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Distillations of fermentation

How Shall We Model the World?

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By and large, contemporary social scientists accept the idea of religion as a category equivalent to politics, economics, and social life—all "parts" of a greater whole, Society or its Culture. It becomes difficult, then, to discuss religious ferment in a context in which the categories refuse to be clarified even for purposes of analysis.

In this section our essayists have begun to move away from the rigidity of such analytic categories. Concerned with a process or processes, they have brought under consideration the old Asian tendency to view religion as life, or religion as coterminous with economics, politics, and social relationships. In short, the following papers search for new perspectives on religious ferment, following the processes that transform ideas into action. At times, in standard rubrics, an author seems to be dealing with the politicalization of religion. Again, some essays seek to emphasize the end product of religious ferment, stressing the mode in which religious values or ethics are transformed into imperatives for daily living: religion persists, but ferment is muted. Together with such a perspective, the model for the world is reaffirmed or reformulated in traditional religious terms. In fact, these papers suggest the beginning of the development of an analytical model of religious ferment in Asia or in other parts of the world.

Let us assume that what we are really dealing with is the problem of alternative models of system organization for attaining certain goals. It has often been claimed that the secularizing model is the wave of the future, while religious models are anachronistic, feudalistic, or unrealistic. Measure such models against a new, scientific world view, which emphasizes relative morality, relative goodness, and varying perspectives of reality. From this standpoint, religious models do tend to be anachro-

nisms, dealing with truths, absolutes, apparently static social orders, and with avowed and to-be-accepted guardians of public conduct and thought. Religious ferment, in such cases, involves a reappraisal of their traditions by the guardians themselves, often reacting to the pressures of the populace they are guarding. If we recognize that for many of the guardians and the guarded the model needs only reconsideration and minor alteration—not *replacement*—in order to make it work more adequately, we can better understand the nature of this ferment. The question Ainslee Embree asks in his essay is indeed one that is not often asked: Why should the guardians of tradition cooperate in its destruction?

Whether we deal with fundamental *human* rights or with the *benefices of deities* and their human channels of communication, all such questions concern *sanctions for action*. At one level, the conflict of models is a conflict between those who seek to strengthen such sanctions by allocating them to the *religieux* for interpretation and those who claim the right to redefine the goals and the boundaries of existence by consensus. In both cases, imperatives of an ideological nature must inform human action. In all cases, there are appeals to greater goods, morality, or rights, which somehow transcend sheer individual, personal survival. Neither the religious traditionalists nor the secularizers and modernizers accept a simple existential view of the universe or the world they wish to construct.

Particularly at the level of organizations, groups, and movements, much ferment in religion shares with political ferment the agitation over legitimacy of control. In bald terms, shall the state or the dominant religious organization formulate the model of the world? Adherents to the model of secularizing states attempt to relegate religion (and its organized advocates) to a noncompetitive position. They stress that specific religious ideas are relevant to the *individual's* goals, but that, for utility, the *social* goals must eliminate sectarian content. Thus we return to the contrast between ethics and religion with which this volume began. Yet it is apparent that even in the most secular of states, religious organizations pose the threat of alternative models for belief and action. The state perforce must seek control or *use* of those organizations proposing the alternative models. In the process, the religious traditionalists reappraise the model to find ways of equating old imperatives with new demands: tradition is newly perceived, and the equations be-

tween old and new can be validated. Does this preserve the Temple or lead to its destruction?

Some of our essays suggest paradoxically that *preservation* is the end point of religious ferment. Yet if we momentarily revert to the analogy of fermentation to produce wines, there is a lesser paradox. If, at some point, fermentation does not stop, the product deteriorates from the desired peak. If any fermentation continues, it may take the form of slow, imperceptible change. Pressing the analogy, in our essays the "quiet ferment which absorbs the new into itself" may give the appearance of the stabilized brew. The natural ferment of ideas may be continuing, but translation of those ideas into the ferment of action may not yet have occurred, or it may have been controlled to preserve the product. In such a case as the Lamaists of West Bengal, preservation of a model of the world—preservation of the stability of a religious way of life (rather than of a religion per se)—mutes the effects of the ferment occurring around them. It would be a mistake, however, to see such populations as static or unresponsive to the agitation of the mind. The Lamaists (and similar populations in Asia) are entities in themselves from *their* point of view, but are parts of a much larger and more complex society when viewed from the outside. They are politically, economically, and socially articulated to the larger society, but *emotionally* they stand apart. For all such *encapsulated* part societies—societies *living* a model of the world not consonant with that of the dominant political-ideological system that surrounds them—ferment, quiet or unquiet, is a part of the daily life. For many of the groups, organizations, and societies discussed in this section, ferment has become a *component* of their system.