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## **Modernity and the struggle for the church**

For several years, I have been working on the relations between religion and economic behavior. Much of what has been written about modernity and its effects on modern religion is in fact concerned with economic conditions. But highlighting them perhaps gives some added insights. If nothing else, it forces us away from Durkheimian perspectives that have focused so much on community, and pushes us more toward Weberian conceptions of ethics and of moral authority.

Viewed diachronically, there is much continuity in the ways that religious commitments influence behavior in modern society. The reason for this continuity is partly that social behavior itself is characterized by certain constants. Despite vast technological innovation the much anticipated leisure society remains as elusive as ever. Most people still spend a great number of their waking hours at work. Unprecedented affluence notwithstanding, money still remains scarce. Most people would like to have more money than they do; most find themselves beset with bills, taxes, and material wants to the point that excessive balances in their savings accounts are not a problem. In both the sphere of work and the sphere of money, however, a great deal of choice remains. As producers, individuals are free to choose (usually) from several alternative career options or jobs, and within particular jobs, discretion is necessary from day to day in the application of attention and energy to specific tasks. As consumers, individuals experience freedom of choice in making decisions among various products and brands. Religious commitments that focus on questions of choice, individual responsibility, and notions of obedience or obligation to God, therefore, remain directly relevant to the social sphere. Furthermore, modern religion in western societies has long been characterized by a "this worldly" orientation. That is, its focus on the supernatural has not deterred it from being especially interested in how people lived their lives on an everyday basis. Rather than encourage believers only to think about another reality beyond the present life, religious organizations have thus insisted that some behavior in this life was more pleasing to God or more in keeping with divine laws than other forms of behavior. Religious leaders have been watchful of the times, seeking evils to correct, morals to uphold, and principles to espouse. Given the great extent to which individuals are concerned with attaining their daily bread, it would have been surprising, therefore,



had religious organizations not paid considerable attention to the economic sphere.

But modern religion is also a repository of the past. More than any other institution, it is concerned with keeping tradition alive. Its very legitimacy depends on asserting and reasserting claims about the intervention of the sacred in history. Despite its insistence on the present life and on responding to the changes inherent in that life, it also stakes its authority in the wisdom of sacred texts that have survived over many centuries and in rituals and symbols that have meaning precisely because they too have existed for long periods of time. When religious organizations speak to matters of work and money, therefore, they do so with an eye to tradition.

There is much continuity in contemporary religious teachings about the calling, stewardship, responsibilities to the poor, and other issues relating to work and money. While the doctrine of the calling came to be emphasized in the Protestant Reformation, for example, Luther's and Calvin's teachings about glorifying God in one's labor were not entirely dissimilar from Benedictine rules nearly a thousand years old at the time, and these teachings drew explicitly on biblical statements much older than that. To suggest, as many active members of religious organizations do now, that one's work is in some way divinely appointed and of interest to God is thus simply to place oneself in a very long tradition of religious thought. Much the same could be said about teachings on stewardship or the poor.

The continuities are evident despite the fact that many people in contemporary society claim not to believe in these teachings or to understand them very well. At what time, one might ask, would this not have been the case? Certainly such teachings in the early years of Christianity were not yet familiar to the vast population of the Roman Empire and even after Constantine it remains doubtful whether the mass populace understood the new official doctrines very well. In the late middle ages and early modern period heresy, superstition, and folk religions remained strong against all efforts of the Catholic church and the Protestant reformers to combat them. And what is known of, say, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century piety in America is often based more on the writings and public pronouncements of clergy than on evidence from the ordinary man or woman.

It might even be argued that organized religion has been better able to assert teachings on economic issues in the twentieth century than ever before simply because it has had the resources and the incentive to do so. Its resources include a vast clergy, mostly with formal professional training, a literate laity generally within close proximity to



a meeting house of some kind, ample facilities in which to meet, and books, pamphlets, and periodical publications of all kinds, as well as (in recent years) radio and television broadcasts, cassettes, and video tapes. Its incentive is that the same resources used to disseminate religious teachings must also be replenished, and, existing as they do on such a large scale, these organizations require the constant input of volunteer time and charitable giving. Teachings about work in secular places of employment or about the uses of money in the marketplace generally have implications for the support of religious organizations themselves. Seldom does one find a religious book on these subjects, for example, that does not devote some portion to the importance of donating work and money to religious organizations.

A purely diachronic analysis of religious teachings on economic issues would of course pay attention to the possibility of change taking place in the relative impact or meaning of these teachings. Secularization theory suggests that such teachings are likely to have diminishing importance over time because of relative increases in the strength of political, economic, educational, or other secular institutions. Religious organizations may therefore be as concerned as ever about securing volunteer labor or influencing public thinking about stewardship, but have to confront the conflicting claims of employers and advertisers. Yet the value of secularization is not so much to identify specific ways in which such changes may be taking place as to suggest the relevance of change itself. Paradoxically, secularization theory posits that change is a constant feature of modern life. Thus, in ways that most religious leaders would also recognize, religious organizations are always faced with adapting to change and uncertainty.

This argument can be taken a step further by suggesting that the chief insight of secularization theory is simply the presence of a prevailing secular ethic in modern society to which religion must adapt and with which religion always finds itself in tension. Secular society might thus be likened to a playing field, tipped slightly so that the forces against which religion is pitted always enjoy a small advantage. But the image of a playing field is faulty in another respect because religion and other social institutions often form alliances, as it were, rather than being engaged with each other as antagonists. The important fact is that the playing field itself is subject to changes (much like weather in an outdoor arena) to which the players must adjust.

If the relevant environment in which relationships between religion and economic behavior are understood is viewed as a space that has taken shape largely within the two centuries since the Industrial Revolution, then it becomes evident that a diachronic model must be



replaced by a synchronic model. This is because religion is always self-reflective, active, responding not only to its past, but to the web of circumstances in which it finds itself in the present moment and to the changes it envisions taking place in the future. Characteristics of its environment become part of the meaning of its own elements because meaning is always contextually determined. In consequence, separate trends become less interesting than the larger mix of conditions to which religion must respond and of which it is a part. All of these conditions converge to shape the distinctive meanings and possibilities that religious teachings about economic issues may enjoy in contemporary culture. Among these conditions, the most important include the following:

1. *The triumph of economic individualism.* The modern marketplace, including labor markets as well as markets for goods and services, functions on the assumption that the individual is the basic locus of decision making and therefore the basic unit of responsibility. While it is possible to find examples of entire groups being treated as a collective unit (as in a class-action lawsuit or an entitlement program), it is much more common for individuals to be hired, promoted, and fired as individuals, held personally responsible for their debts, and appealed to by marketing appeals to personal desires and tastes. In labor markets, whole tribes or families are seldom employed as they once were (say, on plantations or in mining towns), but each individual member is expected to become a repository of employable skills, fill out an application that summarizes these credentials, and be hired on the basis of his or her merits. Despite (some say because of) the growth of large-scale organizations in modern society, a great deal of emphasis in the economic arena is therefore placed on the individual. This emphasis includes not only the responsibility to attain and deploy relevant skills but also to exercise freedom, use discretion, determine personal values or preferences, allocate time and energy to various goals, and make decisions about ethical conduct.

2. *The separation of public and private.* Much of modern life takes place in organizations that claim to represent the public, that are publicly owned, or whose operations ultimately bear responsibility to the public. At the same time, the personal lives of individuals are largely shielded from public scrutiny and accountability. There are of course glaring exceptions to this rule, as the scrutiny of public officials' private lives attests. Generally, however, privacy and personal freedom are cherished and protected even in the face of large-scale public institutions. This separation can be traced to early eighteenth-century Europe where it appears to have been encouraged by the simultaneous growth of cities political bureaucracies and



large-scale industry and commerce. The growing anonymity of urban life permitted individuals to develop more complex, multiple selves but in the process made these selves less stable and more problematic to maintain. In economic matters, labor and employment policy, fiscal management, taxation, the money supply, and the promotion and regulation of trade have all become public issues, to be discussed by public officials and in the public media, while their private counterparts — family budgets, career choices, consumer purchases — are left almost entirely up to individuals and households. Economic individualism is thus accompanied by the sense that individuals can have very little influence over public economic matters, except indirectly through their role as citizens, and are responsible for maintaining the privacy and autonomy of their own economic decisions. Under these circumstances, such decisions necessarily attach themselves closely to definitions of the self and to questions of personal worth, freedom, meaning, and morality.

*3. The growth of the service economy.* The shift in advanced industrial societies away from agriculture during the nineteenth century to commerce and manufacturing, and then in the twentieth century increasingly toward light industry, the professions, and services has had wide-ranging implications for the structuring of contemporary society. One has been the softening of class divisions between wielders of power and the majority of the laboring population. The relatively small fraction of white collar owners and managers who relied on masses of blue collar workers performing physical labor has been replaced by a much larger variety of occupations performing middle management, sales, clerical, and technical tasks. The disparity in income and wealth between the so-called ruling elite and the remainder of the population has probably not decreased substantially as a result; indeed, it has been aggravated by some features of the service economy. But the nature of work has shifted decidedly away from heavy physical labor allowing, among other things greater numbers of women to be included in the labor force, and making for a more finely graded system of intermediate careers in terms of prestige and social desirability. In the process, professionalization has extended downward and outward, encompassing a wider variety of technical and supportive occupations as well as more careers that would have once been considered entrepreneurial or managerial. Professionalization connotes an intrinsic personal commitment to a career, internalization of a set of norms that one chooses to adhere to, and a system of rewards that base rank and prestige on merit. Devotion to the workplace and discretion in making workplace decisions are thus important implications of professionalization. In addition, professional norms have



contributed ambiguity to the question of whether work should be performed strictly for money or whether other values (such as service) should prevail. The service economy has also contributed to the weakening of the labor movement as a distinctive force in politics, leaving an increasing share of the working class to fend for themselves by limiting purchases or numbers of children, seeking education, and maintaining dual career households. The meaning of poverty has thus shifted as well, the impoverished becoming an underclass distinguished mainly by the lack of social and moral capital assumed to characterize the majority of the middle and working classes.

4. *The growing importance of consumerism.* Although foreign trade, colonization, and neocolonial international systems greatly altered the shape of the global economy over the past three centuries, the greatest extension of market economics has been in the creation of consumer markets within developed societies themselves. Household items, automobiles, labor saving devices, and in recent decades a growing variety of services (from day care to lawn care) have become commodities packaged and priced for sale as consumer products. On the production side, the service economy is thus concerned increasingly with the creation and marketing of consumer goods and services. On the consumption side, more and more people participate more frequently in the marketplace as well. The role of consumer has become an important aspect of individual economic behavior. With it come responsibilities to buy well and to buy wisely. Moral injunctions to save and accumulate wealth, or aspirations of attaining higher social rankings by doing so, have largely been replaced by educational attainment systems, leaving most individuals with relatively fixed or secure salaries. Discretion must then be exercised by making informed consumer choices. Having money means primarily the ability to expand one's array of possibilities as a consumer. Social norms also come increasingly into play that define what are reasonable levels of consumer expenditure. It is expected that people will consume automobiles, clothing, housing, and other items to a level that is in keeping with their occupation or their standing in the community. Savings and charitable giving are thus likely to be defined chiefly as trade offs in relation to potential consumer spending.

5. *From life and death to personal happiness.* The lengthening of the normal life span, the dramatic reduction in infant and childhood mortality rates, and the virtual conquering of many life-threatening and debilitating diseases have had far-reaching implications for both the economic and religious spheres. For the former, the possibility of so-called orderly careers, following a predictable trajectory from early



educational preparation through mid-career to retirement has become an expectation both for individuals and for organizations employing them. A number of fixed costs have been built into the economy to foster these expectations, including the huge costs borne by parents and the wider tax-paying public in providing education for the young, investments in on-the job training, and payments to retirement programs. Social benefit programs have also been created to protect most citizens from the fear of leaving families unsupported as a result of death or injury. It is thus outside the immediate experience of most individuals to face the uncertainties of life and death that continue to be a feature of life for the poor who are not protected by such programs. To some extent, economic individualism is also encouraged by these programs, insofar as they replace familial or communal bonds of fealty as bases of social insurance. For religion, life-and-death faith has been replaced largely by personal-happiness faith. Answering questions about the reasons for illness and death, depicting the afterlife, or supporting the bereaved have declined in importance relative to dealing with day-to-day anxieties, worries, and self doubts and providing lessons in self esteem and positive thinking. Sermons offer comfort and reassurance, while support groups encourage people to have good feelings about themselves. It is in this context that religious teachings about the meaning of work or how to feel good about money and material possessions take place.

*6. The declining moral authority of religious organizations.* While participation in religious organizations remains quite high, at least in the United States, the capacity of these organizations to evoke conformity to specific teachings or ritual practices has diminished considerably. Distinctive denominational or confessional traditions were once reinforced by ethnic differences, geographic isolation, distinctive occupational or educational characteristics, a clergy trained exclusively in those traditions, and ecclesiastical rules bestowing special privileges on members in good standing and denying these privileges to others. Most of these features have eroded as a result of larger forces contributing to the blending of the population, as well as competition among religious bodies themselves. Moral authority has also declined as a result of fewer children remaining in the religious traditions in which they were raised, more young people being trained in alternative moral traditions through public school systems or higher education, and as a result of television, colleges and universities, and even political organizations claiming to speak authoritatively on matters of conscience. In place of strong organizational boundaries, a kind of religious populism has emerged in which religious leaders are subject to the demands of their audiences and to the vagaries of



public opinion. Such populism is particularly prone to being shaped by both of these factors, audience demand in the sense of catering to personal anxieties and needs, and public opinion in the sense of responding to politicized issues and movements. Thus, in recent decades there has been much greater attention paid to individual spirituality, on the one hand, and issues such as abortion and pornography, on the other hand, than to questions, say, about materialism or business that had no obvious constituency or interest group advancing them.

*7. The escalation of big-ticket religion.* Developments in the wider society, such as the rise of professionalism and the spread of the service economy, coupled with a tradition of free-market competition in the religious sphere, have greatly increased the cost of operating religious programs. Congregations that at one time supported a single staff member, doing so in part through contributions in kind (especially housing and food) and sometimes expecting this clergy person to be gainfully employed on the side, are now much more likely to support a multiple staff of clergy and assistant clergy, secretaries, educational and musical directors, and perhaps even trained counselors. Denominational officials may be supported to provide specialized services. And in other cases, television broadcasts may be supported, or book publishing ventures, telephone counseling centers, or movements to lobby for certain causes. While religious populism might deter appeals for volunteer work or financial contributions, the cost of these programs, therefore, necessitates greater attention than ever being devoted to these appeals. Besides competition among religious organizations themselves, a large number of secular nonprofit and government agencies have also entered the arena, appealing for charitable contributions and offering to provide social services in return. Religious organizations are thus faced with addressing economic issues as matters on which their own survival depends.

It would be wrong to suppose that these features of the social environment form a coherent system. Some of them clearly are at odds with others. But they do form a system in the sense of generating mutual effects on one another. Economic conditions themselves have an enormous influence, but religious traditions and organizations also form an important part of the social environment in which the specific relationships between religion and economic behavior take shape. The joint effect of these various conditions is to heighten the demand for moral meaning and moral restraint in contemporary culture. The quest for meaning, and the associated questions that arise about moral restraint, thus provide the immediate



context in which to make sense of how religious and economic orientations intersect.

Questions of meaning are integrally related to modern economic conditions. They are, in the first place, associated with the breakdown of community, of which the declining authority of religious organizations is but one example. A person who lives exclusively within a single community such as a monastic order or a medieval village experiences life as given. The meaning of one's own life within that community tends also largely to be given. There is likely to be a close connection between self identity and the community of which one is a part. But modern economic conditions tend to erode such all-embracing communities. Corporations may demand a great deal of a person's time, but would be loathe to absorb their employees entirely into their own domain or to guarantee shelter and sustenance until death. Markets function best when individuals are free to move geographically in search of gainful employment and when standards of taste can be extended beyond distinctive local enclaves. Without a single community of orientation, individuals must nevertheless decide on which standards of taste and of value they are willing to embrace. The meaning of life or of specific events becomes problematic because different contexts for making evaluative judgments are available.

Economic individualism, and the division of labor on which it depends, partly resolve questions of meaning by legitimating the reality of variability. It becomes, in short, acceptable for standards of taste and value to vary from one person to the next. However, for such differences to be acceptable it must also be the case that individuals take responsibility for their own choices. What an individual values must matter, despite the fact that other individuals may hold different values. Moreover, the reason why particular values matter must to some degree be intrinsic to the person rather than extrinsic. One may argue, for instance, that being a chemist matters (is personally important), but greater credence is likely to be accorded arguments that say it matters to me (is personally meaningful) than to assertions about, say, coming from a long line of chemists. The division of labor permits an individual to argue that this is a useful profession, something that others need, and that others cannot do. Yet there must also be additional reasons given to explain why I chose to fill this role. And much the same holds true of the decisions that consumers make. Thus, the question of why one particular choice among many possibilities is meaningful takes on special significance.



The objection might be raised that surely the modern economic sphere is so well institutionalized that questions of meaning actually make little difference. There might be points of entry or exit at which such questions were raised forcefully (such as deciding on a career). But everyday behavior at the job or in the marketplace would operate effectively on the basis of routine rather than requiring conscious interpretation. The best support for this objection would come from arguments about the inherent rationality of economic life. Especially if markets automatically seek out the most efficient means for accomplishing ends, and if they also adjust ends to fit existing means, then little but rote behavior would be required at all. It is increasingly evident, however, that economic behavior seldom functions in this way. As it is experienced by the average person, it is a sphere characterized by much ambiguity and by arbitrary or disorderly occurrences. To take an extreme case, automobile insurance systems may function reasonably well to adjust policy premiums to cover expected contingencies over large numbers of cases, but when an accident happens to an individual, the trauma and disruption (if not actual out-of-pocket expenses) are likely to be considerable. In less extreme cases, economic behavior also requires constant interpretation, not because it is fundamentally routine, but because it is fundamentally disorderly. Coworkers seldom live up to expectations exactly, performance and reward are never entirely synchronous, money never goes quite far enough, purchases work out on one occasion but not the next, and so on.

Religious faith enters the economic sphere, therefore, primarily as a way in which to construct meaning. It supplies order where order is lacking, provides rational explanations when chaos seems to prevail, and offers comfort and a means of escape from otherwise meaningless activities. It is not the only source of meaning: scripts are widely available about careers, success, family responsibilities, community obligations, and self fulfillment as well. Religious teachings compete with all these scripts as interpretations of the meaning of economic behavior. The important point, however, is that religion serves less to motivate, guide, or inform economic behavior than to enhance its meaning. Prayers generally do not yield specific information, for example, about how to attain a job, but add meaning to the individual's concerns with getting a job. Teachings about stewardship do not instruct people (usually) to donate a weekend helping save the whales, but heighten the sense that it is important to think about economic responsibilities.

By enhancing the meaningfulness of economic activities, religious commitment may well contribute to maintaining the basic structure of



the economic system. This may especially be the case if sensing a divine calling makes people more committed to their work, or if believing in the concept of stewardship leads people to take greater care in investing their money. Religious conviction may also provide ways of alleviating job-related stress, or of explaining why the poor are poor. None of this may involve a high-blown or all-embracing metaphysical system, let alone a religious worldview in which the economic structure itself is assumed to be divinely ordained. Meaning is likely to be supplied, less in terms of explicit answers to questions about economic behavior, than as a part of the internal conversation with which a person interacts with the world. Work and money are thus meaningful, not because they have ultimate significance, but because they are part of life which in turn is given meaning by statements about the existence of God or of divine love.

But such meaning is also moral, and in this sense implies restraint. To bestow meaning is to draw connections between an activity or event and some symbolic context. These connections provide added dimensions or a possibility for deeper interpretations. They expand as further connections or broader frameworks are envisioned. Yet there is always a limiting factor as well. To understand in one context is necessarily to deny other possible frameworks. Moreover, these frameworks imply an evaluative dimension, a sense in which it is "right" to think or behave in one way rather than another. Economic behavior may be legitimated by religious meanings, therefore, but it should also be restrained. Stewardship may imply *not* purchasing consumer goods or prayer may suggest *not* working harder to earn more money.

The reason that moral restraint may not be very effective in the economic realm is that meaning systems always require communities to give them plausibility and, indeed, to enforce norms of consistency and coherence. For individuals who happen to be devoted members of religious communities, it may be possible for teachings about the meaningfulness of work to channel activity away from gainful employment toward service to the community itself. Such guidance would require extensive discussion of the meaning of work itself and of the practical implications of religious understandings of work. If communities are silent about such issues, it is less likely that they will have an actual effect on behavior. Even those that are not silent, however, may have limited influence because individuals do not spend all their time in these communities, but participate in several, and take many of their cues from economic organizations themselves.



Given the high degree of economic individualism in modern culture, moral meaning and moral restraint are thus likely to function primarily in guiding individual decisions. Individuals may well make economic decisions with some reference group, such as family or church, in mind, but the implicit conversation involved is likely to be internal to the person. Were it to become explicit, it might take form in statements such as "is this the right thing for me to do?" or "how do I feel about this?" Without much in the way of external validation, there is clearly a great deal of room for slippage in making such assessments. What is popularly referred to as rationalization becomes a process of adjusting interpretations to actions until some portion of the self is satisfied. It is of course unnecessary for such interpretations themselves to carry all the weight of supplying moral restraint. Legal restrictions, not to mention a wide variety of institutional limitations (such as the number of hours a person can be paid each week), provide restraint of their own. Yet religion is likely to influence the individual interpretations that suggest moral restraint if it is going to have an impact on economic behavior at all.

Ritual and symbolism, it appears, play a special role in such circumstances. With coercive powers of an authoritative community lacking, some mechanism is needed to demonstrate to oneself or to a relevant reference group that restraint has indeed been exercised. Were such a community present, it might be able to establish rules dealing with every possible economic contingency. Without such rules, the ambiguities of behavior in the economic sphere make it difficult for the individual to know what is or is not appropriate behavior. Ritualistic behavior helps to reduce the inherent uncertainty of this behavior. It may be difficult to know what the ethical response should be, but being honest when confronted with a dramatic opportunity not to be provides evidence that one is indeed an ethical person. Whether a person has worked hard enough, too hard, or too little may be equally difficult to determine, especially if fixed hours are not part of one's job description. Commonly used language about stress or burn out supplies a way of talking that helps to legitimate saying that enough is enough. Or, by the same token, greed may be difficult to define, so buying a less expensive brand becomes a symbolic gesture of austerity, much in the same way the public condemnation of a "greedy" business official helps dramatize what it means to violate this standard.

To suggest that religious commitment may help to restrain economic behavior in symbolic ways is not to diminish the importance of this restraint. Token sacrifices at the supermarket may do little to reduce consumer spending at the national level or to redress economic



injustices. But symbolic acts are important for reasons other than their economic consequences alone. They send messages about values. They perpetuate the belief that greed is a matter about which it is appropriate to express public concern. Or they communicate to the individual that work is still important even when it does not result in monetary rewards. One might imagine an economic system in which all the necessary checks and balances were supplied by the marketplace itself. And yet such a system would clearly be impoverished culturally in comparison with one in which statements about kindness and unkindness, or about virtue and vice, could be made.

Whether economic behavior *should* be constrained in this way, or in more serious ways, is of course a normative question that cannot be addressed adequately within the framework of sociological analysis alone. From one standpoint, it can certainly be argued that the market system itself does little to supply or defend absolute values. If such values are important to the functioning of human society, then religious convictions and rituals that do supply them play a positive role. From another standpoint, it can also be argued that economic systems themselves influence values, perhaps in ways that encourage overwork, overspending, and a lack of attention to other dimensions of human existence. If so, then alternative sources of value are important indeed.

Because contemporary religion and economic behavior also thrive on freedom, it is nevertheless unlikely that the moral restraint religion may exercise in the marketplace will be very great. Were religious leaders suddenly to impose a percentage point cap on interest rates, for example, there would likely be an outcry not only from the business sector but from other religious leaders and congregants as well. Such a cap would seem an excessive imposition of moral restraint in part because it would appear to rob the individual of exercising discretion. Similarly, religious teachings that encouraged extremely low (or high) levels of workplace involvement would constitute an abridgment of personal freedom as well.

Individual freedom, combined with a relatively constant level of uncertainty in the economic sphere, have then reinforced what might be termed a logic of limited commitment. In this logic many commitments are valued, but none is valued in excess. The implicit idea is to hedge one's bets, cover all the bases. Some attachment to family, community, friends, and hobbies is important. Some involvement with religion is also valued, but the norm is to limit this involvement rather than becoming overly zealous or fanatical. Nearly



everyone attends religious services once in awhile but only a minority are involved regularly to a serious degree. Money is valued because of the freedom it gives to pursue a larger number and variety of commitments. It is not valued to the point that serious sacrifices of time or lifestyle are required to attain it. While virtually everyone considers material possessions such as new cars and nice clothing important, only a minority regard these as absolute essentials. Work is intrinsically important as well, but is a means of attaining other values. Thus people assert that they want more out of life than just a good job, and speak of burn out and stress as ways of signaling that work too has its limits. Limited commitment affords individuals with flexibility in the face of uncertainty about what may truly matter in life (or what may matter *to them*). Should one commitment not work out, then others are there to supply alternative sources of meaning.

Religion supplies meaning to the life of limited commitment, less as an overarching canopy, but as modes of speech and rituals of behavior that help to align the relationships among multiple commitments. Slogans about the dangers of excessive greed legitimate stopping short of an extreme commitment to the pursuit of wealth, but are quite flexible in allowing people to pursue a comfortable life — and to define what comfort should be. Ritualized behavior, such as attendance at religious services or giving to religious organizations, provides important symbolic ways of observing alternative values and commitments. Prayer permits emotional detachment from problems that seem to be taking more than their share of personal attention. It may also alleviate anxiety that arises from attempting to juggle too many commitments. At the same time, relativistic commitments that are otherwise hard to take seriously acquire added meaning in light of religious teachings about the worth of work or the meaning of money. All this can be legitimated with traditional maxims about "moderation in all things" or "the golden mean." It is, however, less likely that these maxims will be regarded as principles of the universe but simply as practical knowledge about personal growth and happiness. There are of course wide variations in how individuals actually allocate personal resources among various commitments. Limited commitment is nevertheless a norm that fosters adaptation to the variations and complexity of modern life itself. With few absolute requirements, together with few authoritative communities capable of setting fixed rules about how much commitment is desirable, individuals are left to use their own discretion in determining commitments. It is up to organizations to secure as much commitment as possible. Internalized checks give individuals a rationale for spreading their commitments among these various organizations. All commitments may be appealing, leading in-



dividuals to want more out of life than they can possibly attain, so a logic of balance, moderation, and restraint becomes particularly important.

Despite its adaptive potential, this logic never functions easily or with complete effectiveness. It may legitimate a balance of commitment and restraint, but fail to offer specific guidelines about how to prioritize commitments, let alone choose among them on a moment by moment basis. The ritualistic behavior that helps align different commitments takes time and energy itself, and it is seldom institutionalized clearly enough that an individual knows for sure that an adequate performance of ritual duties has been accomplished. It is, moreover, up to the individual to monitor his or her various commitments, determining whether they are producing the desired satisfaction, and adjusting them in terms of changing goals or resources. The logic of limited commitment is thus a system of norms that seldom runs smoothly without periodic reassessments. It requires constant attention, periods of reflection, an interest in thinking about values-commitments that are often associated with religion.

While in the Catholic Church the struggle with church authority is evidently connected with the much-debated role of the *magisterium*, still this conflict is not an exclusively Catholic problem. The Protestant churches as well have been faced with the question whether controversies in doctrinal matters should be dealt with by disciplinary measures. The Protestant Church in Germany at least has also dismissed ministers from their office as pastors — after a juridical process, however, in which theologians and members of the synod were

<sup>1</sup> E. Jüngel, *Die Autorität des lebenden Christus*, in: *Unterwegs zur Sache*, München, 1972, 179-188, 179. For Jüngel, "a responsible theology has to deal with this situation critically. It cannot withdraw from the existing ecclesial problems, either by attempting to patch up bruised authorities with postulates or by presenting the question of authority in the church as a superfluous one and one to be superseded by the postulate to abolish all authority." All use of authority, however, has to seek its model in the "authority of the pleasing Christ" and to strive for insight and evidence instead of using force.