



Man's being consists primarily of his existence in economic socio-logical and political situations, upon whose reality everything else depends; perhaps, even it is only through the reality of these situations that everything else becomes real.

~Karl Jaspers

The state of the outer world does not merely correspond to the general state of men's souls; it also in a sense depends on the state since man himself is the pontiff of the outer world.

~ Abu Bakr Sirai Ed-din

3. Historical Episodes of Religion as Problem

Among the first records of human culture and thought that we have, there is evidence of religious concern. Whether one looks at fragments of discourse of Pre-Socratic philosophers, ancient Near Eastern monuments, early Chinese oracle bones, or pre-historical American Indian ruins, the history of our race universally shows signs of what is generally called religion, that diverse body of thoughts and practices people have developed over the centuries to bring themselves aright with the conditions of existence and maintain themselves under these conditions in the best way possible. While in typical traditional societies the manifestations of religion seem to be virtually as sacred as cultic divinities themselves, there exist also early records of attempts at defining or criticizing religion, as in Plato's *Laws*¹ or Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. The Bible, to cite a sacred text which presents in itself both sides of this tension, records the Hebrews' experience of their religion as the central fact of cultural identity. It also records their experience of religion as problem and chronicles their attempts to "solve" the problem along with the consequences of their consistently ill-fated solutions. Religion as problem thus appears to be as old as awareness of religion; in the ontology being developed, it yields a tautology to articulate this observation as the proposition that religion as problem is coextensive with awareness of religion.

While the problem of religion is demonstrably old, its history appears to have taken a decisive turn around the time of the Enlightenment in Europe. The Enlightenment itself does not constitute the turn precisely, but can be seen more appropriately as a manifestation of it. As Frank Manuel traces this movement in his preface to *The Changing of the Gods*,

Self-conscious exploration of religious behavior has been a perennial theme of Western culture. In many respects the eighteenth century interpretations were elaborations, made forceful with contemporary empirical data, of insights that had already found embryonic expression in the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans and the Church Fathers.²

The Enlightenment was a time when it could be important for a Locke to write *The Reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the scriptures* or a Wolff to formulate a philosophy of religion in system-

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atic, logical argument or a Kant to write *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone*. It was also a time, however, when a William Law needed to write *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* and a Zinzendorf needed to compose ecstatic paeans to the blood and wounds of Christ. Theodore M. Greene presents one side of the Enlightenment in his extensive introduction to Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone*:

In it we see the Renaissance working itself out through the agencies of its scientific and philosophical discoveries It was essentially revolutionary, directed against tradition. The positive force at its core was a determined assertion of the freedom of the individual — freedom in affairs social and political, intellectual and religious. This spirit expressed itself most emphatically in a new and extravagant belief in the power of reason. Faith in the old presuppositions and authorities, for so long considered valid beyond question, gave way to a spirit of criticism reason claimed to be autonomous and set itself up as the unique court of appeal. . . . To strictly religious values the age was for the most part blind.³

In Greene's observations, several significant features of the period of the Enlightenment are brought out. First, the connection of the Enlightenment with the Renaissance makes the point that we are setting up the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the temporal locus of a major cultural discontinuity. There are reasons why the period of the Enlightenment is radically different from what went before, but two earlier periods, classical antiquity and the Renaissance, contributed much of the original basis for Enlightenment innovations. The fact that pagan culture and the philosophies that grew with it appeared viable after one-and-a-half or two millennia was liberating to the mind, but this alone did not sufficiently determine the leap made in the Enlightenment; the new mechanical technology growing out of the age's scientific progress, which was, in turn, proximally traceable to the Renaissance, also played a major role in the development of Enlightenment culture. The nature of this technology is not an agreed-upon datum.

Jacques Ellul suggests the decisive difference between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment is to be found in the decay of Renaissance humanism. This humanism, he claims, was the curb on an