

The Fire Within:

Religion, Prophecy, and Politics Today

Sunday Morning Address¹, New York Society for Ethical Culture, April 29, 2007
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Good morning, everyone, a warm welcome to each and all of you. It's so good to see you again, members and friends alike, new and old.

Politics

Today is the first time in nearly two years since I last spoke from this eminent platform. Leigh's and my departure from NYC in mid-August, 2005, concluding a remarkable 5-year stint that, given the events of the times, was significantly challenging for all of us, ended without my being able to properly thank everyone who sent cards or made calls to wish us well on our journey to the far reaches of Lambertville, NJ. I also sincerely want to thank you again for the wonderfully uplifting farewell party pulled together with panache by the Society's trustees, staff, and members. You were all extremely thoughtful and kind.....so belatedly, I extend to you my deepest appreciation for the festive time we so enjoyed together! It was a great evening.

I feel I should mention at this point just a bit about my experience of the early summer months of '05. Some of you will recall, and others might have never known, that a few days before the last Sunday in June '05, I suddenly had to contend with a once-in-a-lifetime 24-hour-long ischemic event known by the grandiose designation, Transient Global Amnesia. Its singular consequence is short-term memory loss which landed me in the hospital for a day and a night and introduced me to the wonders of the neurology department. Since TGAs never last more than 24 hours, that problem came and went without any long-lasting effects upon my health. Fortunately, too, as I went through a battery of tests, it was discovered I had another neurological problem totally unconnected to the TGA. I was suffering from the onset of Myasthenia Gravis which, though it sounds perhaps like the Latin name of a Greek salad dressing, usually signifies a general weakening of the body's entire muscular system. In my case, this auto-immune neuromuscular ailment announced its unwelcome presence by causing double-vision, the initial decisive symptom, among other symptoms. Most disorders of the auto-immune system can be tragically devastating as with Lou Gehrig's disease. By comparison, my situation is hardly dire at all, only physically limiting in small if unpredictably annoying ways, so I'm one of the lucky ones and grateful. My own version of MG appears reasonably well stabilized, at least at the moment. Spontaneous remission is an occasional if rare possibility, but I'm not counting on it! The pill I take 3-4 times a day does the trick. All in all, I'm enjoying a reasonably contented life in stimulating retirement conditions but, like the chief protagonist in the 1975 ethically potent film, *Network*, "I'm mad as hell" nowadays about what's going on in this great and glorious country of ours and the negative impact of our nation's policies throughout the world. I'm hardly alone in this feeling. In the words of now retired automobile magnate Lee Iacocca: "You can't call yourself a patriot [today] if you're not outraged. This is a fight I'm ready and willing to have." Not bad for an 82-year-old.

First and foremost, the leading ethical conundrum of our time, as we all unhappily recognize, is the ill-fated pre-emptive war of choice in Iraq. We have helped make a

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

complete hash of that nation, as if its people hadn't lived in sufficiently humiliating submission for the prior 35 years under a cruelly despotic ruler. To the question of why go to war when you don't have to, the answer, these days especially, is clear: there's money in it, lot's of it! And if our Ethical Culture humanist philosophy cannot address what's at stake, what other brain trust is going to do it better? There's still far more double talk than straight talk throughout this country of ours.

Over a century ago playwright Oscar Wilde wryly observed: "The great mystery of the world is not the invisible but the visible." In other words, the truth of things is more likely than not to lie open in plain sight. We're just not as observant as we should and could be, suspecting that truth is seldom obvious or easy to detect. Fact is, it often is easy to see, but first we have to learn how to read unintended nuances between the lines as a matter of course, one of the many lessons we can pick up from the art of critical thinking. There's nothing mysterious about any of this: words fairly crackle with resonances. The key to what transpires beneath the ostensible surface of events is indeed the visible world. As for the alleged invisible sphere, by definition it has no empirical embodiment, so why waste time chasing after a wild fancy? For instance: when for the umpteenth time G.W. Bush mumbles on that we need to keep spending billions more on the Iraq war until "we get the job done", or other words to that effect, what exactly is he talking about? Fact is: nothing at all, it's just some more rhetoric, political hot air breezily expressed cowboy-style.

The Administration has no plan to win, lose, or leave. Any so-called "surge" in troop numbers is automatically matched by increased insurgency resistance. What the Bushies' right-wing Iraq project is all about is permanently staying in place: to wit—the Administration was very anxious to sign off as soon as possible in its swift successful military response in Afghanistan to Al Qaeda's assault on the World Trade Towers so that it could turn its efforts immediately toward Iraq via its childishly termed "Shock and Awe" inaugural invasion in March, 2003. Shortly after bombing the daylight out of Baghdad, Saddam Hussein exited the capital. Once on the ground, American troops were immediately stationed around Iraq's Oil Ministry rather than its great Art Museum, which you may recall was royally looted, prompting our incomparable Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, to shrug off such action as, "stuff happens". Since then approximately 14 impressive permanent military installations have sprouted – hence the presence of many huge engineering contracting firms like Halliburton, Bechtel, and others – not to mention a posh American-style village with all the comforts and conveniences of home surrounded by a protective zone that will include the world's biggest ambassadorial establishment employing 3,000 employees. Much of this had high priority, built right after the invasion, thus providing a head start before any insurgency could interfere. To top off this splendid arrangement an oil law so-called was drawn up last July by America's petroleum company panjandrums who accordingly will enjoy first dibs whenever it comes around to extracting Iraq's rich natural reserves; 75% of initial profits is to go to American oil company coffers, the remainder to the Iraqis. It's only fair! I guess "greed is good", to quote the 1980's favorite mantra. *The business of war is, literally, business*, as has often been the case.

What else is morally wrong and wrongheaded about this vast cynical scenario? The barely disguised solemn intent of chief presidential aide, political architect extraordinaire and Svengali-in-chief, Karl Rove, is to rev up the awesome rightward-leaning Republican political machine with a view toward achieving an era of indefinite dominance which will undoubtedly require that the U.S. be perpetually at war. This supremely militaristic

delusion goes back to F.D.R.'s then Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, who saw one too many goblins everywhere and was the first to originate the idea of perpetual war to fend off permanent global crisis. Secretary of State Dean Acheson subsequently succeeded in persuading President Truman after WWII into frightening the American populace to demand from Congress that it regularly increase its defense budget in order to parry a growing universe of threats, then largely from the Soviet Union. The ruse worked, we Americans having been dutifully regimented, and patriotically so during the war, to do and believe whatever we were told by the reigning authorities of the day. We became sufficiently servile such that the politically corrosive impact of McCarthyism during the 1950s would easily exact a heavy toll of the American people's moral courage.

The ongoing tale of what's gone askew gets still more fascinating and convoluted. Since the Iraq war started, Halliburton's stock price has risen more than 300%. Former CEO Dick Cheney received a salary of around \$9million a year, plus a \$30 million severance package when he retired to run for the Vice-presidency, and additionally receives, probably for life, \$1 million a year in deferred compensation. These days, however, such figures amount to chump change compared to the annual compensation of a lucrative handful of very shrewd and capable hedge-fund managers who currently receive anywhere from \$250 million to \$1.7 billion annually – nice work if you can get it! In the land of Oz there's no such thing as enough compensation. Again, as Oscar Wilde reminds us, alleged mysteries of the world are all laid out in plain sight – all you have to do is look with knowing eyes.

Worth recalling here is that when the United States began to feel its growing industrial might followed by its developing international imperialistic ambitions, Felix Adler, on the first Sunday in 1896 at the NY Society's elegant rental quarters in Carnegie Hall, intoned the following: "A wave of war feeling, unforeseen, unexpected, has passed over the United States. It has temporarily subsided but may swell up again into menacing proportions. The time, therefore, is fitting for a sober discussion of the issues." Indeed it is time again! Which is why I'm highlighting at length the same subject. Listen as well to these words spoken three years later before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Yale University by renowned sociologist William Graham Sumner in 1899 – he was equally prophetic: "The pre-eminent face of democracy now and in the future will be plutocracy ...the social war of the 20th century will have to do with militarism, expansion and corporate aggrandizement [all of which will rebound principally to plutocracy's benefit]."

It should now be blazingly clear why Rumsfeld felt no need to deploy much more than 160,000 or so American troops and army reserve and National Guard units to Iraq. Cheney was instrumental in proposing years ago the supposed utility of powerful professional private mercenary forces – like Blackwater USA today – which are infinitely better paid than our regular military forces. Bush in an unconvincingly solemn tone praises our troops, who previously have been precisely those that have unnecessarily suffered grievous wounds because of inadequate body armor, inadequately reinforced military vehicles, insufficient food and few amenities. Private contractors offer not only a huge array of costly services like feeding soldiers en masse and repairing infrastructure, they also from time to time engage the enemy directly and pay a price. So far over 1,000 mercenaries have been killed, and over 800 contractors. Such private entities are either paid handsomely off the books somehow or draw on Congressionally voted supplemental (usually emergency) military funds overseen by the Pentagon. There are now roughly as many contractors and professional mercenaries in the field as there are regular army and related personnel.

Meanwhile, privatization and outsourcing of traditional governmental policies and responsibilities continue apace and have the effect of de-professionalizing federal government employees as government activities get increasingly franchised out. For example, it's been estimated that over 90% of all taxpayers may as well remit what they owe to the IRS directly to Science Applications International Corporation which boasts a workforce of 44,000. SAIC is a virtual "Stealth Company", implying a minimally public face that privately sells its professional expertise at astronomical prices to the U.S. government: products like weapons information, warfare dominance information, and the like. The Administration has neither the wit nor patience to deal with international problems in any other manner except to keep projecting 100% military force, deliberately ignoring sustained diplomatic, psychological, cultural and economic initiatives: an expensive, lazy, deadly way of exercising its responsibilities. No wonder we have unnaturally huge deficits! Such a contemptuous attitude toward national expenditure has its counterpart in the hard right's view of Democrats as an inferior human political species best seen as veritable road kill, enemies rather than as fellow adversaries and citizens.

It should therefore come as no surprise that G. W. Bush strives unrelentingly to give body to the concept of a "Unitary Executive" encompassing maximum authority as CEO, Head of State, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Navy and Air Force as well as having been originally chosen by God in 1999 – a personal divine revelation to Bush II who shared it with close friends, aides and supporters – to run for President and, if elected, become uncrowned spiritual leader as well of the fundamentalist Christian right. When the Constitutional Convention was in session from 1787–'89, Patrick Henry of Virginia arose one day to point out that the new Constitution's provision for a strong presidency was excessive; it "squints at monarchy," he asserted. I say it does even more than that. Bush desperately needs to wear the holy mantle of a wartime President in order to continue to access maximum power for the purpose of "protecting the American people," as he tiresomely keeps reminding us. If the Iraq war were suddenly to end, he'd have zilch for a legacy, which he'd find an intolerable burden to bear; however, by keeping the Iraq war going until the day his tenure ends, he can turn the whole bloody mess over to his successor, be it Republican or Democrat, and stiffly depart the Oval Office with head held high, proclaiming he kept the faith in Iraq's future democratic potential. My long considered view is that although he allows himself considerable leeway to get what he wants for his own personal or professional convenience, and given a completely open expense account to travel around the world on Air Force One like a maharajah, in all likelihood Rove and Cheney must pretty much determine the President's calendar and saran-wrapped political appearances and activities; in short, this president is a dutiful marionette – except when his petulant impatience crops up – arousing his insufferable frat-boy style of tough-guy talk. Still, it won't be clear for years exactly where the lines of authority in the executive branch of government of so secretive an Administration were originally drawn.

Despite the seemingly fast tempo of events these days, we thus have both a self-indulgent President and a lazy Congress. According to Lee Iacocca's recent book, *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?*, "If a leader never steps outside his comfort zone to hear different ideas, he grows stale....The inability to listen is a form of arrogance. It means either you think you already know it all, or you just don't care....George Bush prides himself on never changing,....There's a disturbingly messianic fervor to his certainty....the execution of the war has been a disaster. A man of character does not ask a single soldier to die for a failed policy...Bush has set the all-time record for the number

of vacations days taken by a U.S. President, 400 and counting....It's no better on Capitol Hill. Congress was in session only 94 days in 2006....What's everybody [in this country of ours] afraid of? That some bobblehead on Fox News will call them a name?....I'm not trying to be the voice of doom and gloom here. I'm trying to light a fire." Well, so am I, although with considerably less energy than I'd like to have at my disposal(!).

I'm reminded here of the long career of a celebrated Unitarian minister of the late 19th Century, Edward Everett Hale, famous, among other reasons, for having written an extremely popular novel published in 1863 titled, *The Man Without A Country*. Hale's was a long life. Born in 1822, he was called out of retirement in 1903 to serve as chaplain of the U.S. Senate where he was once famously asked: "Do you pray for the Senators, Dr. Hale?" "No," he tartly replied. "I look at the Senate and pray for the country."

There you have it, democracy's perpetual conundrum re. who has the country's best interests at heart.

If you would now bear with me for a sidebar comment I think might be pertinent at this juncture, a word about my immigrant father, who managed to outwit the Ottoman Empire's Turkish cavalry that regularly mounted massacres against Armenian villagers from the 1890s onward until the apogee of atrocity was reached in the first great genocide of the 20th century in the city of Adana in Anatolia in 1915 in the midst of WWI: one million out of only three million or so hard-working shopkeepers and farmers were hideously killed. Islamic proselytizing fury was the Ottoman Turks' spiritual source of their energy. Many was the time, according to my father, when a hapless villager would often be offered at sword's point to choose either to convert to Islam on the spot or be driven through with the blade: two stark choices.

Born in 1904, my father was one of several children and adults in a large family cramped together on a dirt floor in a less than modest dwelling; they mostly farmed for a living. Dad had but one year of schooling, and for most of his young life thereafter was on the run. Of calm demeanor, he proved to be remarkably self-possessed, otherwise he'd have been killed early on. His two older sisters, after all, were seized by surprise and carted off to Turkish harems in quasi-medieval fashion never to be seen again, while an older brother was caught, sprinkled with oil along with other compatriots, set on fire and thrown into a giant pit, there to writhe in agony until they expired.

After arriving in this country in 1922 with mind, body and spirit intact, he was greeted by his remaining two older brothers at Ellis Island as he stepped out of steerage of the ship that had ferried him and the usual huddled masses across the Atlantic. As a parent, he was a sturdy yet gentle person, extremely observant of the world around him and who after work and supper, would regularly take down from the parlor table a globe of the world and twirl it on its axis in order to teach me how to be aware that history cannot be properly understood without an understanding of geography. A favorite test of my knowledge might be to ask me where a hard-to-find place like the Kamchatka Peninsula was located. The exchange between my dad and me was not unlike the two of us sitting at either end of a log facing each other with the emotional energy of learning passing back and forth.

Probably no scholar is as adept in calling upon several disciplines to illuminate the various insights of each as they cross-pollinate and generate a multi-level analysis of historical facts than UCLA Professor Jared Diamond in his ground-breaking study, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. In other words, as a hologram can be highly suggestive as the creation of different sources of light that intersect, by the same token, viewing certain historical

facts and events from larger overlapping contexts can sometimes yield unexpected connections and, hence, much deeper levels of truth. A hologram's usefulness lies in its being more than the sum of its separate yet interdependent parts. Facts and events, after all, almost beg to be organized into some kind of understandable order: connecting the available dots embedded in those facts and events can thus result in the emergence of very helpful scenarios. This whole approach is not unlike a scientific hypothesis. It's this complex type of big-picture overview of different pieces of information that my father passed on to me almost by osmosis; it's a way of seeing the world with fresh eyes – and, naturally, what you discover is not always pretty, or always right.

As much as I revere my father's memory, I'm am equally thankful to President Eisenhower for famously warning us all in his farewell address of January 17, 1961 to beware "the disastrous rise of misplaced power" that controls and directs the "military-industrial complex" which these days needs to be enlarged to read, the "military-industrial-intelligence-counterterrorism and media complex", an unwieldy, swollen manipulative hybrid of American corporate interests that regularly cancel out the common good on behalf of the people of this nation in deference instead to the costly agendas, interests and pet projects of the White House, the Pentagon and intelligence community as a whole.

On 9/11, which Bush I believe (I base this on historical instinct) must have been virtually ordered by Rove and Cheney quickly to fly back from Florida to New York City to claim this spectacularly chilling event as the Administration's prospective Holy Grail before Giuliani or any one else got their hands on it, exactly the kind of triggering event that the Republican Right and their neoconservative armchair warriors like Wolfowitz and Perle had so long been waiting for; ran with it they did, all the way to monumental disaster and folly. So I come back here to SAIC, which late last year went public on Wall Street as an IPO starting at \$15.00 a share. It had long since brilliantly envisioned Nine/Eleven as a great boon in every respect, especially the financial! That astounding Corporation is now in the vanguard of propagating the prospect of endless war, an obvious improvement on Napoleon's thesis of total war that expands to epic proportions; all that need be permanently avoided is atomic warfare – in which no one profits. Why else would Bush, Cheney, and Rove be so concerned about Iran's and North Korea's nuclear pint-sized ambitions. In *The Good Shepherd* actor Matt Damon superbly reprises the spirit of onetime CIA spook-in-chief, James Jesus Angleton; in one of the more revealing scenes a well-known Mafia mobster, bemoaning that he's about to be deported to his home country, asks Matt Damon's character what's in it for privileged white men like him? He confidently replies, *We own the USA, none of you ever did; besides, the rest of you are only visitors here.* This all too cynical and real geopolitical drama is today regularly played out throughout the world in plain sight.

In sum: since great modern wars are hugely destructive because of their Napoleonic scope, they're now deemed by unseen powers that be as utterly unprofitable and consequently have to be either limited or driven out of business.

So it is that the kind of borderless asymmetric guerrilla-style conflict that has since come into play in which we're now everywhere enmeshed, replete with suicide bombings and improvised incendiary devices (ieds), is maddeningly surreal. Terrorists and insurgents are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, rendering the experience of being surrounded by unseen individuals out to kill in the bewildering maze of Baghdad's streets a mix of frustration and fear beyond imagining for both innocent civilians and legitimately armed combatants. This is the sort of war, therefore, that can be neither

officially won nor officially lost – nor will ever be definitively ended – by any of its warring parties irrespective of whatever empty boasts or promises are expressed. The Iraq conflict represents, therefore, the ultimate bankruptcy of war itself. In many ways it's the vengeful offspring of our own Vietnam debacle which we were unwilling to admit we lost, and from which we have chosen to learn nothing. Perhaps the best well known officer during the Vietnam debacle, General Westmoreland, like the absurdly compulsive optimists of today's political right, always saw "light at the end of the tunnel": according to this dogma, even when you're losing, you're winning, exactly the same cockeyed paradox we hear constantly from Cheney and others who dutifully echo him. Technically, at least according to George Bush, we in fact won the first Iraq skirmish in a cakewalk, toppling Saddam Hussein within a few months during the spring of 2003, the President crowing that our mission was already accomplished, making us Americans believe we were super heroes and that would be the end of it.

Had we really held to such selfless motivations, which would go against every principle of geopolitics, once we caught Hussein, we might have done well to hand him over to the International Criminal Court and then left shortly thereafter. Iraq might have gone on to flourish without our dubious assistance. By staying, we instead created over the succeeding years an utterly unmanageable mess and a thoroughly nerve-wracked people. We could logically assert even now that we were defeated neither then nor now during the current ongoing insurgency. Even the powerful and brilliant Israeli military that had occupied southern Lebanon for years finally saw fit to depart because, with Hezbollah permanently nearby, there was really little left they could do. The Israelis were not defeated, they were simply frustrated, so why remain any longer? An occupying force can only magnify the resentment of any population by maximizing its firepower and minimizing its efforts sincerely to win the trust of the people. So we had better bring to a close this whole pointless type of self-righteous undertaking before we needlessly lose more and more precious young lives, bankrupt our nation further, and ourselves morally. Bush the Younger simple-mindedly holds to the view that this war is all about him, and that we best honor our dead by continuing to fight the jihadist insurgency indefinitely, thereby putting more of our soldiers in harm's way and steadily increasing the number killed as an ongoing tribute to those American troops that have already preceded them in death! If this isn't an example of circular cogitation to the point of insanity, what is it? Lincoln, as usual, said it best in observing that as a free people in a functioning democracy it is we who either choose to live through all time or die by suicide. We can only defeat ourselves even as we keep reeking havoc upon others: a lose/lose proposition. Surely we cannot afford any longer to be so self-negating and dismissive of both history and present fact as to choose a fatefully wrong alternative yet again.

For the next time around, there may be little promising future left. That's why we must exert all the influence we can bring to bear upon this ever-loose-canon of an Administration to desist – or be prevented – from cooking up more phony excuses next to attack Iran as a way of deflecting attention from, and by doing so generate an expanded rationale for continuance of the present conflict in Iraq! Mr. Bush seems to believe he of course isn't "political" when he drops hints like this and that all others who disagree with his policies or views are somehow egregiously "political" in contrast! Isn't this a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black? Such is the state of affairs we find ourselves in today. We need to change it!

Religion:

The remaining areas of inquiry I originally intended to talk about – namely, the fire

within (having to do with Felix Adler), religion, and prophecy, will have to receive short shrift; for this I apologize. Having but one opportunity to address you in nearly two years (mentioned earlier), I'll suggest a few things in brief compass about each of the remaining topics in summary form, (but omitting prophecy for another time) as if they were like the coda to a musical composition.

I've long been intrigued by a telling observation floated by President De Gaulle's Minister of Cultural Affairs, Andre' Malraux, when shortly before he died on November 23, 1976, he laconically said: "...The 21st century will be religious or it will not be at all." I suspect that Malraux, wise and well read, a fine novelist to boot, was probably prognosticating yet another stark historic confrontation between secular modernity and some version of fundamentalist religiosity in the making.

In celebration of the French Revolution – the first mega-break with traditional autocracy in the burgeoning modern period – Wordsworth had exultantly expressed in *The Prelude*, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very Heaven!" The Revolution in France would be followed by a thermidorean reaction – an ultraconservative response of let's-set-the-clock-back-to-the-good-old-days-of-comfort-familiarity-and-monarchy forever. Though the times didn't provide much bliss for all the young and the restless, the latter nonetheless did taste some of the excitement of a new age finally dawning after centuries of dogmatic religious and political intolerance and persecution. The French Enlightenment in Europe and its colonial American counterpart created lasting foundations for a more open world. As noted, this hardly prevented a widespread atavistic reaction literarily, artistically, politically, or religiously from taking place. Darwinism came along in 1859, igniting a second ultra-conservative response lasting well into the 1920s. We are now in the midst of a third revolt against the secularism of modernity launched against the countercultural decade of the 1960s in America, complemented at virtually the same time by university student demonstrations against Gaullism in France. Formal political orders struck back in both countries.

In the United States today the fundamentalist resurgence is probably the single largest political, cultural and religious movement of the first decade of the 21st century. Malraux's hedged prophecy has been fully realized. There's been a huge explosion of interest in all things religious. In fact, religion and sex now vie in popularity as Internet topics. Searching for "sex" and "God" presently registers about 400 million hits apiece! Make of that what you will. So it goes.

Happily, and just in time at Harvard University, from April 20–22, the Humanist movement in the United States and throughout the world, though splintered into myriad groups small and large, came together in a spirit of uncommon passion, mutual curiosity, determination and commitment, and, for a change, fresh access to modest but substantive new financial sources for support. Well over 600 registrants were present, nearly half of them eager college students. The overall program, titled *The New Humanism*, was extraordinarily imaginative, brilliant, and to the point of what's required of one to become a positive agent for change. Kicking off the event was an enthralling dissertation by author and scholar Salman Rushdie on Cultural Humanism. Rushdie's approach was so engagingly broad that it truly enriched and expanded our understanding.

There's an enormous difference, after all, between a society that mandates religion to be the vehicle of its culture, versus acceptance of the culture as the principal secular vehicle of everything else, including religion. This latter alternative has been basic practice in the United States via church–state separation as well as in Western Europe.

Conversely, in the Near and Middle East, Islam, long feeling under siege by modern secularism, began in the 1970s rapidly to awaken to the limitations of its plight and freshly determined to overcome its siege mentality, by protest and violence if necessary. Islam remains a great and amazing world religion and is growing at a rapid pace, but as it strives to command every aspect of an individual's life – it is, after all, a religion exclusively of God, and only secondarily of humanity in its submission to the will of Allah: its turbo-charged theism is nothing short of magisterial. This all runs counter to the Western tradition of the unique importance of assertive human individuality. At the same time there's a significant minority of secular Muslims wherever they may live who respectfully regard Islam primarily as a secular culture in which religion plays a distinctive part.

Religiously speaking, finally, the attempt by Bush II, who perfectly fits psychologist William James's characterization of the twice-born personality that in its rebirth and reincarnation is often dogmatic, intense and brittle, along with efforts by the President's similarly religious-minded cohorts to promote on every level of the U.S. federal government a faith-based nation, simply must be stopped dead in its tracks. Such overt mingling of politics and religion goes completely counter to American tradition and experience. In a democracy a religious majority, however large and influential, has no moral, legal or logical right to presume it therefore deserves special treatment: majoritarian tyranny is still tyranny. Felix Adler, philosophically, spells out the essence of the democratic premise implicit in the new typological category known as ethical humanist religion. *From Sketches of a Religion Based on Ethics*, published in 1885 he says the following:

“May I then be permittedto make use of an analogy, and to say that our religion differs from other religions as republicanism differs from monarchy. For us, the moral state, like the political state, no longer culminates in the person of a sovereign, the moral law does not express the will of that sovereign, and religion does not consist in loyalty to that sovereign. The moral law originates in the reason of those who are subject to it, and only because it is the utterance of their own reason are they bound to obey it...”

Bravo to that!

The Fire Within:

In another of his early publications, Felix Adler reflects on *Some Characteristics of the American Ethical Movement*: “The desire” he recalls, for a consecrating influence expressed itself in...the Sunday [meetings] which were marked by great simplicity...there is music as a kind of frame but the center of the service is the address...[the speaker's object] shall be to communicate light and heat to [one's] hearers... Mere light alone....will not [suffice]....The platform of an Ethical Society is itself the altar, the address must be the fire that burns thereon.”

The imagery of fire became central to Dr. Adler. It was certainly elemental for his elderly mentor, Emerson, who confessed that we humans were born “to walk on molten lava.” Well, if you're going to do that, you had better step lively before the lava consumes you! No wonder Emerson once confessed he never rode a coach that went fast enough for him.

At the age of 30, having finally come to terms with the untimely death of his first wife, Ellen Tucker, who would always live in his heart as the love of his life, Emerson, having resigned his Unitarian pastorate in his hometown as too theologically confining,

set sail for Italy. Upon visiting Naples, he became utterly mesmerized by the sight of Mt. Vesuvius – today still one of the five most active and dangerous mega-volcanoes on earth – overlooking the city’s celebrated bay. It seized his imagination with the power of an epiphany. Years later a print of Vesuvius erupting would be hung in his Concord, Massachusetts home. For Emerson, being alive meant being on fire with the life force of the universe itself. Thus could the oracle of Concord logically conclude that “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us” – namely, the fiery passion that drives us to confront brute fact and deliver blunt truth to our friends and neighbors, to the citizens of our democracy and to the world at large. No wonder that years after his death Emerson’s son Edward was moved to say of his father, “He had lived free.”

Having painstakingly emancipated himself from needless conventional constraints, Emerson was able to serve as an agent of emancipation for others. He founded no separate school of thought that would outlive his lifetime, thus revealing a confident modesty; instead he was far more interested in helping individuals learn how to come to themselves rather than relying upon others to do it for them . He would probably agree with Plato that one must be one’s own best friend. Since each of us is not only unlike everyone else, each of us is also a social being, therefore one need never lack for good company in being by oneself. All of this is reminiscent of Adler’s stupendous regard for Aristotle who once averred that although Plato was a good friend, truth was still a greater friend.

Aristotle was a naturalist par excellence; Plato, something of a fantasist. Life on earth is imperfect, precisely what makes the experience of living dynamic infinitely worthwhile. All attempts to blend mythology and history, however ingenious or emotionally soothing, will always remain intellectual and moral abominations, and therefore disingenuous. “You’re on earth”, famously commented playwright Samuel Beckett, “there’s no cure for that”.

Endnote in appreciation to “The Fire Within”:

“I think continually of those who were truly great...

Who, from the womb, remembered the soul’s history....

The names of those who in their lives fought for life

Who wore at their hearts the fire’s centre...

And left the vivid air signed with their honour.”

—Stephen Spender



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