

The Emergence of the Sacred in Human Being

For the Muskegon Council for the Arts & Humanities Festival,

On the theme "Freedom and Privacy"

Richard A. Rhem
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It is an honor to be the tenth Marguerite Holcomb lecturer and to be included on the program of the 2004 Muskegon Arts and Humanities Festival. In all my years of preaching, even though I observed the Church Year calendar and loved the great festivals of that calendar, I resisted using the Lectionary which provided a four-fold set of scripture readings for each Sunday and all Feast Days. For me, it was part of the creative process to wrestle with season, scripture and theme. And so, when Mr. Ford called me to invite me to give these lectures and gave me, as well, the theme "*Freedom and Privacy*," my only hesitation in accepting the invitation was the assignment of the theme.

I have insisted on determining my themes in private, with freedom, you see!

Freedom and Privacy? What qualifies me to address such a subject? But, then, in his own inimitable fashion, Mr. Ford continued, suggesting I could really develop the subject in any way I chose, even if the theme was not at all evident.

I was also encouraged by a gracious letter from Martha Ferriby in which she wrote:

The theme of the 2004 Festival is "Freedom and Privacy." With that theme in mind, we have no preconceived approaches you should take. We encourage you to develop your own presentation consistent with your area of specialization ... You are encouraged to consider the wide range of subjects touching our contemporary world within your area of expertise.

That was the permission I needed to think about "Freedom and Privacy" philosophically and theologically. I suspect, although I do not know, that the theme was determined in light of our contemporary situation which has been so largely shaped by 9/11. The terrorist attack on this nation and the worldwide terrorist phenomenon has required governmental measures to attempt to provide security in an increasingly dangerous world and security measures inevitably threaten human rights. Especially in a nation that has been marked by the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, the creation of a Department

of Homeland Security and the passage of the Patriot Act create tension with fundamental human rights as we have enjoyed them. Surveillance cameras becoming a fact of life, along with provisions of the Patriot Act create a chill as the possibility of an Orwellian world emerges.

I am a technological dinosaur, but I am learning slowly to use the computer. I know enough to go to Google and with one finger type in words. For “Freedom” and then “Privacy” and then for “Freedom and Privacy,” I found a few million entries. Not being up to researching that vast field, I did linger long enough to realize that not only the terrorist threat but also the Internet has created a whole new threat to Privacy. One’s profile as to habits and tastes can now be filled out in details and, as we are all aware, the tension between freedom and control has created one of the great contemporary debates.

You may have heard of the comment made by Scot McNealy, Co-founder, Chairman and CEO of Sun Microsystems. He was asked at a press conference about the need for privacy and said:

You have no privacy. Get over it.

Well, he caused a firestorm, but the response clearly indicates that he touched a raw nerve and the issue at stake will not be solved by raising the decibels of emotional retort.

As I said earlier, I do not know how our theme was selected, but I suspect our contemporary situation marked by terrorist threat, security measures, as well as the whole new complex of issues raised by the Internet may well have played into the discussion.

As critical as this whole complex of issues is for the well-being of present and future society, I have no special knowledge or experience to offer a full analysis of the problems nor to offer solutions to the new threats to our freedom and our privacy. What does interest me, however, and what I have spent much time thinking about is the nature of human being. And one cannot think long and deeply about the human without recognizing the critical importance Freedom plays and the right to Privacy, as well.

The first point I would like to make is that the American Experience grounds its core values of Freedom and Human Dignity in a religious-metaphysical understanding.

The American experience in its formation rooted human freedom in the Sacred Source of Being itself. In the familiar words of the Declaration of Independence,

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure

these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Chief architect of that great document, Thomas Jefferson, in his first Inaugural Address contended,

Equal and exact justice to all ... of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none. ... Freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of person ... These principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us, and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and the blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment. They should be the creed of our political faith, the text of civil instruction, the touchstone by which to try the services of those we trust; and should we wander from them in moments of error or alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty, and safety.

In our day, advocates of the Christian Religious Right claim ours is a Christian nation, but such a claim is unwarranted. The foundation of human dignity issuing in human freedom transcends any particular religious creed while rooting that claim more profoundly in a shared religious conviction that human worth and human freedom are given by the Creative Source of Being, however that Sacred Mystery is conceived or named.

The authors of our forming documents were Enlightenment thinkers whose Christian faith found particular expression in a Deistic creed. God, Creator, other than creation, was the Source and guarantor of human dignity, human rights and, thus, human freedom. The claim that these truths are self-evident may well be challenged as one observes the human story. Obviously, accident of birth, to say nothing of innate giftedness would seem to call in question the surface claim that all are created equal. But, certainly this is not a recent recognition; it must have been evident, as well, when these words were penned.

What, then, is the claim of equality, of certain inalienable rights? *Surely those claims must point to that which is universally shared - the sacredness of human being in the created order of Being itself.* This was the fundamental conviction of the Deist who had moved beyond Christian orthodoxy but held, nonetheless, to a conception of God as Creator. In this understanding, God is the great Clockmaker who creates the universe, endows it with the Laws of Nature, and sets it on its way without intervention or interruption.

The Deists, as their orthodox predecessors, were thus shaped by the biblical story - the profound Creation mythology of the early chapters of Genesis in which God, the Creator of all Being or Reality creates all that is, including the human being in the Divine Image. Volumes have been written about the meaning of the Image of God. I will not attempt even to summarize that discussion, but only claim that it would seem obvious that the ancient Hebrew author was reflecting the sense of a profound connection between the Divine and the Human in terms of conscious awareness and moral sense.

Attempting in those first eleven chapters of Genesis to set Israel's salvation history in the context of a universal history, the human condition is described in narrative form as one of rebellion and revolt with all the negative consequences that mark humanity. In traditional theological language, we speak of the human condition as Fallen. The whole ensuing biblical story, continued in the Christian scriptures, particularly in the writings of St. Paul, is a story of redemption - deliverance from that fallen state of estrangement from the God of Creation, restored to communion with God.

The Deism of the authors of America's founding documents reflected a move beyond a traditional orthodox Christian theology, but the Deist was still locked into a God "out there," a Supernatural Being who created and endowed the Creation with Natural Law, thereby calling in question the engagement of God with Creation - challenging the traditional understanding of God's immanence. The Deist, in other words, moved from a traditional Theist position which marks biblical religious understanding, including the Islamic conception of Deity, but Deism was only a halfway house to modern atheism which denied a transcendent Ground of Being.

In his book, *Does God Exist?*, (1978), Hans Küng traces the development of modern atheism, from Feuerbach through Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, to the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche. Beginning with Feuerbach's projection theory claiming,

The consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the consciousness of the *infinity of the consciousness*.

That is:

In the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature.

Küng explains,

This, then, is how the notion of God emerges, and it seems entirely understandable. Man sets up his human nature out of himself, he sees it as something existing outside himself and separated from himself; he

projects it, then, as an autonomous figure - so to speak - in heaven, calls it God and worships it. In a word, the notion of God is nothing but a *projection* of man: "The absolute to man is his own nature. The power of the *object* over him is therefore the power of *his own nature*."

... God appears as a projected, hypothesized reflection of man, behind which nothing exists in reality. (Küng, p. 200)

Feuerbach's projection theory provided the "Climate of opinion" for those thinkers who accepted that theory uncritically and assumed its truth as they pursued their respective areas of special focus: Marx's socio-political atheism; Freud's psychoanalytic atheism and Nietzsche's nihilism.

Rather than engaging the amazing discoveries of the natural sciences about the universe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the advent of historical consciousness in the nineteenth century, the Church hardened the lines of orthodoxy, claimed absolute authority in tradition, institution and scripture and absolutized its dogmatic creedal declarations, all of which had been conceived on the basis of a worldview that was rapidly dissolving before the unrelenting movement of new knowledge exploding across the spectrum of the disciplines of human research.

The war between science and religion is both familiar and unfortunate and need not be recounted here, other than to say that it is incredible that there continues to be vocal claims from Fundamentalist religious quarters for obscurantist views of the universe, literalizing the profound biblical myths and sagas and thus draining them of their symbolic value.

I relate this historical development of the modern period because it ended with an impasse; much of institutional Christianity continuing to perpetuate the biblical worldview that could not stand the test of empirical research and verification and much of the intellectual leadership and the academic community, not willing to make the sacrifice of the intellect demanded by the Church, simply giving up on the formal religious observance.

Even the movement of Liberal Theology continued the biblical paradigm of theism - the Supernatural God "out there," Creator in perfection and Fall - the human creatures fallen, their nature needing redemption. The Liberal Theological movement did attempt to accommodate its religious understanding to the findings of modern science, but like the Deists we spoke of earlier, it was a halfway house, trying to preserve the biblical worldview in an age whose breakthroughs in discovering the nature and history of cosmic reality could not be accommodated in that worldview.

Thus I come to my major contention: The freedom and dignity of the human will be best affirmed and protected if the biblical worldview is replaced by a

worldview that is conceived and imagined in light of our present knowledge of the cosmic reality into which our lives are woven.

Specifically, the biblical paradigm of a Creator God “out there,” calling into being a created order separate from the Being of God and over against God should be replaced by a model that sees Reality as one, the emergence of its Sacred Source and creative center.

Secondly, and following on that conception, the Human must be conceived as the emergence of the Sacred in the one cosmic totality. The sacredness, the worth, dignity and the freedom of the human being is not something conferred on the creature by a God “wholly other” in the language of Karl Barth, but rather intrinsic to the creature, the creature being the emergence of the Sacred in the evolving cosmic reality.

The human then is not a creation in perfection in an initial state of innocence from which the creature “fell,” marking the human race as fallen. Rather, the human is the product of a process of billions of years of cosmic unfolding, the emergence of consciousness, of awareness, the emergence of spirit.

We who are human are not marked by all the negativity that clings to us because we have fallen from some state of perfection, but rather, because we are animals who have arrived through the exercise of the survival instincts we have practiced in order to prevail. We have come to our present state through millennia of evolution from the slime and the jungle from which we have emerged.

If I claim that the biblical worldview must be replaced by an understanding that accords with our best scientific knowledge of cosmic reality of which we are a part, I do not mean to say that the great religious traditions that look to the Bible have not provided profound insight into the human situation. Earlier I mentioned that intuitive insight in the Genesis stories that the human is created in the image of God. I now add a second insight which is at the heart of the Christian tradition, namely, that God has become human.

The Christian claim of the incarnation of God in the humanity of Jesus is expressed profoundly in the Johannine writings. In the Gospel of John we have in the prologue the claim that the Word or logos that was in the beginning, became flesh or human. John 1:1 can be translated “in the beginning was the Divine Intention.” Then in 1:14, we could read “The Divine Intention became human.” This would seem to be a claim of the Divine becoming human in the unfolding of history.

Of course, the biblical writer had no sense of a cosmic process of 13.7 billion years. Still, the emergence of the Divine in the Human is clearly there.

That is a profound and radical claim. Of course, what the Church has done with that insight is to isolate that event of God becoming human to the once-for-all event of Jesus, thus leading to Christian exclusivism and absolutism. Such exclusivism can no longer be reasonably maintained in a world awake to the pluralism of religious understanding and observance. Nonetheless, this was an amazing claim and all we have to do is recognize the claim as a moment in the evolving process of the Sacred emerging in the human and the human as the location for the concretizing of the Sacred in the cosmic process.

Perhaps one might counter that the human is a very questionable manifestation of the Sacred, to which I would respond that that is because we are not yet fully human, carrying with us as we are the marks of our evolutionary movement in the violent struggle for survival. We are animals still on the way to the human, to the realization of Spirit. One of the most vivid descriptions of the human being I know was penned by a great preacher and theologian, Carlyle Marney:

Man is the most dangerous and savage of the beasts: His bite is poisonous; his hand is a club; his foot is a weapon; knives, clubs, spears are projectiles to bear his hostility. Nothing in nature is so well equipped for hating or hurting. Confuse him and he may lash out at everything. Crowd him and he kills, robs, destroys, for his crime rate increases in proportion to his crowding. Deprive him and he retaliates. Impoverish him and he burns villas in the night. Enslave him and he revolts. Pamper him and he may poison you. Hire him and he may hate both you and the work. Love him too possessively and he is never weaned. Deny him too early and he never learns to love. Put him in cities and all his animal nature comes out with perversions of every good thing. For greed, acquisitiveness, violence were so long his tools for jungle survival, that it is only by the hardest [effort] that these can be laid aside as weapons of his continued survival.

And that, you say, is the emergence of the Sacred? And I would answer, “Yes, precisely,” for Marney’s description needs to be put within a larger picture.

The biblical story begins with a “let there be ...,” the recognition that all there is is not a chance accident, nor a self-creation, but a gift, a grace, if you will, that has been evolving for 13.7 billion years. That evolving cosmic process lately issuing (in the last ten thousand years or so) in a human cultural history unfolding before our eyes in amazing fashion. It is within the cosmic evolution that history has emerged and is unfolding, and it is within history’s unfolding that the Creator Spirit moving the process from within becomes flesh - human flesh. Thus, Incarnation is Spirit enfleshed or God embodied - not an alien invasion but an immanent emergence. David Tooland expresses it with power and grace:

Offspring of stars, children of earth, we are great mothering nature’s soul-space, her heart and vocal chords - and her willingness, if we consent to it, to be spirited, to be the vessel of the Holy One. When we fail in this soul-

work, nature fails/falls with us. But when it happens, when we say yes to the Spirit who hovers over our inner chaos, the mountains clap their hands, the hills leap like gazelles. They and the quarks have a big stake in us. Remember, though, to be patient: in the condensed astronomical time of a cosmic year, our species has only been around for a minute or two, and for much of that time we've been sleepwalking. Our cosmological task takes some waking up to, and getting used to.

Nonetheless, we represent a turning point for nature, and a turning point for the Great Dispatcher, as well. Two significant events happen simultaneously, or converge, once humans emerge from the prebiotic soup. First, as the team of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas would say, consciousness or mindedness - of whatever fleeting sort - would not be there except for participation in the mindfulness of the Poet-Maker of all things. Darwinian evolution only explains our hard wiring, not how it is that we are aware or minded. Secondly, as I have said, consciousness is also nothing else than great nature more or less awake and reflective. That's a beginning; the spiritual task is to deepen our inwardness and, therewith, our imaginations. In this sense, we are nature's black box, her soul-space - and hence her last chance to become spirited, to be the vessel of God, the carrier of the message that all creation is not only "very good," but to be glorified. That's the script, the big drama.

... Like us, Jesus is the cosmos become conscious; he provides it with soul-space. But in him the cosmos finally finds adequate soul-space, a cavern of interiority big enough to contain the fullness of divine love and compassion. (Unlike us, he isn't a shallow container; he doesn't babble nonsense or go haywire under the strain of the dawn that is trying to break through in our species.) The Torah, the big dreams of the Hebrew prophets, and the poetry of the Wisdom literature stand behind him, within him; Jesus is intelligible only within this lineage. He represents an intensification of what God has particularly chosen the people of Israel to meditate and mediate: the meaning of everything from quarks to cities; nothing is too small or big or unclear as not to merit passionate interest and attentive understanding. Through this son of Israel Christians discover that the Ur-Mystery lives in human blood, would act through us, speak through us. (From *Cross Currents*, Winter 1996/97, by David Tooland (p. 464))

Such is the Human - stardust, the cosmos becoming conscious, the awareness of the wonder, miracle, glory and joy of life, the Voice of Being, for the Human is the emergence of the Sacred in the ongoing cosmic process. The Human therefore becomes co-creator with the Eternal Spirit coming to embodiment. It is ours then to recognize our true nature and vocation, not to find meaning, but to create it, recognizing that we are not passive passengers on some cosmic journey, but the

agents through which the truly Human as the emergent of the Divine is coming to be.

The biblical writers had no sense of our cosmic home, but they did sense that the human is the creation of the Divine. The authors of our founding documents who brought to expression the American Creed with Freedom as its core value labored still with a paradigm of cosmic reality we can no longer affirm. Nonetheless, they did recognize that the Human can be fully realized only in *Freedom* - a freedom that was intrinsic to Being and thus essential for Human Being.

We are not robots marked by an inevitable fate, cogs in a cosmic machine grinding on its way. We are Sacred, for we are the emergence of the Sacred Ground and the Source of Being in the concrete drama of cosmic unfolding, the drama of History whose future lies in our hands. We possess the terrifying gift of *Freedom* to create paradise or destroy the human experience as the emergence of the Sacred in the cosmic story.

Will we be able to break free from old paradigms and patterns of behavior that have written a history of violence, war and destruction? Is human transformation possible, given the entrenched ideologies that continue to find expression? Barbara Marx Hubbard in *Conscious Evolution* (p. 10) provides an image with which I would leave you. She writes,

Let's compare our situation with the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. When the caterpillar weaves its cocoon, imaginal disks begin to appear. These disks embody the blueprint of the butterfly yet to come. Although the disks are a natural part of the caterpillar's evolution, its immune system recognizes them as foreign and tries to destroy them. As the disks arrive faster and begin to link up, the caterpillar's immune system breaks down and its body begins to disintegrate. When the disks mature and become imaginal cells, they form themselves into a new pattern, thus transforming the disintegrating body of the caterpillar into the butterfly. The breakdown of the caterpillar's old system is essential for the breakthrough of the new butterfly. Yet, in reality the caterpillar neither dies nor disintegrates, for from the beginning its hidden purpose was to transform and be reborn as the butterfly.

When it seems the darkness can never be overcome, let us not despair. Let us remember the hidden purpose for which we were born.

References:

Hans Küng. *Does God Exist?* 1978.

David Tooland, *Cross Currents*, Winter, 1996-97, p. 464.