

Notes on my October 16th lecture, "The Will to Believe."

The thing I've been thinking about in connection with "The Will to Believe" has to do primarily with the rationalist, secular, agnostic-atheistic, positivistic, scientistic point of view. In the political dimension of Israel, for example, I am struck by the fact that the ties that non-Jews have to Israel are at least to some extent based on profound spiritual commitments. To the extent that Israel articulates a position that is rationalist and anti-spiritual in the sense most commonly shared by intellectuals, Israel loses the deeper meaning and deeper justification for its ties to a country like the United States.

Should our involvements with Israel's survival and defense be based only on the kinds of relationships that are rational, then I don't believe they have the strength to survive.

I'm prompted in part in this by Will Durant's position on the most serious threat to western civilization being the death of Christianity, the end of a substantial belief in the supernatural in the best sense of that term. Have we reached a point where Israeli intellectuals in Israel and Jewish intellectuals in this country and in Europe have built for themselves a place in the world that reflects a spiritual and religious tradition which these same Jews cannot accept? Is it a situation such as that envisioned by Will Durant when he says that the common man needs to have that kind of faith in the supernatural even though educated intellectuals do not have it--even cannot have it, as if by intellectual definition.

In part, this quandary is the quandary expressed in a different way by Elie Wiesel himself in his questioning of God. He must, because of the experience of his life question the existence of God, because the events of his life are such that he cannot conceive of a world in which God would have permitted such suffering to take place, theological system big enough to include such enormities of human behavior is in his mind deficient. Wiesel seems not to have finally resolved the quandary; he simply pursues it. But his basis for existence seems now to be rooted in history, in a sense, a history which is a religious tradition and which requires a capacity for mythical thinking and for metaphorical reasoning that goes far beyond the limits of science and scholarship. Perhaps what Elie is doing is itself an expression of the will to believe, as I'm at least thinking of that at the moment. Although Elie's theology, as is said of other Jewish theologies, is an intellectual structure without a God, but he seems to convey in his exploration of this problem, this essential and never final search for meaning as an act of will, a determination by intellectual force, that there must be meaning and purpose in the world. If a world of the holocaust is a world in which the existence of God is unthinkable, then existence in a world without a God--without meaning or purpose--is even more unthinkable.

The basic thrust of all this is the problem of the intellectual in the world, and particularly the academic man, carrying out an intellectual tradition that began during The Enlightenment and that has been given ideological force by Marx and by modern science and technology. Under such circumstances, we're confronted with a choice that Durant offered --namely, a world in which the best we can offer is a sham, a fabricated faith in

which others must believe because we ourselves have not the intellectual power or the capacity to reach beyond our own philosophical assumptions.

The contrast, the other side of the argument, is the notion that people like myself are only engaging in the exercise of the will or the right to believe. The notion that we have some kind of inner need that can only be met by forcing ourselves to reject our rational standards and our other intellectual commitments and to impose on reality a dimension that can only be somehow as thought of somehow as psychologically fraudulent. (Perhaps psychologically is not the right adverb -- intellectually fraudulent.)

On the one hand, we are confronted with a scientific posture which strikes me as narrow and inadequate, simply unable to cope with the deeper and profounder confrontations of human life with its boundaries. The inadequacy of our intellectual interpretation to achieve a level of humanity or understanding or tolerance or wisdom or insight that is more than superficial. What I'm trying to suggest is a contrast between the position of the intellectual who denies a kind of reality that he intuitively recognizes but must rationally deny or leave in such intellectual limbo that it serves no purpose in adding to understanding. On the other hand there is the intellectual who is a believer, who seems to be engaged in imposing on disorder and perhaps even more so on the ascertainable order of the world a "meaning" and "purpose" which is a projection on to reality growing out of psychological and physiological quirks of the human mind and personality.

Whatever the conclusion one comes to, my contention is essentially that it is essentially an act of will that resolves such quandaries, not a process of intellectual analysis that is rigorous--at least by the standards of rigor that we normally apply in the arts and sciences with which we customarily deal.

Our thinking in all this is greatly confused by the intrusion of ideological forces--certain assumptions made about the nature of the world lead one to certain conclusions about how human affairs ought to be guided and human choices made. Some of this becomes "situation ethics" where one focuses on the process and tries not to overstate the ultimate end of one's activity. The other and more familiar pattern is the intrusion into all these matters of dogma, doctrine, "faith" as is objectified and formalized in organized religion. It is, after all, the perceived abuses and outrages of organized religion that have led to the reputation of the church in all of its various forms over the last two hundred years. Much of the current contempt for organized religion is related to the liberal-radical identification of organized religion with repressive political regimes and with social and economic oppression of the kind that is still evident in many parts of the world. Those rejections of the organized church leave unanswered a whole array of intellectual and spiritual and psychological questions, as well as leaving unanswered a whole series of moral imperatives advanced by particular religions, such as Christianity.