

# Rereading Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's Philosophy of History in the Era of God's Return

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A fair appraisal of our social reality concludes we are living in what philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls a post-secular society. In addition to the social reality that naïveté is unavailable for "the believer or unbeliever alike,"<sup>1</sup> this means there is a growing "awareness [that] living in a secular society is no longer bound up with the certainty that cultural and social modernization can advance only at the cost of the public influence and personal relevance of religion."<sup>2</sup>

Secular and religious academicians must learn together a new kind of hospitality in how we handle knowledge. We must question "the hegemony of unbelief in academic and intellectual life,"<sup>3</sup> while giving thought to how we might respond to religion's call for us reconnecting with the continuum of our historical selves. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy gives us a healthy example of how to respond to this call.

We have entered that phase of history Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy described as "mutual permeation where everybody knows and hears of everybody else." This historic revolution "presupposes the solidarity" of all humankind, and because it does so, it

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "A 'post-secular' society – what does that mean?," paper presented by the author at the Istanbul Seminars organized by Reset Dialogues on civilization in Istanbul from June 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> 2008, pp. 4-5/18, read from <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000000926>.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 13.

“comes upon the scene with a new significance.”<sup>4</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy studied the history of the west rooted in Christianity, which as the progenitor of revolutionary passions he taught, produced the third order of human relations beyond either the church or the state, which we call, “society.”

He taught we all lived in the unicity of speech spoken through diversity. We gain our varied inherited identities through this single socializing field. Together the languages form the body of speaking humanity living through its generations. He was confident that through our conflicts we created an ever-increasing unity (but not synthesis) that is waiting for us all with out-stretched arms. Within the history of human generations, he understood speech as the medium of the Holy Spirit that "opens the spirits of the different times to each other."<sup>5</sup> This One Spirit experienced as our many languages generating permutations of passion inspires us to speak beyond our past into the future because it is "at work behind the spirits of several periods."<sup>6</sup> We can experience this work as individuals through moments of Death and Resurrection --living beyond ourselves --, and as nations as moments of sudden Revolution and periods of sedimentary Development.

Rosenstock-Huessy anticipated that although we could no longer speak to one another from either an exclusively religious or secular point of view, we must nonetheless think and speak from out of salvational history, or *Heilsgeschichte*, the history we really live. This describes for Rosenstock-Huessy the concrete and particular journey the generations of humanity have experienced by traveling the speech paths Jesus made

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<sup>4</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution, Autobiography of Western Man* (Norwich, VT.: Argo Books, 1969, originally published in 1938), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Fruit of Lips or Why Four Gospels* (Pittsburg, Pennsylvania: The Pickwick Press, 1978), p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Fruit of Lips*, p. 31.

possible through his death. He called this Christian history, or salvational history because, as he put it, "I have no system outside of that which has happened to me and to the whole world, and what continually still happens."<sup>7</sup>

Rosenstock-Huessy calls us to be cognizant of our highest human capacity, to hear God speak by listening to others, the quality of life that allows us to rise again from despair, since "victory over tragic conflict [is] the deepest meaning of our destiny."<sup>8</sup> He wanted us to see ourselves as co-founders of a future in which coming generations could experience relations of healthy authority, service, fellowship and creation.<sup>9</sup> Beyond ourselves we need to hope, love and come to believe we can nurture a temporary peace that helps bring this about. The cunning prowess of death in us against which we press, the forces of chaos we unleash to bite and devour one another, our lust for vengeful and vainglorious war against outsiders and unbelievers, our disposition of decadent indifference toward promise of our common future and our disrespectful, impatient revolt against our traditions bequeathed us by our ancestors, all conspire to deceive us into doing the dead works animated by the idolatrous spirits of futile history heated by the flames of the gluttonous present.<sup>10</sup> In the midst of our living for today, we need to come alive to the calling of challenging our children to live for the ages.

The truths we live to live in peace, Rosenstock-Huessy said, are as "mortal as an infant baby."<sup>11</sup> We do not create truth but we can create the time in which we speak to our differences in voices of mutual respect while trusting in the mutual permeations

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<sup>7</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Heilkraft und Wahrheit* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlag, 1952), p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future*, p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future*, p. 193.

<sup>10</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Speech and Reality* (Norwich, Vermont: Argo Books, 1970), pp. 11-15.

<sup>11</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Heilkraft und Wahrheit*, p. 10.

collectively ours that stir us to speak. In this way we build temporary truces, which allows us to live together.

Rosenstock-Huessy warned us that we have “no chance of living crucially” unless “the greatest conflict of a period is...faced, [otherwise] all its minor conflicts will re-open, under its pressure.”<sup>12</sup> Rosenstock-Huessy confessed that the “crux” of his life had been “to break the impasse between the tradition of the Holy Ghost and the workings of the spirit of the times in the courage and faith of simple soldiers.”<sup>13</sup> He was not merely speaking biographically. We all suffer from the strain of fantasizing over peace and fearing the ravages of war. “Peace and war together represent the cross of reality to which we are nailed, changing natures in a changing world.”<sup>14</sup> Pioneers of tomorrow’s song of unity know that the “future does not consist of the extension of existing trends, nor of ideological opposition to them.” They know, “The future must be created.”<sup>15</sup> They know only those who cease to be dogmatic, who dare to despair, who open themselves up to the end of their thinking can do this. They know this requires an act of courage; indeed, an act of conversion from “self-conscious orthodoxy to simply believing”<sup>16</sup> God has put a life process in place through Christ that unfolds as the *Heilsgeschichte* for the world. This gift allows each of us to continue walking in the truth through “the unending stream of rhythmic speech,”<sup>17</sup> which as the medium of the Holy Spirit has as its innermost impulse the yearning in all its ways and with all that is said to get us in touch with one another and connect us together.<sup>18</sup> Rosenstock-Huessy

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<sup>12</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future*, pp. 214, 215.

<sup>13</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future*, p. lvii.

<sup>14</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future*, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future*, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Heilkraft und Wahrheit*, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Die Sprache des Menschengeschlechts*, vol. 1, p. 284.

<sup>18</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Die Sprache des Menschengeschlechts*, vol. 1, p. 283.

believed that the Christian era “achieved something very different from the pagans” of the ancient world. Its unique characteristic was the “inter-penetration” and “coexistence” of the basic forms of government and constitution we know since Aristotle as monarchy, aristocracy, democracy and dictatorship.<sup>19</sup> In the Christian era, “the world was redeemed from the curse of blind repetition.”<sup>20</sup> Because of Jesus coming into history we all live in one another’s lives and can adapt one another’s habits and choices of personhood. This is the hallmark quality of his unique transformation of speech, which manifested itself in the unsettled nature of the western experience. As a principle of historiography, Rosenstock-Huessy expressed this fullness of life experienced as “mutual dependence” as it pertains to the nations within a European context. “The peoples co-operate and co-exist, not merely geographically or mechanically, but morally, as one collective system of interplay and mutual dependence.”<sup>21</sup> This state of mutual dependence and moral interplay now defines our post-secular global living quarters.

The lifestyle we bequeath our children however in this new setting, threatens future generations to suffer decadence, the suffocating condition of being trapped in the present, overwhelmed with options and without a calling. The style of life into which we have drawn them promotes an inflated premium upon displaying leisure, luxury and the second-hand, simulacrum kind of life. They wage a thousand battles a second against a myriad of distractions that keep them from seeing the future. They stand stunned and overrun by too many opportunities that hold them captive to the present. As their

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<sup>19</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution*, (Norwich, VT.: Argo Books, 1969), p. 455.

<sup>20</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution*, p. 454.

<sup>21</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution*, p. 455.

teachers and leaders we too easily become absorbed in our role as "hyenas"<sup>22</sup> roaming the past battlefields we have lodged in their minds. Too quickly before them we bend the knee to the inertia<sup>23</sup> of competing dogmata -- scientific-socialist/progressivism, *sola scriptura*, American exceptionalism, *Magisterium*, or *Sharia* -- with an idolatrous air of nostalgia for days of bygone glory or contempt for the glory days won by others. We forget that we need to listen-speak-listen to one another with humility, one person to another, realizing that within the social reality in which we meet, none of us has the authority to speak for all the generations of humanity. We forget the Spirit is the one who bears witness through us, giving us the timing and forms with which we should speak the truth. We neglect the dying of our noble death of thought to breathe again with new life beyond the earlier ways we gave witness to truths we continue to hold dear. We fail our children by failing to demonstrate to them, "Man's dignity lies not in producing [or protecting, or promoting] private opinions but in timing public truth."<sup>24</sup> We are not called to abandon our respective grasps of truth, but we are called to learn how to live them out as speech and action in one another's lives for purposes of peace.

The timing of inter-penetrations among peoples occurs through episodes of change, which Rosenstock-Huessy calls "World Revolutions."<sup>25</sup> Revolutions can neither be planned nor announced. Revolutions are "explosions" which occur in the "realm of fact."<sup>26</sup> The timing of these revolutions works out of the dialectic of life between love and law. "Nature has no rest and has therefore no choice; man has. Human love

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<sup>22</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Teaching Too Late, Learning Too Early," in *I Am an Impure Thinker* (Argo Books, 2001), p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Teaching Too Late, Learning Too Early," p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Teaching Too Late, Learning Too Early," p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> See Chapter Eight, "Polybius, or, The Reproduction of Government," in *Out of Revolution* for thirty-two statements about the nature of these Revolutions, pp. 453-482.

<sup>26</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution*, p. 128.

condenses an eternity into a drop in time's ocean. Human law can keep life unchanged for centuries."<sup>27</sup> Thus in the world of human suffering and human joy, "Law and love, nature and creation, are in perpetual opposition and struggle with each other" in a way which is "inexplicable."<sup>28</sup> Daily life, filled with the "regular and recurrent" is also an arena of "love, change, grace [and] surprise."<sup>29</sup> We cannot follow the single-note, siren call of the secular sciences because they "presume that the future is not created but caused, the past not looked upon as an authority but as mere tyrannical cultural lag, the mind not experienced as brother fellowship but as a blueprint, and the earth not experienced as waiting to be led to its perfection but as an objective obstacle to be crushed or exploited."<sup>30</sup>

Rosenstock-Huessy urged us to reject "the dogmatic self-complacency" that dulls us into thinking man is a thing of nature "like anything else."<sup>31</sup> In place of this reductional "uniformity of man" explaining how Man works, he called us to join him in being "convinced of the unity of mankind, of a common goal and destiny for all men," and therefore, "of an urgent need for restoring the humanities"<sup>32</sup> for learning how to live as men and women through the generations. As a Christian who wrestles with the dual dogmatism of theology and science I share his conviction. Therefore, as an exercise of faith I seek to contribute to this restoration project by building upon the embarrassing foundation of the Bible. I confess our different pasts have joined us together to live in one post-Christian, post-secular global society. This reality calls me to open the Bible

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<sup>27</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution*, p. 185.

<sup>28</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution*, p. 189.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future or The Modern Mind Outrun* (New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 194.

<sup>31</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Multiformity of Man* (Essex, VT: Argo Books, 2000), p. ii. From lectures originally given at the Lowell Institute in Boston in 1935.

<sup>32</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Multiformity of Man*, p. ii.

not only as revelation, but also as a meeting place for studies in the global humanities and as a corpus of literature to be examined – experimented on -- for further developing the skills of translation and the tools of literary criticism. These two post-secular fields of speech together form a healthy diachronic arena for discussing our differences while exploring our common destiny.

I believe we owe it to ourselves, to those who taught us and to our children to study further Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's philosophy of history. We are not Elliot's Hollow Men. We have the hope it takes to live out commands of love, believing in the new meaning we bring to life through our speaking beyond derision and despair. We have the opportunity to die to and rise again from our subjective religious worldviews and our isolated political identities. In the present new setting beyond what we had once been we can choose to become what Rosenstock-Huessy called men and women of good will, those who believe in the unity of man. This is not an abstract faith based upon "scientific knowledge," but lived faith as "a mighty dangerous task,"<sup>33</sup> which we take up as this unity yet to come. It "is not demonstrable on paper, but a bold faith in a truth to be revealed, a common speech to burst forth, after much moaning and groaning."<sup>34</sup> As an "invisible remnant" this group of men and women of good will "always overcome the cowardice of class and family, clan and race, the pretense of a better pedigree, of a better

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<sup>33</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Comments on the document by Emil Brunner on THE ETHICAL REALITY AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH," remarks in a letter addressed to Mr. Bennett, dated December 2, 1942, p. 7/8; read from *Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy Collected Works on DVD*, Item number: 366, Reel number: 7.

<sup>34</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Comments on the document by Emil Brunner on THE ETHICAL REALITY AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH," remarks in a letter addressed to Mr. Bennett, dated December 2, 1942, p. 8/8.



promise, for their own class."<sup>35</sup> Should we join them, Rosenstock-Huessy believed, our struggle "creates a common language, a common spirit, a common rediscovery of prayer, praise, confession, [and] remission of sins."<sup>36</sup> He called us to join their ranks. If we do so, then like him, we will be changed.

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<sup>35</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Comments on the document by Emil Brunner on THE ETHICAL REALITY AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH," remarks in a letter addressed to Mr. Bennett, dated December 2, 1942, p. 3/8.

<sup>36</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, "Comments on the document by Emil Brunner on THE ETHICAL REALITY AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH," remarks in a letter addressed to Mr. Bennett, dated December 2, 1942, p. 7/8.