/mechanism is not a mechanistic or materialistic view of reality (hence the elegance of Gellner’s “selector” idea) but the demand that any adequate theory or explanation favour “reproducible, publicly, observable and examinable, so to speak culture-free structures”.²⁴ As a selector, empiricism too has no stake in a particular

²¹ E. Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief* (1974), p. 31, cf., pp. 36, 46–58.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²³ Cf., *ibid.*, pp. 71 ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65, cf., pp. 122 f.

view of reality. Its sovereignty comes from “proscribing the construction of circular, self-maintaining worlds”²⁵ by insisting that all evidence be broken into its constituent parts and examined as such. The convergence here is in favor of knowledge which is public, reproducible, impersonal, and indifferent to special pleading. And this convergence is represented more in what the selectors exclude, for they perform a massive debunking operation, precluding, in Gellner’s shorthand, all “magical or participatory societies”,²⁶ i.e., all reality claims based on tradition or privileged access. These are massively eroded in the modern world.

The traditionalist cannot reply by declaring religion, with its basis in faith, exempt from this erosion. Far more is at stake for Gellner than simply a history of esoteric philosophical debates. One side of modern intellectual history has indeed concerned a crisis in the legitimation of knowledge, and, Gellner shows, its resolution, represented by the selectors, is broadly, if often in highly indirect ways, established in the cultural structure of modern societies. The fragmentation of symbolic universes in the contemporary world has, if you will, an epistemological basis and cannot just be referred mechanically to social differentiation.

Gellner is especially sensitive to this issue. A second burden of his discussion is to ask what kind of world we can live in after we have irreversibly crossed the “great divide” marked by the selectors. The problem is that the cognitive world we moderns have no choice but to inhabit is cold, heartless, impersonal, morally neutral, humanly indifferent. In fact, it is a world we cannot inhabit, at least for very long at a time. But this fact gives no license for an openended re-endorsement of the “Lebenswelt”.²⁷ Modern man’s peculiar problem is precisely that the “Lebenswelt” in which he must live has become problematic:

“Modern man has been practicing epochē for some centuries without knowing it, much as he speaks prose. It is precisely because the new science speaks in a strange and ‘technical’ idiom, referring to a cold and inhuman world, which is discontinuous with the notions of everyday life, and because at the same time the new science manifestly has much greater cognitive power than any contained in the practices of daily life, that daily life has come to be surrounded, as part of its very nature, as part of that which is ‘lived’, by tacit, doubt-conveying quotation marks.”²⁸

For this reason, Gellner adopts the term “*ironic cultures*” to describe the human world of modern cultural meaning. Man continues to live in a cosy, human world; indeed, the social conditions of modern life permit an effluence of such playful, self-induced symbolic worlds. Here, among other things, we are speaking of polysymbolic religiosity. But such constructions are ironic. Unlike their equivalents from traditional worlds, they are not serious. They represent marginal secondary elaborations on a quite different substructure where the serious cognitive business goes on. In Gellner’s formulation:

²⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 125.

²⁷ Cf., *ibid.*, pp. 195–200.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 198.

“By [ironic culture] I do not mean that the individuals involved in them necessarily or indeed generally hold and internalise such cultures and their doctrinal content in a detached, ironic spirit. The irony is not generally conscious, explicit or individual. It resides in the fact that the whole organisation of such cultures, the way in which they are implemented and enforced in life . . . work in a manner which tacitly presupposes and admits that they are not to be taken seriously, as knowledge. They contain claims, assertions, which sound cognitive, and which in other, non-ironic cultures would indeed have been such; but here, it is somehow understood that they are not fully serious, not commensurate or continuous with real knowledge. Real knowledge is to be found elsewhere; and it does have the cold forms which Kant and Weber discerned and anticipated.”²⁹

With the notion of ironic cultures, we can now return to the question whether polysymbolic religiosity can lay claim to being religious. The problem here has to do with seriousness, for religion is nothing if it is not serious and capable of sustaining seriousness. The issue emerges when, having elaborated something like a constructionist methodology, the polysymbolist blithely asserts that a fictive consciousness can construct meaning. Meaning in what sense? Can it endow the human situation with meaning? Can meaning be constructed by an act of freedom? The meaning which sustains the seriousness of religion is nothing less than the meaning – not necessarily the meaningfulness – of man’s existence in the cosmos. While there is no religious agreement about this meaning, there is agreement that the crucial crises of human existence – fate, death, man’s final aloneness, suffering, injustice – are not finally without redemption. What is at stake here is nicely caught in Peter Berger’s phrase that “religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant”³⁰ The fictive character of polysymbolism is not at issue here. We have already granted the terms on which a radical theology must be prosecuted after the death of God. The issue, rather, is the seriousness with which polysymbolism locates itself within ironic culture. Here the undefined, unrelievedly optimistic assertion about the construction of meaning must give one pause.

A closer examination reveals that the polysymbolists’ construction of meaning

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 193 f. Again, cf., pp. 147 f.: “When a traditional faith was held in the full and literal sense, it was wedded to the best available current forms of knowledge. When it is theatrically revived, in a kind of social inverted commas, it is revived, precisely, by disconnecting it from what is taken seriously as knowledge, and is kept alive only by this artificial insulation, by inventing special criteria and functions for it, which are carefully made distinct from serious cognition. But when serious issues are at stake, when the fate of individuals and communities is at risk, one will not fail to make use of the best available knowledge; so, in any crisis, men tend to ignore the revived ‘tradition’ and think in the terms which they cognitively respect, rather than in terms of antiquarian conceptual furnishing. So, ironically, the traditional ‘faith’ is used when things go smoothly and no faith is really needed, but it is ignored when the situation is grave.”

³⁰ Berger (n. 9), p. 30. Or see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), with his now classic definition of religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”, in the essay *Religion as a Cultural System*.

is in fact far more problematic than they recognize and for quite specific reasons. These have to do with the “meta-reflective” epistemology built directly into polysymbolism. Unlike the immediate effusions of ironic culture, the theological freedom enjoined by polysymbolism requires an explicit self-consciousness about its status in ironic culture. Its methodological basis presupposes a second-order, meta-reflective awareness of ironic culture. In this sense, polysymbolism is doubly ironic: not an immediate effusion, it nevertheless exploits the situation which makes such effusions possible, self-consciously acknowledging the fictive status of its own productions. Thus, while its theological constructions are self-consciously part of ironic culture, the meta-reflective epistemology which makes them possible is not. What is its basis? It can only be something very much like Gellner’s selectors. This means that symbolic formism is not purely constructionist at all but is parasitic on the selectors. But this dependence is smuggled in and not fully acknowledged. And this is why there is an underlying equivocation about the construction of meaning within polysymbolism. Several examples will help clarify this point.

In his symbolic formism article, Kliever states that symbolic worlds, “even though imaginary, play decisive roles in human life”, and he argues that symbolic formism requires these roles to be anchored in the everyday, “real” world in which secular man lives.³¹ But he fails to acknowledge the full implications of this admission. It means, given their fictive status, that the intelligibility of symbols will be dependent on their reference to the structures of a human reality which can be re-stated in quite mundane, scientific, and non-religious, even if still symbolic, ways. Its meta-reflective character means, in other words, that polysymbolic religiosity necessarily contains a hidden bias in favor of symbolic reductionism or Gellner’s selectors which symbolic formism only thinly disguises.³²

The same points is implicit in Kliever’s sympathetic discussion of David Miller and Joseph Campbell. In *The New Polytheism*, Miller advocates a revival of the polytheism of Greek mythology as a symbolic form appropriate to the multiple realities and multiple truths of modern societies. Although Miller and his mentor, James Hillman, sometimes seem to suggest that the Greek gods are real as gods, the more serious thrust of their work is to suggest that the gods give symbolic articulation in man’s deep unconscious to “those always unharmonized and often unrecognized structures and forces which give shape to social and personal existence”.³³ If this is the case, however, then, again, the very “meaning” of the gods is dependent on a meta-level recognition that they “refer” to a set of realities capable of being stated in entirely direct and non-religious terms. Further, we have access to such descriptions only by virtue of the cultural sciences based on the selectors which relegated “the gods” to ironic culture in the first place.

This same meta-theoretical point emerges from Joseph Campbell’s voluminous surveys of world mythology in a somewhat different way. Two latent arguments run through his attempt to demonstrate the richness of myth for modern, secular

³¹ Kliever (n. 15), pp. 101 f.

³² Cf., Gellner’s (n. 21) discussion of the same point, pp. 83–107.

³³ Kliever (n. 3), p. 15.

man: (1) the meaning of myths only becomes accessible when they are stripped of their supernatural and historical trappings, and (2) underlying all world mythology is a kind of “monomyth”, rooted in a collective unconscious, which offers an identical and still valid vision of man’s place in the cosmos.³⁴ Because of this latter element, Campbell’s position is not susceptible to the same kind of scientific reduction and adjudication that applies to Kliever and Miller. But the same meta-theoretical point applies. The myths offered to modern man depend for their appropriation on a second order self-consciousness about their meaning which itself can be articulated and adjudicated only by a language entirely different from and reductive of the original mythological language – e.g., philosophical argument, a cross-cultural empirical and historical examination of Campbell’s data, and the conflicting claims of Jungian and Freudian psychoanalysis.

3.

These examples demonstrate that the *carte blanche* symbolic formism seemingly gives for the *construction of meaning* is *deceptive*. The intelligibility of every so-called construction of symbolic meaning implies a meta-reflective use of interpretive frameworks which make questionable the religious meaning of such constructions. This is the pathos of the alienated theologian: every attempt to capture a “second naïveté” carries with it a loss of innocence which cannot be forgotten. This is the “box of interpretation”, and polysymbolic religiosity cannot escape it so easily as symbolic formism suggests.³⁵

Is there a way out? In one sense there is not. The cultural location of religion in modernity will not change, and in this sense, polysymbolic religiosity is not only a proper analysis of the situation but also represents the direction of an appropriate response. If theology has a future, it lies in the fictive imagination. But the purpose of this analysis is to indicate that the precise shape of its meta-reflective consciousness places the fictive imagination within more severe and sober constraints than the polysymbolists acknowledge. I want to mention *two* such *constraints*, each of which presupposes the other.

(1) If religion in its deepest center attempts to represent and enact the meaning of the human situation, then the specific meta-reflective consciousness of the contemporary fictive imagination (i.e., something like the selectors) situates it within at least one “realistic” onto-epistemic constraint: atheism, or, at least, a very sober agnosticism. Since these terms are already heavily freighted philosophically, the meaning intended here can perhaps best be indicated by a series of more prosaic negations. Underlying a polysymbolic religiosity must be the recognition that religion’s audacious attempt to conceive the entire universe as humanly significant

³⁴ Cf., e.g., Campbell (n. 1), p. 257.

³⁵ Cf., R. Scharlemann, *Religiöses und kritisches Bewusstsein. Erwägungen zur Wahrheitsfrage in der Religionsphilosophie: Neue Zeitschrift für Syst. Theol. und Religionsphilosophie*, 18 (1976).

is indeed illusory; that the cosmos is finally *indifferent* to human cries for response; that death is without redemption; that apocalyptic times offer no grounds for eschatological hopes; that there are no consolations for suffering, sin, and guilt apart from the fragile consolations we can offer one another as we reach out across our final aloneness; that human existence is finally and unremittingly tragic. While many polysymbolists would probably respond that such claims have simply been assumed as obvious throughout their work, their joyous optimism about the construction of meaning suggests the contrary. The point is that, in its religious dimension, the fictive imagination can be neither optimistic nor limitlessly free. On both sides, it is constrained by the tragic implications of its meta-reflective consciousness, and its symbolic creations must be controlled by these implications.

(2) I want to be more tentative about the second constraint since it involves a proposal for a specific line of development from the first constraint. Part of a larger series of projects I have underway, there is space here only to adumbrate it. I am troubled not merely by the optimism but also by the rampant *individuality* implicit in polysymbolic religiosity. This “each man his own religion” stance leaves modern man even more isolated than the already impersonal, rationalizing, community-destroying structures of secular culture have already left him. If the future of the fictive theological imagination has the tragic contours I have suggested, then it must be further constrained by communities of symbolic action which permit a sharing of the dilemmas and passages of human existence toward death. Such sharing becomes more, not less, essential in the religious recognition that we have nothing but ourselves.

I am suggesting, therefore, that the most promising direction to look for the development of a fictive theological imagination is not toward the polymorphic creation of symbolic meaning but precisely toward the religious *traditions* and *communities* which constitute our historicity – in the West, Judaism and Christianity. It is a truism that just as meaning can only be discovered, not freely created, so religions can die but cannot be self-consciously constructed. Whether our formed symbolic traditions permit such a contraction toward a tragic community of sharing is an open question. But an exploration of this question and its constraint is the most promising future for polysymbolic religiosity.

While some work has begun concerning the possibilities within Judaism and Christianity for this kind of interpretation,³⁶ the argument here is not dependent

³⁶ Cf., R. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (1966); *idem.*, *The Religious Imagination* (1968) and *My Brother Paul* (1972); G. N. Boyd, *Richard Rubenstein and Radical Christianity: Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 30 (Fall, 1974). While it is not clear that Fritz Buri would concur with the line of this argument, it should be recognized that the “material principle” of his theology is the most substantial statement of a position in contemporary Christian theology which is at least susceptible to being construed in this direction. Cf., Buri, *Dogmatik als Selbstverständnis des christlichen Glaubens*, 1 (1956), pp. 442 ff. It may be, however, that in Christianity and Judaism the doctrines of election and hope place insurmountable barriers in the way of such a tragic re-symbolization from within these traditions. Cf., Rubenstein, *The Elect and the Preterite: Soundings* 59 (Winter, 1976).

upon appropriating any particular community and tradition. Indeed, there is evidence that *Buddhism* may turn out to be the most modern of religions. Hence, I fully agree with the polysymbolic reference point in pluralism. But as Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, meaning has always been a scarce resource and in modern societies is becoming even scarcer.³⁷ Herein lies the significance of its cultural location for a fictive theological imagination without illusions.

Charles D. Hardwick, Washington, D.C.

³⁷ Habermas (n. 8), p. 73.