

Religion and the Revolution to Come

Daniel STEINMETZ-JENKINS

Acknowledging that the world is in dire need of religion, Roberto Unger’s latest book envisions something ambitious, namely the creation of a “religion of the future”, which will not only revolutionize the way humans think about and practice religion but will also lead to a political revolution.

Reviewed: Roberto Unger, *The Religion of the Future*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014, 480p., 45€

In recent years a number of notable philosopher and intellectuals have exhorted the political Left to abandon its secular bias against religion for the sake of establishing a common progressive program. The idea of post-secularism – most notably associated with Jürgen Habermas – suggests that secular and religious citizens must now join forces in order to resist the ills of the market, and to secure and advance the welfare state.

Roberto Unger – a leading public intellectual and Professor of Law at Harvard University – also believes that progressive politics cannot advance without religion. This is because religion is ultimately concerned about the human predicament – and provides answers to existential questions that far exceed what philosophy, politics or art can say about the matter. However, Unger believes the Habermasian understanding of post-secularism to be misguided. Joining forces with traditional religions can only compromise a progressive vision of the world. The only way around this impasse, argues Unger, is the creation of a new religion. This “religion of the future” will revolutionize the way humans think about and practice religion. It will, in fact, usher in a political revolution by convincing humans they can become more god-like right now.

Some might see Unger’s understanding of religion to be too narrowly defined or his religious alternative to be utopian. A much more interesting question, though, concerns Unger’s understanding of how the religious revolution will come about. It is here that many will find problematic Unger’s insistence that believers in the old religions be publically challenged regarding the false promises of their respected faith traditions.

Religion as a Useful Category of Scholarly Analysis

The Religion of the Future is undoubtedly ambitious work. It takes Unger just over 100 pages to explain the cardinal shortcoming of every major world religion. In doing so Unger is adamant that the concept of religion is a useful category of scholarly analysis. For this reason he bunks the

current academic trend – most associated with the anthropologist Talal Asad – that claims the very idea of religion to be fraught with biased European premises.

Rather than being an Enlightenment/Protestant invention used to compare the rationality of different religious traditions, Unger sees religion as possessing three related characteristics. Religion, affirms Unger, offers a response to the incurable flaws of human existence; it connects an orientation of life to a vision of human existence in the world; and requires one to commit their life in a certain direction. Thus unlike with philosophy, religion does not require “reasoned justification” (60); and in distinction to politics, religion claims to be capable of “bearing the full weight of our ultimate anxieties” (61).

Religion, from this perspective, entails adhering to ideas and beliefs that address matters of ultimate significance. Hence Unger’s argument that religion involves a commitment that exceeds its ground, or rests on a vision that goes beyond its reasons. It is this very idea – namely faith – which Unger uses both to show why the major world religions have failed and how the religion of future can succeed. Ultimately, Unger wants to rescue the category of religion from its newfound despisers since he believes that a religious revolution would ultimately lead to a political revolution. The end result is an ambitious five hundred page tome devoted to explaining the task of religion, its classical historical expressions, and its future.

Belittlement and the Human Condition

By “world religion” Unger particularly has in mind the revolutionary religions of the past two and a half millenniums. These religions rejected cosmotheism, downplayed hierarchical divisions, and demonstrated an ambiguous relationship to the state. Although he rejects Karl Jaspers’ famous notion of axial age religions, Unger sees Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam as the revolutionary religions of the distant past. Unger argues that they all failed to provide an effective antidote to what he describes as the problem of human belittlement.

Human beings, observes Unger, possess the unique capacity to transcend the particular societal arrangements or communities to which they belong. The ability of human beings to go beyond their circumstances should, according to Unger, “excite in the mind the idea of our greatness, of our share in the attributes that some of the world religion have ascribed to God” (24). Belittlement, however, speaks to the recurring fact that our capacity for transcendence is stymied by economic deprivation, social oppression or our devotion to objects – namely the social and political structures of human existence. Unger is emphatic that belittlement is not an insurmountable feature of human existence, but rather can be confronted and resisted – although never entirely defeated. The problem with the major world religions, maintains Unger, is that they accept social structures that encourage or even justify human belittlement. This is due to how they approach what Unger sees as the permanent defects of the human condition.

Belying the fecundity of human experience – no matter how robust or grand – is the horrifying fact that death is evitable and that human consciousness will end. Almost as terrifying, suggests Unger, is the groundlessness of human existence. We can neither look into the beginning and end of time, nor understand the whole of reality. Consequently there exists no basis for what to do with our lives outside of what we will.

On top of this, Unger sees humans as stricken with pernicious case of insatiability since they seek from the limited the unlimited. Unger uses these categories as a measuring stick to judge the degree and manner to which the major world religions encourage or even justify human belittlement. Clearly Unger's rendering of the human predicament is influenced by modern German philosophy and theology, as well as an Augustinian derived understanding of desire – among other Christian inspirations. It is for this reason that Christianity – much like Hegel's philosophy of history – shares the most in common with Unger's "religion of the future".

Three Paths in the Religious History of Humanity

On Unger's reading, the major world religions offer three general responses to the human condition: overcoming the world, humanizing the world, and struggling with the world. Overcoming the world is most exemplified in early Buddhism, the Upanishads, aspects of Platonic and Stoic thought, and more recently in the philosophy of Schopenhauer. This path, suggests Unger, offers a solution to human groundlessness and mortality by denying the actual existence of the phenomenal world. Time, distinction and individuality are, from this perspective, simply illusions. All that really exists is one unified and timeless being, yet by downplaying the phenomenal world it jettisons any idea or attachment hindering participation, universal timeless being. In doing so, says Unger, overcoming the world denies or trivializes "what goes on in the historical times of society" (80). It falls prey to a quietism that engenders belittlement by accommodating the social divisions of this world.

The starting point for humanizing the world – Confucianism and contemporary secular humanism – is the world's utter meaninglessness. Humans, however, can create meaning by denying their individual self-interest in favor of societal cooperation and group solidarity. Each person must resign themselves to occupying roles in service to one another. Yet by deifying social harmony Unger believes that humanizing the world "provides no adequate bases on which to affirm our power to resist the social regimes in which we find ourselves enmeshed" (107). Such is not the case, affirms Unger, with Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which stress the great divide that exists between God and man.

The religions of the book are defined – like secular ideologies of emancipation, liberalism and socialism – by their "struggle with the world". Unger's analysis, however, gives priority to Christianity for one major reason: its affinity with and influence on secular projects of political and personal liberations are more profound than Judaism or Islam's.

The metaphysical structure of struggling with the world affirms the existence of one actual world, the reality of time, and that history is open. Unlike with humanizing the world, its struggling with the world's central challenge to accept others out of love rather than to master self-interest for the sake of collective solidarity. It sees human beings as embodied spirits possessing the godlike capacity to ascend their surrounding circumstances. This conception of the self affirms "there is always more in us . . . than in a particular institutional regime or system of belief" (137). Human thus have the power to change, challenge and transform the nature of their social contexts.

Yet struggling with the world's capacity for societal change, suggests Unger, has in large measure been sidetracked. Unger blames this in large part on the marriage of Christian theology to ancient Greek ideas of natural order and timeless laws. These notions have stymied or compromised the core message of the struggle with the world. Unger sees modern philosophy as the inheritor of this tradition. Even as Marx, for instance, affirmed that societal structures are human inventions, he compromised this revolutionary insight by claiming that "inexorable laws of historical change drive forward the succession of systems" (133). This leads to Unger's larger criticism of secular projects of liberation, namely that by placing the ideal or supreme good in the future, they do not recognize that liberation can be achieved now.

But let us leave to one side Unger's criticisms of modern philosophy. His primary critique is directed at Christianity. The ultimate problem with Christianity, affirms Unger, is that it has made peace with the existing order by accepting its political, economic and social institutions.

What if Christianity broke from its philosophical, cultural and political trappings, and rediscovered its struggle with the world anew? Although Unger entertains this option it appears to him to be a highly unlikely possibility. Foremost, the religions of struggling with the world offer theological responses to human morality, groundlessness and insatiability that Unger deems intellectually suspect – belief in an afterlife, a divine friend who is master of the universe, etc. Unger argues that in order for Christianity to be a part of his future religion, it would have to undergo changes so radical that it would most likely no longer be recognized as Christian. Hence Unger's call for a "religious revolution" now.

Unger's Religious Alternative

Unger is convinced that the world religions could one day face stiff competition – and perhaps will be surpassed – by a spiritual alternative that more adequately addresses the human condition. Unger has his own ideas of what this new religion should look like. He has no qualms professing that his view is heavily indebted to the struggle with the world. Unger's aim is to radicalize its core features. "We must reinvent," Unger says, "the struggle with the world to keep it alive" (201). He pursues this by rescuing and radically reorienting its metaphysical assumptions of one existing world, the reality of time, the possibility of the new and the depth of the self. This new religion will be so radically different that most believers in the present teachings of the struggle with the world will not recognize it. As we will see, since Unger denies historical necessity, adherents of the new religion are responsible for its success.

The most salient feature of the new religion, Unger insists, is the divine-like capacity human beings have to transcend their societal circumstances and to achieve greatness. Unger's aim, then, is to somehow institutionalize the struggle with the world. At bottom this means Unger's politics begin in a religious conception. When put into action such religious convictions would engender an empowered democracy; one in which the economy, education and politics are held in check by social institutions that challenge and overthrow the forces of human belittlement.

But can such a revolution really ever happen? Unger believes certain circumstances could engender it.

Foremost, an awareness of the idea of human greatness would have to take the world by storm. Presumably as the realization of the human capacity for greatness takes off, the demand to overcome institutions and policies producing mass poverty and human belittlement would grow. This will lead to calls for religious reform, Unger believes, due to religion's capacity to answer ultimate questions of existence. However, popular religious devotion based on dubious theological ideas will stymie such reform. Supposedly, this impasse will "help set the stage for a religious revolution" (231). But since Unger denies the idea of historical necessity, none of what he imagines is inevitable. We will address Unger's solution to this momentarily.

So let us assume this happens. Then what? Once established, the new religion – in distinction to the old one – will refuse to centralize its power in a single individual or text. The prophet or teacher will be replaced by a convergence of overlapping movements. The new religion, asserts Unger, will espouse no creed, holy book or set of laws. When one of its members decides to bailout for philosophical reasons, their apostasy will face no consequence.

The only virtues this religion exhorts are those necessary for its survival and success: respect, fairness, simplicity, openness, etc. It will offer no blueprint for action and will constantly reinvent itself to confront those structures burdening human existence. This new path must not be understood as a Promethean venture, stresses Unger, since it outright rejects the seduction of self-idolization and power worship. Its purpose is to pursue and secure deep human equality through the reformation of institutions and social practices.

Unger is clearly arguing for political revolution but with the caveat that only a religions revolution can bring it about. This means that Unger is really a political theologian who – to a significant degree – bases political action on a heretical version of Christianity. But if this is the case, how can the religion of the future operate in a pluralistic political context that limits or separates religion from politics? Or how can the new religion pursue its mission in regimes where one religious tradition dominates? Unger's answers to these questions will strike many readers as problematic.

Criticism and Conclusion

It would be easy to brush off *The Religion of the Future* as utopian. But let us not do that. Nowhere does Unger state that the religion of the future will cause the extinction of the other religions. Moreover, the last two hundred years have witnessed the invention of several religions – particularly in the United States – that now have global significance.

I am also not interested in addressing the question of Unger's very specific understanding of religion. Criticisms of this nature too often lazily dismiss the entirety of a given argument, simply because they dislike how a term is defined; even if Unger unfairly judges world religions for not adhering to ideas they often explicitly reject; and if Unger's religion is simply a secularized version of Christianity.

Let us rather look more closely at Unger's argument concerning how the religion of the future will come about. Here we see that the religion of the future is at bottom a political theology, whose political program is based, according to Unger, on faith. For Unger's vision to have any

chance, it must reject the liberal principle of the privatization of religious belief and also the taboo against the religious criticism of religion.

This is necessary in order to convert people to the new faith so as to usher in the religious revolution which will lead to the institutionalization of its values. From this vantage point the public sphere transforms into the new religion's missionary field. The aim is not reconciliation with the other religions and philosophies since they are compromised. The goal is to change minds and hearts to accept the religious revolution. Supposedly no religious wars would result since there would be no compulsion to convert to the new faith – only the temptation to become more like God.

Again, there is not one blueprint for this new path but various expressions of it from one society to the next. But by rejecting the principle of neutrality – the idea that the state should not promote any particular conception of the good – the question becomes what the new religion could entail for the older religions, which are still around. For instance, Unger argues that the religion of the future will offer a certain kind of public education. Such an educational program would be driven by the new religion's values. If that is the case, then it would seem arbitrary or even discriminatory to not let Muslims or Catholics also have a say in the matter of public education. This is simply because, at bottom, Unger's politics are based on comprehensive values that require faith – albeit an atheistic one.

In turn, Unger's acceptance of political theology must seemingly tolerate rival political theologies that also seek to challenge the principle of neutrality – even if this is just a regulative or imaginary idea. Yet the implications of Unger's political theology is only explained from the advantages it has over the other world religions. No longer confined or marginalized by the trappings of the neutral “public sphere”, the old religions – with all of their factions – might also be empowered by the religious revolution to come. We thus enter into a new age of political theology whose organizing principle – religion – is resurrected from the pre-modern past.

Published on *Book&ideas.net* on October 16, 2014.

©**booksandideas.net**