

Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove: An Invitation to Religious Studies.
(New, Updated Edition.) Michael Novak. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

Preface and Introduction: Key Notions

- Novak's purpose is the development of a critical language for talking about one's self which necessitates a true encounter with the self, resisting the intrusions and easy, trivial language of the public world.
- Religious studies involve a number of different aspects:
 - It is *personal*, insofar as my actions reveal my choice of identity.
 - It is *social/institutional*, insofar as many factors shape my identity, and uniqueness/individuality is something I must labor long to achieve.
 - It is *transcendent*, insofar as it involves experiences which suggest a meaning transcending ordinary, everyday life.
- However objective this study, it is ultimately radically subjective – for it imperils one to critical evaluation of his/her life-choices. Religious studies seek a full articulation of a person's way of life. This will involve a number of breakthroughs/conversions, i.e., movement from standpoint to standpoint.
 - “*Horizon*” is the maximum field of vision from a determinate standpoint. Given this notion, there is a rhythm of two forms of progress in understanding:
 - Logical *development* within a horizon.
 - *Breakthrough* from one horizon to another.

Chapter ONE: The Voyage

The Religious Drive

Human persons face a fundamental *choice*: direct my own life, or surrender its direction to others.

An integrating vision of my identity and of my relationship to others/world is implicit in all human acting. That vision of personal identity and human community is “religion.”

By my living I tell a unique, personal story. And here the fundamental choice confronts me: Am I truly telling the story or am I simply allowing others' stories to be told through me?

The story/vision unifies and directs my everyday choices and actions.

It is *explicitly religious* when it involves attitudes of awe/wonder/reverence.

The religious dimension is experienced as a drive in my restlessness with disharmony/inconsistency, in the raising of further questions, and in the envisioning of new possibilities.

What Religion Is Not

The beginning point is to *become aware of my present standpoint*.

The “American way of life” has shaped that standpoint, and this has involved certain inadequate notions of religion:

1. Religion as reinforcement of the cultural status quo.
2. Religion as reinforcement of morality.
3. Religion as source of inner serenity.
4. Religion as vehicle of belonging.
5. Religion as source of aesthetic/artistic delight.
6. Religion as source of dogmatic certainty.
7. Religion as fulfillment of personal needs.
8. Religion as escape from the harshness of reality.

Common to these inadequate notions is the attempt to identify the ordinary world of the everyday as “the way things Really Are.”

In contrast, genuine religion has a *disruptive* character, insofar as it involves *transcendence* beyond the everyday (i.e., beyond class, nation, culture, and church structures).

Way of Life

Summary statement: “Religion is a conversion from the ordinary, given, secure world into a world of nothingness, terror, risk – a world in which nevertheless there is strange healing and joy.”

This involves religion as being first a conversion in one’s *experience* of life (holiness), and secondly an *articulation* of that conversion (scholarship).

The language used in this articulation will not be logically exact and precise, but will be evocative and ambiguous. When one seeks to articulate the movement beyond a standpoint, this also involves a movement beyond the exact grasp of words.

Thus, the method will be *dialectical*: there will be negations as well as affirmations – one tries to say clearly what the experience is not, as well as to suggest what it is.

A *standpoint* is a complex of experiences, images, expectations, presuppositions, and conscious operations by which persons act out their own sense of themselves/others/nature/history/God.

There are *activities* present in everyone’s life, but one may be more or less aware of them.

The activities may be expressed as six inter-related stages:

1. *Experience* is the foundation of all human consciousness; one may be thematically aware of various experiences (second awareness) or not (first awareness). The possibilities of experience are so vast, that one is always exercising certain selectivity. One’s story/standpoint shapes even his/her preconscious experience.
2. *Imagination* mediates between experience and understanding; its location/effect is central in human consciousness – i.e., imagination arranges experience in such fashion as to make insight possible.
3. Intelligent *insight* is the intellectual grasp (understanding) of a unifying pattern; it is a concrete, personal event which precedes conceptualization. Insight can issue in artistic expression as well as conceptual formulation; but insight is the key event, which expression is to serve.

4. *Method* is giving a full and ordered account of the genesis, relations, implications and moving direction of consciousness.
5. *Self-criticism* involves the recognition that not all insights and theories are true. This necessitates questioning oneself as to the justifiability/reasonableness of his/her insights and choices.
6. *Action* gives concrete, real existential force to the other operations of consciousness.

Earthly Ecstasy

The religious drive is rooted in very concrete, natural experience, i.e., with earthly, bodily realities. Our culture largely distances us from such experience with its emphasis on reason and control.

The orthodox impulse has ordinarily been a search for balance/harmony; but the religious impulse tends to veer off either in the direction of overpowering concreteness (e.g., fertility rites), or in the direction of cold reason and will-power (“decency”).

Balance is to be tied to the earth without losing oneself in it.

Apart from concrete experience, there seems to be something false/inauthentic in religious reflection.

“Spirit” does *not* mean “immaterial.” Rather, “spirit” is the *straining forward* through experience, imagining, feeling, inquiry, understanding, acting.

Conversion to the Sacred

The “sacred” is a reality deep in the center of things, which *manifests* itself (“Hierophany”); religious conversion is that breakthrough in which one comes to regard the world in its relationship to this Reality.

Industrial society has tended to relativize everything and to focus attention on the practical world of everyday experience, such that experience is largely “secularized.” The standpoint of the profane has assumed considerable social power.

But however powerful its grasp, no standpoint is inevitable. Commonly, human life progresses with the *breakdown* of one standpoint, *breakthrough* to another, and *reintegration* within the new standpoint.

“Sacred” and “profane” are *dialectically related*, i.e., each can be understood only in terms of the other. They point, not to two separate classes of things, but rather to two differing interpretations of the real.

Conversion to the sacred is a shift in sensibility, imagination, and intelligence. The key to such a shift for modern consciousness lies in *probing the radical meaning of the profane*.

The heart of the profane standpoint is *practicality* – calling a spade a spade, breaking symbolic connections with ‘other dimensions.’ But such utter practicality incapacitates the psyche, rendering one impotent for leisure, reflection, play, art. *Recognition* of the incapacity/impotence is what makes conversion to the sacred possible.

In a true conversion to the sacred: one becomes aware of long-repressed feelings, instincts, images, questions; one becomes aware of his/her capacity to shape one’s own identity; one becomes able to

respond to things and to people as a “thou,” with reverence and full attention rather than with pure instrumentalist concern; persons, play, art, silence become ends in themselves.

Ultimately, one’s sense of what is real is expanded; one perceives a sort of participation. There is a sense of *mystery*, wonderment, awe.

Realities become *sacramental*, i.e., they retain their profane sense yet reveal dimensions upon dimensions.

Chapter TWO: Autobiography and Story

Religion as Autobiography

Most personal growth is organic, continual, gradual, though there certainly may be occasional dramatic changes.

“Religion” can be imagined as the interconnectedness of that growth/change, as the *story* told with one’s life.

The choices/actions of a completed life trace out a story, which reveals how one implicitly imagined/understood the world and his/her place in it.

Few lives will be thoroughly integrated; in most there will be somewhat of a dispersal of stories.

In a secondary sense, “religion” is *awareness* of the story dimension of life, involving awe at the risk and terror of human freedom. Sensing my own responsibility for choosing/creating my identity gives rise to the primal religious sense.

Religious studies involve the effort to make one’s story conscious to oneself.

“Religion” can also, thirdly, be taken as interpreting the universe in light of the striving and freedom of the human person. Ultimate reality is perceived as “Thou.”

The significance of the story we are living in large part escapes us.

Memory, especially of experience and of action, is key in trying to re-collect the story.

A central question in considering my life-story regards the extent to which one has simply drifted, waited for things to happen, or played clearly tracked out roles, and the extent to which one has truly chosen/acted.

Cultural Stories and Personal Stories

“Story” is a narrative structure that *links* actions over time. It will involve a certain direction, though perhaps encompassing various subplots.

One’s *culture* provides many images which deeply affect his/her psyche – images, e.g., of heroism, masculinity/femininity, fulfillment, etc.

Accordingly, a person who wishes to understand what story/stories he/she is living out does well to ask himself/herself what it means to be brought up as an American, or a given social class, ethnic background, religious or secular tradition.

The experience of *nothingness* is to find oneself without a story; it is to experience the primal formlessness of human life below the threshold of narrative structuring.

Standpoint to Standpoint

A life-story links not only actions, but also *transformations*: breakthroughs in imagination/understanding/action.

Human life involves considerable *struggle*, which issues in the emergence of successive new standpoints; the manner in which such standpoints are linked becomes one's story, one's sense of 'who.'

"Standpoint" is a complex of all those things that compose an inquiring 'who.'

Such transformations place ideas/concepts/theories in a new context.

Human experience can be interpreted only from a standpoint, i.e., only in the context of experiences/insights/judgments accumulated to that point.

Thus, to grasp the import of what a person says, one must grasp clearly the standpoint from which he/she says it.

It is also very fruitful, accordingly, to become as conscious as possible of the contours of one's own standpoint.

An underlying experiential and imaginative base is necessary for the occurrence of insight, for insight is into the patterns/structures/relationships in experience-organized-by-imagination.

There is, in human existence, a drive toward growth – a restless quest for sharper, broader, deeper understanding. There are two rhythms of this *drive to question*:

1. It impels one to push beyond his/her present horizon, venturing into the dark toward a new standpoint. The breakthroughs which resolve this pushing often come unexpectedly, as gifts: **"flight of the dove."**
2. It leads on to explore from a newly achieved standpoint, absorbing new discoveries and following out implications. This requires patience and determination for small, steady efforts: **"ascent of the mountain."**

"Story," Elaborated

One's story is both "invented" and "discovered." It is "discovered" insofar as it is lived within certain limits of possibility/probability. It is "invented" insofar as I allow the emergence of those experiences/images/insights which make significant and highly individual breakthroughs possible.

The critical question for me to ask becomes: "Have I discovered, am I inventing, the story most appropriate to my possibilities, yet recognizing my limits?"

In asking this critical question, one must recognize the capacity for self-deception.

In order to evaluate the "appropriateness" of one's life-story, he/she needs *criteria* by means of which to judge; these criteria constitute a "second-level story."

This amounts to asking *why* I should live the story I do.

Such second-level stories are also open to revision/transformation.

“Story” is more comprehensive than a set of principles.

“Principles” are highly abstract analytic tools.

But the sources of a person’s action are never as clear as a principle. Whereas a principle is general/abstract, a person’s action is particular/*concrete*.

In fact, a Principle is always understood from a particular standpoint, and its applicability at a particular time and place is judged from within a standpoint.

Grasp of one’s own basic story offers *guidelines for the future* insofar as it allows one surer grasp of what is “in character” or “out of character” when confronted with new situations.

But a story also springs from inner sources of creativity and perception. A life-story is full of invention, surprise, and *originality*.

A person is free to change his/her life-story; with such a change the same principles may be held, but their impact will be different.

A person comes to each situation as if it were a new episode in a story. He/she enters the situation, not new-born, but with internalized experience/understanding developed over the years. Yet it remains a new episode.

A story connects present situations with both a past and a future.

Institutions (language, economic structures, class) inhibit the unfolding of some stories and encourage others. Thus, there is a necessary question as to how one’s personal story bears on those of the institutions to which one belongs.

Each person’s struggle and consequent story is so unique that it makes difficult the task of truly understanding each other. If we do not attend to each other’s stories, we may not notice that our use of shared language/principles does not mean necessarily shared understanding.

The *ethical* character of an action is a singular matter of concrete awareness/choice/decision. There is a uniqueness in human action, not reducible to a general law.

An act is moral insofar as (a) it is proper to this person in this situation, and (b) only if the story of which it is a part is moral and if it adequately fulfills that story.

A change of story indicates perception of the inadequacy of a prior story.

There are numerous reasons for changing one’s story (sense of reality), such as:

1. The story is out of harmony with the dynamics of one’s unconscious.
2. It is out of harmony with one’s efforts to change the world, to relate to others, or to be a peace with oneself.
3. A new story offers more illumination/satisfaction.
4. New experiences introduce contradictions unable to be resolved by the old story.

5. The story fails repeatedly to predict consequences or to interpret the behavior of others.

It should be recognized that altering another person's sense of reality (story) is extremely difficult. Primarily what one can do is to present counterstories/counterperceptions to suggest a new way of looking at things.

Objectivity is a matter of selectively tutored subjectivity.

What Cannot Be Said

The deeper one penetrates his/her self, the more aware one is of his/her real *ignorance* and of the struggle of many forces. One comes to perceive the mystery of oneself, and is led to reverent *silence*.

And as mystery is found in one's own identity, so too in the identity of the world which is addressed in some way as "thou."

Ultimately, a religious interpretation of human and worldly existence affirms a "who" at the heart of reality, but then trails off in silence – for this "who" does not fall within the comprehension of human intellect.

The Aesthetic, the Moral, the Religious

"Discernment" is not a matter of quantitative measuring, but is an art learned through living in a certain way.

There are real differences between persons regarding the degree of growth/liberation attained. And while there is no exact measure of this, there are general signs by which to interpret how deeply a person has negotiated the struggle.

Søren Kierkegaard distinguished three categories:

1. The *aesthetic* person judges according to his/her *feelings* and sensibilities. The self seeks to attune its moods/judgments/actions to certain inner guides ("feelings") it has learned to trust.
2. The *moral* person judges according to reasoned *principles*; he/she has trained head to take command over body/feelings.
3. The *religious* person judges according to a holistic *vision* of his/her own identity and situation.
 - a. Often, aesthetic and moral consciousness mask themselves as "religious."
 - b. Authentic religious consciousness understands that experience is richer than our capacity for verbalization/analysis, and assimilates aesthetic consciousness; it also recognizes our tendencies toward self-serving self-deception, and assimilates the moral consciousness.
 - c. Authentic religious consciousness begins with *self-acceptance* as one is: flawed and fallen. This presupposes recognition that the self is not at the center of reality. The effect of such self-acceptance is evident as a certain peace, simplicity, humor.
 - d. The actions of an authentically religious person spring from seeing oneself in context – as one fallible self among others in a world of surprise and contingency. It is an attitude of reverence for ordinary life, for it regards others as of precious value because their life values correct one's own deficiencies and complete one's own incompleteness.

- i. The religious consciousness, therefore, is *responsive*: other-centered, reality-centered. One attends to others and to the concrete world with reverend discernment.
- ii. I respond to life as if it were a conversation.
- iii. I see life as an invitation to *create* a self.

Among the Many Rises and Declines of Reason

A contemporary understanding of “Reason” generally focuses on precise/analytical/scientific thought, with an emphasis on practicality, prediction, and control. This has led to a reactive emphasis on unreason: emotion, passion, touch.

Needed is a way of imaging “Reason” as passionate, as involving all aspects and operations of the person and thus transcending the dualism of mind/body, objectivity/subjectivity.

Needed is a theory of intelligence worked out in the context of action, for the self acts out a set of stories long before it learns to analyze.

Every theory operates only within an imaginatively constructed standpoint.

We need to learn how to talk about the human subject and his/her struggle toward personal and communal liberation.

We need to transcend a cultural “story of reason” which emphasizes theory and control, and which includes reference to organic growth and transformation.

At this point, the religious dimension arises.

Chapter THREE: Cultures

Paradoxes of the Finite

There is a *primal formlessness* at the base of all human consciousness, which is experienced when a given culture begins to disintegrate.

There is a paradox to human consciousness: one’s drives are *infinite*, but his/her achievement remains always *limited*. At the levels of experience/understanding/judgment/action selection must be made of this, not that.

“*Culture*” is the social selection of one form of life out of many.

Human groups transmit behavioral patterns by means of symbols. Culture is the communication of a sense of reality.

Commonly, persons accept their particular culture as *the* true reality, rather than as one possibility among many. For many, however, this cultural reality-sense becomes *relativized*, and they recognize the formlessness as the base of human consciousness (“the experience of nothingness”).

The precondition for experiencing the “nothingness” is a willingness to probe beneath the surface of what one has hitherto accepted as real. This willingness means allowing the basic *intentionality* of human existence to press onward as the drive to *question*.

This basic intentionality is common to all human persons but is articulated concretely in a given culture. Different cultures promote different selections of what/how to experience, imagine, understand, judge, justify, and act.

Within a culture, some individuals will question deeply, others will unquestioningly live out cultural roles and definitions.

When probed deeply, various human cultures can be seen as remarkably analogous to one another.

A person who appropriates culture ‘A’ will do so by engaging in the same conscious operations as the person who appropriates culture ‘B.’

Sense of Reality

One’s personal sense of reality is tutored by the culture in which he/she lives – i.e., culture provides us with one way to interpret human experience.

Contemporary Western culture largely counts as real only that which is quantifiable, analyzable, predictable, and controllable.

This involves a narrow and alienating selection from human experience, and calls for a transformation of consciousness – a revision of what we count as real and which would embrace the reality of “intelligent subjectivity.”

One’s *sense of reality* is one’s instinctive selection-of and trust-in those aspects of his/her experience that are taken to be “real,” as opposed to those one ignores as insignificant or illusory.

A person’s actions most clearly reveal his/her reality-sense.

Authentic *objectivity* is a matter of taking account of one’s own passions/interests/desires/biases in order not to be swept away by them. This is basically what is meant by “*intelligent subjectivity*.”

Intelligent subjectivity aims to attune itself as fully and thoroughly as possible to the matters with which it is engaged.

This is more fundamental than and often opposed to a popular notion of “objectivity” as being a detached, uninvolved stance.

In order to achieve truly intelligent subjectivity, it is first necessary to recognize one’s own reality-sense. Only having done this can I begin to understand other reality-senses as they are, rather than perceiving them in the light of my own reality.

A cultural story plays several functions:

1. It provides a model by which to live one’s life, against which to measure one’s behavior.

2. It illuminates/highlights certain aspects of a people's experience.
3. It organizes data, so as to provide an overall view of a people's experience.
4. It selects goals.
5. It is a guide to action in concrete situations.

From Culture to Cult

"Cult" is the dramatization/reenactment of a culture's reality-sense, story.

For example, various elements of a medieval reality-sense were evident throughout medieval cultural symbols:

1. There was a conviction that each event was understandable, at least insofar as it was known by God.
2. Every single person was perceived as beloved by God.
3. It was believed that history has a direction and is not circular, that the future will be different from the present.

With the disintegration of the medieval world, the Western story fragmented – subsequently, diverse sets of symbols came to give sense and plausibility to human action.

The student of religious studies must develop a capacity for sympathy-connaturality whereby he/she can pass-over to the standpoint of another reality sense. The following are representative of the kind of questions to be asked in such "passing over:"

1. When do people feel awe?
2. Where do people feel most satisfied, as if at last living up to the archetype of what they think a human being is and ought to be?
3. How do people celebrate their satisfaction?

Chapter FOUR: Societies and Institutions

Institutions Are Mans' Natural Habitat

Institutions serve as structures of *meaning* and differentiation by assigning *roles*, in recognition of the diversity of persons/tasks/needs.

Language is a basic institution, which structures human experience/imagination.

Basic *trust* (the reaching out of person toward person across the seeming separation between them) is a precondition of human institutions.

Long before the modern sense of the differentiated individual, a feeling of community was the primary human experience.

Only in modern Western culture has the "individual" gained the ascendance in human awareness.

Maturity involves learning discriminations of trust: i.e., who can/cannot be trusted, to what extent, and when.

Economic, political, religious, and cultural institutions make goods available to meet long-term and recurrent human needs.

They make *cumulative* development possible, extending human effort over time.

It is for this purpose that roles/tasks are assigned by institutions.

It is through such institutions that humans acquire their sense of reality, stories, symbols.

Persons learn skills through the *scope of activities* provided by institutions.

Human instinct comes to expression only through cultural forms: culture channels instinct.

Whereas Freud imagined civilization and its institutions to be purely repressive, it is more adequate to imagine civilization and its institutions as also enabling, representing far more possibilities for experience/imagination/understanding/action than any one individual can assimilate.

Freedom and Coercion

Freedom is a *social* as well as a personal development; i.e., personal freedom depends on a social/institutional order for coming to be seen as a value as well as for its actual exercise.

Even what a person means by “freedom” depends on a network of social experience/images/insights.

Society is not a monolith, but a highly *differentiated set of variously interlocking systems*: state, culture, ethnic group, family, socio-economic class, religious tradition, voluntary associations.

The interactions of social groups and individuals occur in many modes, not all of them properly called “coercive”/”repressive,” even when they exceed the control of individuals in the group.

Every human action (whether “free” or “coerced”) occurs within the context of all sorts of *social Inheritance*, but no particular aspect of this ‘inheritance’ makes an absolute claim.

The effects of many groups/institutions upon a person are in conflict, and the ‘calculus’ of his/her actions has an irreplaceable uniqueness.

A common contemporary image of freedom is of the individual standing over against society, and every ‘infringement’ on his/her psyche is seen as a form of repression/coercion.

Yet it must be seen that institutions enlarge options as well as coerce them.

Television, for example, creates the possibility of both the enlargement and the diminishment of freedom; it may stimulate or pacify.

The actual question does not concern social or non-social elements of freedom, but rather *which social conditions* promote freedom and which inhibit freedom.

Freedom and social constraint are mutually interdependent, not antagonistic.

Are Institutions Obsolete?

We generally become aware of institutions when they break down and become dysfunctional; otherwise, they tend to be 'taken for granted.'

Change of basic institutions is extremely difficult, occurs only over time, and based upon the long, social, and personal acquisition of habits, skills, purposes, adaptations to new demands, images of success, etc.

Two contrary tendencies operate in much contemporary social analysis: (1) perceptions of the individual as utterly reasonable/free, and only undermined by institutions; and (2) perception of the individual as totally conditioned by institutions. In overcoming these inadequate tendencies, two complementary principles must be kept in mind:

1. The identity of a person cannot be defined without reference to the institutions under which he/she lives.
2. The person is not exhaustively defined by the list of institutions under which he/she lives.

The New Heteronomy

A culture (sense of reality, story, set of symbols) finds expression in social institutions, which generate roles/sanctions/expectations; the operation of these institutions is dependent on trust ("shared values").

Talcott Parsons expressed this as follows: "Society is a religiously based moral order characterized by *congruence* between the cultural, structural, and personality levels of the social system."

In contemporary America, considerable stress is placed on this "congruence," given the seeming freedom of persons to choose reality-senses: my sense of reality may not be 'reflected' in any single institution or even in the culture as a whole.

An ideal of "personal autonomy" leads to a form of *alienation* insofar as the social system seems to elude the capacity of 'autonomous individuals' to make the system congruent with their own reality-sense/stories/symbols.

This alienation tends to be bridged by the fact that our social system embodies a story of individuals formulating a sense of reality for themselves.

Isolated autonomy is imagined as an ideal, a model.

But the relative harmony of American life is bought at the price of disengaging the individual's sense of reality from any serious impact upon his/her institutions.

The sense of reality embodied by American institutions is largely that of the "free market place:" an impersonal mechanism designed to allow a maximum of private space to individuals. As such, American life is built upon a flight from others.

But this reality-sense is at odds with other sets of stories and symbols that we live out. Images of communal solidarity also appeal to us and find institutional embodiment.

Culturally/socially/personally we are trying to have reality two ways at once.

Secular Religion

There seems to be a finite set of motifs/themes in various human cultures; cultures differ from each other in their selections from this set and in the constellations they weave into heroic stories.

Each person needs a “selector” to break down the overwhelming floods of experience into a living sense of reality; a way of relating himself/herself to his/her past and future, as well as to the past and future of the human race, and sets of images to focus his/her revulsions, goals, aspirations, perplexities, loves, hates, and actions. This “selector” comprises a quite defined standpoint from which to experience, imagine, understand, judge, and act.

It is one of the tasks of religious studies to describe, analyze, and evaluate such standpoints.

For many of our contemporaries, the basic sense of reality is explicitly secular, focusing on themes and symbols such as: reason, scientific method, enlightenment, freedom, social justice, relativism, Prometheus, etc.

One’s sense of reality (“view of the world,” “story,” “myth”) links the actions of his/her life in a meaningful pattern and also relates them to broader history. Symbols guide his/her loves, hates, resentments, exhilarations. All together govern his/her development as a human being, inhibiting certain drives/reactions and reinforcing others.

One aspect of our contemporary culture seems to emphasize “functional efficiency.”

A sense of reality involving the *sacred* arises from wonder at a presence sensed to be at work in the world, or from wonder at the complex depth and liberty of the sacred.

If science/technology are conceived as performing a limited, instrumental function in human life, they are not antithetical to a sense of the sacred. If, however, they are taken to be the basic measure of reality, they function as a total standpoint and exclude a sense of the sacred.

Basic cultural myths tend to promote the emergence of individuals in their own image.

The Communal Imagination

Contemporary media have had a profound impact upon the human sense of reality, story, symbols:

- They make it evident that events in every part of the world affect my destiny.
- They are my chief access to the information on which I base judgments.
- The images and contexts in which they present data enter into my psyche, emotions, intelligence.
- They establish the model of what counts as reasonable, responsible, mainstream.

The Realities of Economics

It is possible to chart the general impact of various institutions as follows:

- | | | |
|----------------|--------|----------------|
| • Family | shapes | experiencing. |
| • Church/Media | shape | imagining. |
| • Schools | shape | understanding. |
| • Economics | shapes | judgment. |
| • Government | shapes | acting. |

The economic system is the basic instrument of survival and well-being; it establishes fundamental roles and identities; it reinforces basic attitudes and ideals.

An image of the human person and of human community is built into the daily workings of an economic system. In this sense, an economic order is a theological construct.

The schools take their sense of reality from the economic system of which they are a part.

The American economic system seems to promote these ideals/values:

1. Commitment to hard work.
2. Ability to suppress feelings, and to make 'hardheaded' decisions.
3. Fierce competition with others.
4. Strong motivation to find more efficient and better ways of doing things.
5. A person should be easy to get along with.
6. Loyalty to the organization.

Political Revolution

The impact of bureaucratic institutions is "spiritual" insofar as it governs perceptions, judgment, actions.

Also, the significance, expression, and practical effect of specifically religious experience is conditioned by the politico-economic order in which it occurs; i.e., religious language is understood in a concrete social context.

Insofar as one steps himself/herself in the Jewish-Christian reality-sense/stories/symbols, he/she feels a *tension* arising between them and his/her culture.

This tension gives rise to pointed questions because the human spirit is *self-transcending*, i.e., never satisfied with its own finite expressions.

Institutions shape the development of spirit, but spirit pushes beyond those institutions toward more adequate expression in new and better institutions.

That is why "religious experience" is viewed with suspicion by existing institutions.

Civil Religion

"Civil religion" is the attempt in a pluralistic society to wed the sense of reality, story and symbols of science, technology and a this-worldly approach to government to a set of more transcendent values.

That is to say that American living, for example, has generated a sense of reality, direction, and perception that have a differentiated, clear, effective form in the behavior of Americans. This is supplied by civic experiences and institutions.

This reality-sense is set against a transcendent background for purposes of legitimation; (note, e.g., the use of biblical images such as "Exodus" and "Promised Land" in American self-understanding).

Chapter FIVE: Organizations

Organized Anything

Religious experience can find expression in many ways: in an entire social order such as primitive societies or in a highly differentiated “religious organization” such as the Western pattern of Churches.

In the United States, the dominant religious form is high *privatized* expression subject to personal choice.

There seems to be no overarching scheme of meanings integrating the various aspects of the social world.

The system seems organized on the basis of effective practical function, rather than on the human need for ‘a sense of reality.’

Largely, fulfillment and significance are not to be found within the meanings provided by the social order but are left to the individual to be worked out on his/her own. The individual’s psyche carries the burden of making sense out of life.

This often leads to a narrow search for escape; often *sexual* satisfaction is made to carry the burden of meaning and fulfillment.

Autonomy is the key symbol of this privatized religion; it is a ‘story’ of self-expression and self-realization.

The overriding picture of society in such a story is “the market place.”

The real revolution of modernity has been to set aside a “private space” in which the solitary individual seeks fulfillment.

Neither the materialism of Soviet communism nor that of American capitalism provide meaning and significance; the secret springs of community elude materialism of both forms.

Liturgy

Experience of the sacred generally brings about a feeling of being “connected” with a “deeper reality.”

Ritual/liturgy is an effort to institutionalize the experience of the sacred, making it a regular, repetitive pattern in life.

Liturgy, accordingly, is torn between its primitive source and its formalized expression.

The contemporary trend toward privatization weakens every form of significance, for the privatized person tends to be disconnected/*alienated* from: (a) the world as a whole; (b) other persons; and (c) his/her own body and workaday activities.

Liturgy seeks to overcome this threefold alienation:

1. By an experience of *community*.
2. By an instinctive understanding that the experience of the sacred extends through *all of life*, giving significance to every detail.
3. By involvement of the entire *body*.

It is extremely difficult from within the standpoint of privatized meaning to feel ‘at home’ in communal liturgy of memory and hope.

It seems that any liturgy which would be effective in that standpoint must first speak to the individual who seems trapped by the efficiency/instrumentalist focus of contemporary institutions.

Church, Denomination, Sect

Ernst Troeltsch distinguished three forms of institutionalizing the archetypal events of Christian memory:

1. "Church" is an institution which develop structures parallel to every realm of profane culture.
2. In a "sect," emphasis is placed on the rule of spirit and on genuine personal experience.
3. "Denominations" are intermediate between church and sect; they are designed as specialized institutions, caring for the religious needs of their members while other institutions care for their secular needs.

The tendency of contemporary Western culture to privatize religion severely diminishes the social effectiveness of churches, sects, and denominations. Religion is relegated to a private sphere.

Holy Texts

Religious traditions organize around a set of sacred texts, which have a two-fold role:

1. They provide leverage against passing "fads."
2. They provide fresh and useful illumination on each succeeding age; their significance lies in opening a path of entry into the experience of the holy.
 - a. Such texts must be interpreted, and are susceptible to interpretation from developing standpoints.
 - b. Such interpretation requires considerable discipline.

Reading a holy text can invite one to "feel his/her way into" a new standpoint; but this requires attention to the poetic suggestiveness of the text and not simply its literal meaning.

Theologies

Theology is *systematic articulation* of a sense of reality, stories, symbols.

Divergence between theologies is subtle and complex because of divergence in standpoints/horizons.

Criticism of one's theological stance is often felt personally because it involves criticism of one's basic reality-sense.

There are various sources/bases to a theological standpoint, which generate a great variety of standpoints from which theological reflection is done.

Every theological standpoint has a socio-economic base.

Habits of articulation arise from past traditions.

Theological reflection is colored by the cultural reality-sense/stories/symbols in which one's life has been nourished.

Reflection tends toward specialization.

American theology needs a method for relating and comparing the work of theologians from within different standpoints.

This has traditionally been less important in Europe because of a universal, classical “Kultur.”

A Map of Christian Theologies in the United States

Theological standpoints can be understood in terms of their social base in different geographical sections, for example, of the United States. They can also be understood in terms of the basic, underlying influence of one central thinker.

David Tracy has delineated five basic models of contemporary theology, in terms of analysis of “horizon,” i.e., the theologian’s image of self and of world.

1. The “orthodox” theologian images himself/herself as a believer standing within a faith community that exists in the midst of a secular/unbelieving world.
2. The “liberal” theologian imagines himself/herself as an autonomous, critical person, informed by the best of modern consciousness, addressing the church insofar as it needs to be reformulated in accordance with modern commitments.
3. The “neo-orthodox” theologian imagines himself/herself as driven beyond liberal optimism by the tragedies of the twentieth century to embrace existential attitudes such as courage in the face of despair, authenticity, and interpersonal love.
4. The “radical” theologian imagines himself/herself as committed to secular values and as engaged in a struggle for liberation from various alienations, including the “God” of the previous three models.
5. A “revisionist” (Tracy) or “symbolic realist” (Novak) theologian redefines both “faith” and “modernity” in an attempt to escape the imagined division between them. The theologian is seen as having a dual commitment, both to the fundamental meaning of his/her religious tradition and to the meaning of contemporary experience.

Theology as Suitor

Theology is sustained *reflection* on human *experience*.

It remains authentic only if it truly arises from attachment to the *concrete*.

Chapter SIX: Nature and History

Concerning action, the contemporary situation poses the nature/history question by asking whether one ought to (seek) a private, communal shelter in order to live as “naturally” as possible, or (b) work to bring about social/political “change.”

American culture seems to emphasize the *transitive* nature of action, insofar as it is directed to bringing about effects in the world (“progress”).

In contrast to this notion, it is also possible to image human action as *immanent*: directed to bringing one’s own activities into operation and then to peaceful completion.

Such action changes the *subject*, not objects ‘out there.’

An image of this is an athlete's struggle as being for the satisfaction of his/her own sense of self rather than as motivated purely out of competition.

A key contemporary task is bridging the destructive split between nature and history.

Besides responsible concern for effecting the world, there is also the sense of joy fruition that comes from being who one is: from acting in faithfulness to one's identity.

Such 'doing' is an acting out of one's own being.

But the individual is also inescapably social and political; accordingly, his/her action will inevitably involve responsibility for shaping the world.

The proper focus of action is both upon what happens to the agent and upon what his/her acts effect upon the world.

There is a deep and joyful satisfaction that comes from faithfulness to one's own experiencing, imagining, understanding, judging, and deciding; that satisfaction is intensified by harmony between one of these operations and every other. Through exercising such operations, we grow from horizon to horizon.

It is not a matter of having a completed "real self" within one and being faithful to it, but rather of having conscious imperatives within one and creating one's real self by being faithful to them.

Since there is no absolute standpoint accessible to humans, we need the *conversation* in which we try to understand, to sympathize with, and to criticize one another.

Epilogue

The main function of the concept "story" is to approach human action through the insight that the human being is an embodied person, and is moved by *imagination and sensibility* in conjunction with intelligence.

Experience/image/symbol/myth/narrative-context are all essential elements of active intelligence.

The advantage of the concept is the possibility of bridging the common separation of "reason" and "emotion," allowing us to treat all parts of the self in one unified concept.

In order to understand the workings of religion today, one must understand the workings of the imagination in the public culture in which we live.

The most important existential decisions of our lives are not made through principles and logic, nor simply through hunch or intuition; that is why the category of "story" can be so illuminating. In order to understand why I do what I do, I must describe the shape of my experiences, sensibility, and imagination.

Every moral action is that action of a unique person in a singular situation; it is not simply the realization of a general principle.

Some concluding points may help overcome misunderstandings of the use of the concept "story:"

1. The point of using this concept is to bring into consciousness those elements of one's horizon which would normally be neglected and to place them under criticism.
2. It is not easy to determine which story is actually being lived out.
3. A human life is a tangle of stories; often there are 'cover' stories which we may claim to be living out but which are not evident in our actions.
4. Personal stories are not simply invented by individuals; they are passed along by the communities/cultures within which the individual is continually nourished.