

Modern American Religion

Volume 1

The Irony of It All

1893-1919

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TO ARTHUR MANN

MENTOR, COLLEAGUE, EXEMPLAR, PARTNER, FRIEND

Acknowledgments

The act of launching a four-volume historical work whose writing is to consume two decades is a lonely task. It will take up the rest of the century about which it is being written. In such an endeavor, the company of colleagues is especially welcome. Dean Franklin I. Gamwell of the University of Chicago Divinity School has given encouragement and aid from the beginning. Through a score of years, twoscore of my doctoral dissertation advisees who specialized in this period have made more contributions than they can know of or than I can directly acknowledge. Professors David Tracy, Jerald C. Brauer, Wayne C. Booth, and Myron A. Marty have read this manuscript and made valuable suggestions. William Hutchison at Harvard arranged a seminar on the main theme and followed it up with probing conversation.

Closer to home, my wife Harriet Julia Marty participated in all final stages of editing and graphic designer Micah Marty served as picture editor. Mrs. Rehova Arthur headed a team of typists through earlier drafts and Ms. Judith Lawrence was in charge through later drafts. Both have worked tirelessly and with impressive editorial competence.

Three University of Chicago research assistants played such an important role that they almost deserve to share space on the title page itself. While the chapters take shape entirely out of my own reading and teaching, they derive from sources that are not always

easily accessible and that can easily turn fugitive. These co-workers help make the sources available, keep finding them when they have figuratively fled or turned obscure, and check my citations of them against the originals. The process sounds mechanical, but in practice it is intellectually creative, because these associates participate in generating and criticizing ideas. In the late 1970s James P. Wind served in this capacity. Through much of the course of teaching and writing, R. Scott Appleby continued in this task, bringing a second vantage. Both these men have now launched their own careers. In the final two drafts Stephen Graham became partner in the enterprise. I am pleased to say that he is well on his way into the materials of the second volume. My debt to these three younger scholars is immense. Kenner Swain-Harmon made many editing contributions, and I thank him.

A quirk in my academic and editorial vocation has made it possible for me to become familiar at firsthand with many of the people who carry on the legacies here portrayed. It is doubtful whether any other writer who has contributed to the American religious-history canon has ever been privileged to visit as many archives, repositories, sites, headquarters, and campuses as I. Unfailingly, the custodians of sources at these locations have been helpful and courteous. I only regret that I have not been able to mention them by name; the list would run into the hundreds. Beyond these people are the authors of monographs who wrote what are often called "secondary sources," but which are "primary" in the case of near-contemporary history. Through such writings one visits landmarks, gets a sense of terrain covered, acquires road maps, and determines means of access to sources which, especially if they are in non-English languages, would often be beyond the ken and scope of authors who write synthesizing works like this. Wherever possible I have acknowledged their writings, but acknowledgments can not do true justice to one's extensive debts. I hope I have given publicity to their work and led others to read them.

In respect to such historians I have sometimes felt like Machiavelli, who describes in his letters his nightly time in his library. He would dress up in "garments regal and courtly" as he approached the books. The authors then "lovingly received" him and, as he asked questions, they, "out of their humanity," would answer him, while he was "completely transferred into them." I know many of these authors personally but feel I know them even more through their works.

Finally, this book is dedicated to a colleague of twenty years. While researching this book I came across lines of William James that often reminded me of the way historian-critic Arthur Mann combines intelligence with tentativeness: "The wisest of critics is an altering being, subject to the better insight of the morrow, and right at any moment, only 'up to date' and 'on the whole.'" My students have often thanked Arthur Mann; now I get to. Doing so is among the rich pleasures connected with this project.

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1

Modern American Religion and Irony

1:1 **F**our of the Aristotelian categories figure chiefly in this plot: time, space, substance, and quality. They provide the framework of a narrative and analysis of religion in the fifth American century. Three planned volumes will continue the project through the twentieth century. Each successive book will focus on a later period and each will isolate a different quality. They will also be able to stand independently of each other. Together they will make up the first history of twentieth-century American religion, the first attempt to discern its basic shapes whole.

1:2 *Modern*, first of all, will characterize the category of time. Historians necessarily style periods by discerning how people perceive and name their time. Thus one describes religion in modern as opposed to ancient or medieval times. Temporal categories are rich in personal meanings. It would be bizarre to picture turn-of-the-century Americans asking daily what it might mean to classify their time as modern. They do, however, give evidence that they tried to make sense of the moment they so regularly thus named and that they associated many events and qualities with it. They used such reflection to help endow their efforts with meaning. "Time is the central category of finitude," urged mid-century theologian Paul Tillich. "To be means to be present" in a specific time, in this case, the modern.

1:3 *American* is a nationally based reference to space. Historians

engage in mapping and placing. "Everything is somewhere," say theorists of mapping. Whatever else objects do not share, "they *always* share relative location, that is, spatiality." This history seeks to limn qualities of religious life that are special because they appear in America. "The present implies space," Tillich continued. "To be means to have space," a physical location including "a home, a city, a country, the world." Awareness of place both produces in people a sense of insecurity and inspires in them a need to reflect on the drama that occurs in their space. At the turn of the century, Americans were uncommonly occupied with the American question and have remained so.

1:4 *Religion* describes the substance of this book and series. The substance of some histories may be railroading, labor movements, roofing technology, or political parties. Other histories deal with the elusive but urgent spiritual experiences of a citizenry. Religion is the substance of this book and has substance in lives. Substance, Tillich resumes, "is present whenever one speaks of *something*," and has religious significance especially because of anxiety over the fact that this substance is temporal. "This anxiety refers to continuous change as well as to the final loss of substance." Americans in this period regularly expressed fears about a possible loss of religion in culture and in the meaning of their lives. They also expressed courage and creativity in concrete situations.

1:5 Those who observe modern American religion have reasons to be surprised over the amount of this substance they encounter. For centuries, plausible prophets had envisioned the decline of religion. Scenarios written in Europe and sometimes in America pictured an urban and industrial life inimical to faith. Instead of disappearing, however, religion prospered in selective ways. Instead of dissolving in the face of the jostling and erosion caused by American diversity, it relocated more than it declined. Instead of assuming a single nonreligious style of rationality and life, as some predicted they would, citizens kept inventing protean ways to pursue their spiritual questions.

1:6 "The conventional wisdom of the West," as British philosopher Ernest Gellner speaks of it, assumes that while "the rest of the world wishes to become rich and powerful, just like us," it can only do so by taking over "our rationality, our secularism, our liberalism." Such an outlook, he rightly observes, led many Westerners to underestimate religious power. They overlooked the ways it motivated the Islamic world and misdefined modes of

rationality current in non-Western nations. Such conventional wisdom overlooks many trends in American culture itself, as this book will demonstrate.

1:7 *Irony* here characterizes the quality of situations and outcomes in modern American religion. By the category of quality Aristotle meant "that in virtue of which people [or, by extension, conditions and things] are said to be such and such." I came to the sources unprepared to discover how ironic were the outcomes of religious aspirations in this period. Since "qualities admit of variation of degree" and of scope, it seemed fitting to use a folk phrase, "the irony of it all," to characterize the intentions and consequences of actors in the religious drama of this period. The citizens and believers who are being observed did not, of course, intend ironic outcomes nor did most of them employ ironic expression at decisive moments. Yet the observer is struck by the way in which the ironic perspective so regularly describes their circumstances and the consequences of their actions.

1:8 Attention to the concept of irony in this introduction will make possible the subsequent telling of a story uncluttered by too many self-conscious references to it. The most important aspect to address at the beginning is a distinction between literary irony, which has been a constant, almost wearying theme in literary criticism since mid-century, and historical irony, the irony of a situation, which has received much less attention. The former is "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used," and is often employed in sarcasm or ridicule. Wayne C. Booth, for instance, has expounded *The Rhetoric of Irony*, Douglas C. Muecke has surveyed *The Compass of Irony*, and Norman Knox has chronicled *The Word Irony and Its Context*. In all these cases, it is the literary trope of irony that received notice. Muecke calls "ironologists" those who pursue and advocate this form of literary expression and a mode of life related to it.

1:9 The only version of irony which will play any part in this book, on the other hand, has to do with perceptions of historical events. The *Oxford English Dictionary* almost perfectly and with some literary elegance defines this "*irony (fig.)*" as "a condition of affairs or events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things." To this Gene Wise adds the necessary ingredient of human agency to separate it from "the irony of fate." Here "an ironic situation occurs when the consequences of an act are diametrically opposed to the original intention," and when "the

fundamental cause of the disparity lies in the actor himself, and his original purpose."

1:10 While the bibliography on literary irony is very extensive, historical "figurative" irony receives less notice. Three important books are rare exceptions. The first, by Hayden White, deals with European history: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. The second, by Richard Reinitz, treats American history: *Irony and Consciousness: American Historiography and Reinhold Niebuhr's Vision*. His subtitle signals the third work, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's little classic, *The Irony of American History*.

1:11 Mention of Niebuhr, perhaps the most influential American-born theologian of the century, and of his classic theme, should serve as a reminder that the employment of an ironic perspective or the discernment of ironic outcomes is not a fresh discovery awaiting breathless announcement. Just the opposite. Far from shunning a theme because it is already patented, a historian gains confidence from the fact of its familiarity. An apologia would go something like this: If a situation best admits of an ironic outcome, the conscientious historian will use it, no matter what the fashion. Historians, of all people, should not resent and should welcome the observation that what they are doing is in a continuity, for continuity is their stock-in-trade. If such a motif helps provide appropriate and meaningful continuity to a narrative, that is a help in historical writing and reading. Finally, if the ironic understanding belongs to what, in the language of hermeneuticians, relates to an author's "pre-understanding" (*Vorverständnis*), as it does to mine, it is well to bring this forward.

1:12 Four corollary issues proceed from the choice of irony. The first has to do with what historians call "exceptionalism." That is, why employ it or discern it in this particular time, place, and issue? In one sense, all history is open to ironic construction, since "the promise and fitness of things" is so frequently a denial of human intention. Yet, since irony normally concentrates on illusions of innocence, virtue, wisdom, and power, one reserves it chiefly for well-situated agents and leaders. One would not, ordinarily, use it in connection with the oppressed or the poor, even or especially when outcomes are better than what they could have hoped for. America has seen millions of oppressed and poor people, yet this place has also been singularly rich in "the promise and fitness of things." That is why the ironic eye has been turned on events in the prehistory of this modern study. Perry Miller's

grand corpus concerning American Puritans saw irony in the effects of their concepts of a covenant and chosenness. David Noble discerned something similar in the Republic—an counterpart among the national founders and the historians who attended to their story.

1:13 For all the plausibility of ironic perspectives on earlier America, as Reinitz observed it in the careers of major historians Francis Parkman, Henry Adams, Richard Hofstadter, and others, there are exceptional—which here means distinctive more than unique—reasons to use them in this turn-of-the-century “early modern” matrix of modern American religion. Religion can and—as this narrative will demonstrate—consistently did reinforce and exaggerate those illusions of innocence, virtue, wisdom, and power. It did so especially among the sets of leaders who thought they could, in the name of religion, either significantly advance the cause of modernism or, at the opposite extreme, significantly counter the whole cause of and case for modernism through reaction. Between these extremes most other American religious leaders set patterns that turn out to have been persistent in their pursuit of illusions in ways that this period sees as heightened. The extended case for exceptionalism, of course, has to be made not through promises in advance but through the telling of the story in the many scores of pages that follow.

1:14 The second issue has to do with the morality and aesthetics of the ironic choice. Most students of literary and historical irony have stressed the element of choice. Thus Douglas Muecke insists that “irony, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder and is not a quality inherent in any remark, event, or situation.” Choice here is not arbitrary, of course, yet those who perceive irony recognize in it “a view of life which recognizes that experience is open to multiple interpretations,” as Samuel Hynes has put it. This means that of the interpretations, “no *one* is simply right;” instead, “the co-existence of incongruities is a part of the structure of existence.” Why *this* choice, for Hayden White’s supreme European ironist, Jacob Burckhardt, or for Richard Reinitz’s Americans, or, in the present circumstance, for me?

1:15 Hayden White properly relates it to the fundamental outlook and character of the historian. He cites R. G. Collingwood, who “was fond of saying that the kind of history one wrote, or the way one thought about history, was ultimately a function of the kind of man one was.” Then he went on to argue that “the reverse is also the case.” When a reader is placed before the alternative visions

that history's interpreters offer for consideration, "and without any apodictically provided theoretical grounds for preferring one over another, we are driven back to *moral* and *aesthetic* reasons for the choice of one vision over another as the more 'realistic.'"

1:16 To linger for a moment over White's own strictures is valid because he is the preeminent theoretician in the field. He wrote a 448-page work "in an Irony mode," through a conscious choice that "represents a turning of the Irony consciousness against Irony itself." Why? He feared that irony might tend "to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions," because of the view of "the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition" that it implies. That is the moral issue. Aesthetically, irony can feed "the skepticism and pessimism of so much contemporary historical thinking."

1:17 One who takes White's urgings seriously has the burden of proof to show that special kinds of ironic interpretation do not necessitate either passivity in the human *polis* or mere skepticism in the writing of its history. Reinhold Niebuhr's version, for which Reinitz comes up with the happy coinage "humane irony," and which the following narrative is supposed to exemplify, is a positive alternative, and it demands notice here. It alone helps the historian avoid a superciliousness, detachment, and condescension which would be the ironists' temptation even if they were validated by no other credential than that the historian was born after the outcomes of events and thus has superior hindsight.

1:18 Niebuhr contended that "the Christian faith tends to make the ironic view of human evil in history the normative one," though, as Reinitz and a number of people who facetiously referred to themselves as "atheists for Niebuhr" regularly made clear, one need not be a Christian to employ "humane irony." The theological root for Niebuhr was the view that God was "a divine judge who laughs at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations." The second half of that phrase is frequently overlooked, yet it is of equal weight in this form of irony and in the narrative that follows. Niebuhr's own career as a political activist and his awareness of alternative tropes like the tragic, the pathetic, and the comic, before his choice of ironic, promote a confidence in the belief that moral and aesthetic claims can be met through humane irony.

1:19 The message of such irony, and of the story to follow, and of this discernment in subsequent American religion, is not "What fools these mortals be!" Such inhumane irony would only respond

to the “divine judge who laughs at human pretensions.” It might also turn the historian into an illusion-filled agent who is set up for a grand ironic outcome! Niebuhr’s dialectical vision is to be sustained throughout. The knowledge of irony, he urges, “depends upon an observer who is not so hostile to the victim of irony as to deny the element of virtue which must constitute a part of the ironic situation.” On the other hand, the observer must not be “so sympathetic as to discount the weakness, the vanity and pretension which constitute another element.” Elsewhere he adds that a situation is ironic if “virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in the virtue,” or “if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its limits,” yet one must *not* overlook the virtue and there *is* also wisdom. The historian sees creativity and human intentions in the actors and agents who acted, who had to act, in spite of some illusions and without foreknowledge of outcomes. It is my intention to see most characters in this story in such a humane light.

- 1:20 The agents or actors themselves are the chief subjects of this history. In a study of human agency, Frederick A. Olafson insists that, if there is to be continuity in historical narrative, “the actions in question [must] be identified under the descriptions which their agents and patients may be supposed to have used.” To assure that what has come conventionally to be called “agent’s description” will receive prime attention on these pages, there will be many quotations and paraphrases of their own words. A footnoting or, better, backnoting system includes numbered paragraphs, each of which refers to a note at the end. This convenient numbering system also allows for attention to the important secondary literature on which authors of works like this must and do profitably draw. As for intrusion of formal ironic interpretation, this may consequently be rather rare and understated. Muecke writes that “the accomplished ironist will use as few signals as he can,” and the historian who observes irony prefers to let the story as told evoke recognitions of this theme rather than with wearying frequency pound a point home. In such an approach, “the eye of the beholder” of irony will not belong only to the latter-day historian but may just as well, indeed, may preferably, be that of contemporaries of the actors. In more rare circumstances, the actors themselves, if they lived long enough to reflect on contradictory outcomes, furnish the eyes.

- 1:21 Historians choose the distance for their perspective depending upon what story they have to tell. John Murray Cuddihy has ar-