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Five Partings of Way in World History

A Comparison

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EDITION

Chapter I

By Way of Preface: the Result

1. Similar Processes at the Beginning of Five Ways of Life

The paths we travel can fork without warning. Having never traveled these paths before, without signs to show us the way, we do not know which direction we should go. We stand – as Hercules once did – at a crossroads. We must choose.

Societies and cultures also come to crossroads from time to time. In this book we will be dealing with historic situations in which some of the traveling companions continued marching straight ahead, while others turned off. These forks in the road not only divided one path into two, but also divided the people who walked along those paths. A community of conviction bifurcates into two camps with differing convictions. Precisely because they are aware of and retain their shared heritage, they do not accept the necessity of separation and become entrenched against each other.

At certain moments, new ways of life emerged that marched in opposition to the culture of origin. Once sharply contrasting, the grinding, aggravating contradictions between old and new might not always remain as clear as when the camps were formed. Today, there are movements toward reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics, even Jews and Christians. By now, American democracy and English parliamentarianism with a monarchical head are but variations of one and the same political system. In Europe, previously socialist states have turned to a democratic line that they had long reviled as merely masking class rule. Where communism survives, it is outside the West from which it arose and its goal has been fundamentally altered to modernize stunted countries through firm central control. This has little in common with the series we are tracing.

We devote our attention to newly developed communities of conviction, although the old traditional cultures – their native soil and opposite – will always remain present in our deliberations. The movements that formed each of these breaking ranks are strikingly similar, particularly in their formative phase, during which they developed their lasting characteristics. If this has not yet been noticed, this is because these upheavals are so far apart in space and time. They are chronologically spread over three thousand years: from the 13th century BCE to the 19th century CE. They unfolded in scenes scattered across a vast area, encompassing

the northwestern outskirts of Egypt, the hinterland of the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as Central Europe, North America, and Russia. The points of contention over which cultures broke also differ. Three of the cases, which led to reorientation of religion in antiquity and early modernity, were followed by two upheavals in the 18th and 19th centuries that were more concerned with fairer political and social ways of life. As such, it is unsurprising that things so chronologically, spatially, and substantially disparate have not yet been examined and surveyed as topologically related.

It is time to make up for that. We will be concerned with the following situations in world history:

- The appearance of Moses, with whom Israel's path to monotheism began.
- The short-lived, abruptly terminated public activities of Jesus of Nazareth, which continued into Christianity.
- The tumultuous emergence of the Reformation in Central Europe as the beginning of Protestantism.
- Thirteen North American colonies' renunciation of the British motherland and the establishment of modern, representative democracy.
- The formation of revolutionary cells in the Czarist Russia between 1860 and 1880, from which Communism would ultimately emerge.

Despite their differences, these five upheavals portray a whole bundle of common systemic characteristics. It appears we can entirely rule out this particular grouping in other cases. The concurrence between these five cases form a list of ten common characteristics.

The First Similarity

Let us set aside the Mosaic Reform, about which we know very little with certainty. In four other cases, significant cultures, which were also communities of conviction, unexpectedly drifted apart in two different directions at a cross-roads. While some members followed the old course, others found their way to a fundamental reorientation that placed key areas of life placed on new intellectual supports. Altering the basis of legitimacy, upon which the previous way of life had rested, resulted in numerous individual reforms. In doing so, the trail-blazers in the second through the fourth cases, perhaps even in the first case, did not intend to overthrow the existing order, but rather to renew it. Traced to its core, its true nature, a culture of origin should perfect what is inherent in it. The first Christians were concerned with a reformed Israel. The aim of the Reformation was reformed Christianity. The founders of North American democracy wanted to create a reformed England on the new continent. The Russian

revolutionaries of 1860 ultimately had a democratic ideal in mind that did away with the inequality of political rights within society and rendered everyone equal, including in their economic situation. (This is precisely the original meaning of Social Democracy). This appears to be an extension of the French and American Revolutions. However, the achievement that was ultimately produced in Russia represents an exception in our series. It was not a reform democracy intended to cleanse and perfect a valuable heritage. Rather, it signified an unprecedented radical break; an irreverent, do-or-die reform that threw the most valuable intellectual, political, and legal achievements of Western civilization overboard.

In contrast, I carefully suspect Moses fits neatly into our series. For the time being, the fact that he wanted to renew the religion of his fathers and simultaneously create a reformed Midian should be added as a mysterious formula. This will be deciphered in the first part of our considerations.

The First Explanation

The fact that Christians appropriated the entirety of the Jewish Bible fits the concept of *renewal*. Even if it gradually opened its attitude towards orthodox doctrines, Protestantism held to the traditional creed. It severely distanced itself from the Antitrinitarians, who shook the traditional teaching of the triune God. With the Ten Commandments, a central element of the normative heritage was assumed into the corpus of Protestant creedal texts.

It is characteristic for North America that an entirely new political type was introduced with representative democracy based on a written constitution. The intent was not to do away with, but rather to continue and perfect the English heritage, for example in firmly established civil rights and liberties and a legal system without codified laws, even as the the European continent was already on the path to modern, systematically structured statutes in the 18th century. But the German Social Democrats – with deeper consequences than their initial dreams of revolution – had sought an alliance with *radical*, but not with *socialist* Democrats. Thus up to this point we are dealing with *renewers*.

At first sight this is also true for the revolutionaries of 1860, because they viewed themselves as the continuing and completing the achievements of the French Revolution of 1789, even, indirectly, of the preceding American Revolution. But the pattern of renewal and perfection of the traditional was already shifted before it was clearly formulated because the Russian radicals had grown up far from living democracy and never learned to develop a reform program in the following and advancement of the order that was reached in developed countries. Instead of an expansion of valuable traditions they quickly dreamed

of a demolition from which an ideal world would arise. The task of showing that the Russian radicals do in fact belong to our series, yet simultaneously fall outside the parameters in several fundamental specialties, will be a major theme and highlight throughout this book.

The Second Similarity

New cultures that emerged from the five awakenings superseded the cultures of origin. Each time, the separation of the camps took place in an amazingly short period of time. Barring the Mosaic reform, of which we do not know the speed for certain, we have, without exception, a period of about two decades. No more time was necessary to stake out the outline of Christianity, Protestantism, representative Democracy, and revolutionary Socialism.

The Second Explanation

The suggested two decade period is a rough attempt to connect far flung events with a common denominator. It is common to estimate the formative phase of Christianity to have been forty years— from the fall of Jerusalem to the writing of the oldest gospel. But it can be argued differently: around 50 CE, when the church planting in Rome made strides and Paul achieved the beginnings of a Christian literature, the new movement had already formed firm, fundamentally lasting contours. With the reformation and the American Revolution, we must calculate a preparatory phase to reach twenty years. Note that we are not looking for *physical laws* as in natural sciences, but rather *approximate similarities*. It goes without explanation that the five forks in the road that led to new and stable communities of conviction developed *very quickly*. This should give us food for thought and make us curious, *Technical inventions* or other principles of success that sometimes spread like wildfire were not exactly asserted in our cases. Rather, it was a transformation in the realm of fundamental beliefs, which according to a rule of thumb of historic experience, in no way tend to precipitate rapid upheaval.

A glance toward two other new ways of experiencing the world that continues to have an effect today. The new attitude towards life beginning in Italy, which Jacob Burckhardt classically described in his *The Culture of the Renaissance in Italy*, crystalized into a long process that finally developed into a *first Enlightenment*. Nearly two hundred years were necessary before the foundations of the new, mathematically formulated worldview of classical physics was developed: from the *Commentariolus*, in which Nicolaus Copernicus first sketched his heliocentric planetary system at the beginning of the 16th century, to Isaac

Newton's *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* from 1687, in which astronomical insights of Copernicus and Kepler were unified in revolutionary physics to a sole, closed system by Galileo Galilei. Both processes are chosen as counterexamples that have also deeply influenced the consciousness of the West, and therefore took much more time than each of our five cases.

The Third Similarity

None of the upheavals could replace the way of life that was intended to be renewed. Polytheism, Judaism, Catholicism, the English Kingdom with its traditional constitution, Western Democracy and its capitalistic economic system: they all possessed enough vitality to survive the challenge. But also to survive the challenger. This is how it came to separation that has been long-lasting, or even final in the second and third upheavals, for the time being. These crossroads of history have more deeply influenced the face of the world in which we Western people live than all other turning points that become apparent in a long history.

The Third Explanation

In the two last cases, the contrast – exposed at the crossroads and initially hostile – no longer exists. As already hinted at, these contrasts cancelled themselves at various times and due to various reasons. By contrast, in several other cleavages that continue to the present, if the two communities of conviction opposing each other do not want to give up their identity at any price, there are at least convergences that relativize the old partitions. More than ever, Jews and Christians have become aware that they agree on their historical roots and their spiritual core – the belief in the one and only God. At the same time, a divided Christianity comes together – with even more apparent results – in an ecumenical movement from which firm institutions of cooperation have emerged. Christians are beginning to heed that everything that separates their confessions is much less important than the shared foundation. Thus the emergence of hard fronts between firm and often dogmatic convictions, which alternatively consider themselves the nonnegotiable truth, is by no means the last word in world history. The direction that it proceeds has always been unpredictable and will remain so.

The Fourth Similarity

Characteristic of the type of upheaval we are following is that it was not in the service of certain social or cultural sectors of society, although at least twice –

around 1520 in Germany and around 1860 in Russia – the reorientation arose from a tightly delineated social milieu and reflected its intellectual imprint. None of the upheavals were the expression of any particular interest that was near and dear to a certain social or cultural segment of society. Instead, every time there was a message for all: towards a goal beyond class barriers. With the exception of the fifth case, where the message initially did not reach the peasants who should have been converted, the echo of upheaval was not found to be restricted to certain circles of society.

An egalitarian ethos and pathos belonged to the spirit that filled the new communities of conviction. Instead of elites, previously elevated through privileges and often inherited, representatives of a new kind emerged, which often achieved the position through popular election. Instead of insisting on traditional privileges, they earned their authority as functional elites.

The Fourth Explanation

Seen individually there is of course a varied picture. We can only guess that the order initiated by Moses contained equalizing elements on the basis of argument by analogy. It is also difficult to decide if the *late* – according to ancient oriental standards – transition by Israel to a monarchy with Saul as its first king was also influenced by an equalizing impact of modernity.

The fact that Jesus strove to remove the walls of separation he deemed religiously unjustified appears to be equalizing. In this way, he also turned towards the tax collectors and prostitutes. He was not even in agreement with the exclusion of lepers from the religious community and its duty to care. He accused the Pharisees – which literally means those set apart – of elevating themselves from the masses with a more pious lifestyle than was usual and wanting to distinguish themselves before God, before whom we all are and remain sinners. Much more than was usual for his Jewish contemporaries, Jesus had an open ear for the faction called Samaritans, who were considered apostate brothers in Israel. Jesus polemicized against the privileged temple aristocracy. Gender equality was largely practiced in Jesus' surroundings. The first Christian congregations dismantled male privileges that were common in the synagogue and were open for people of every social station. Thus from the beginning there were aristocrats as well as slaves.

The Reformation eliminated a type of clergy that had developed as a class with its own rights and with extensive privileges. Calvinism even distanced itself from the official graded Lutheran and Anglican hierarchy with the principle that all preachers were considered equal. Protestantism pronounced the Priesthood of Believers and positioned the average working person – in the language

of the flyer propaganda: *Karsthans* swinging his hoe – in the center of the effort to win over the entire society.

The essential feature of egalitarianism also continued in both of the two later upheavals, in which the concern was not so much the religious but rather the social order. The American Revolution created a political system of order in which no one was granted a particular office due to his noble status and no one was excluded from voting merely because he did not appear to be materially blessed. The Russian revolutionaries wanted to free the masses from their social yoke and lead world history to its culmination by creating a completely egalitarian society for the first time.

However, even during these upheavals, opposing tendencies toward class set forth. In Israel's early established tribal structure the Levites were distinguished from by the fact that its descendants came from one person, among other things. The Levites were the only tribe of the twelve to have no territory designated to them and were only charged with priestly functions. The resulting class that was formed was likely of high importance for the preservation of the belief in Yahweh. Jesus chose – corresponding to the number of the scattered tribes of Israel – twelve disciples around which the church gathered in Jerusalem. From there, a line of tradition leads via the figure of Peter, who was called as the Bishop of Rome, to the church as an institution that gradually formed where the bishops represented the supporting pillars.

Protestantism supported itself with professional preachers from the beginning, regardless of how strongly it emphasized the priesthood of all believers. It ensured that the new class of clergy was educated in schools and universities. But in the vacuum left by Catholic clergy, who had assumed the role of mediator between God and believers, now a new type of minister emerged that, as members of the community and often appointed by worldly powers, did not represent a state within a state and held no elevated faction within society. The United States of America has remained true to its foundations in maintaining the principles of democratic election of officials and judges, without extending the egalitarianism of political civil rights to include dismantling differences of property and income.

The Russian revolutionaries emerged in the form of circles that recruited from the intelligentsia, yet occurred with a high level of self-sacrifice in the service of the working masses. The Bolsheviks, a product of the 1890s, clearly answered the question of what should become of the educated elite's first class-related soundings about liberation of the peasants and workers. They built a party—controlled by nobody and impossible to vote out—that held self-determination after the victorious October Revolution. The party decided who belonged and therefore who would share in power. The tendency to make the

leadership *de facto* independent from the mass of members was designed from the beginning. Therefore the fifth upheaval appears, despite having proclaimed egalitarianism as its program even more radically than the previous upheavals, particularly *un-egalitarian* from the moment the Bolsheviks assumed power. In the Eastern Bloc it was joked that *everyone is equal but some are even more equal*.

The Bolsheviks also deviated from their egalitarian approach by declaring capitalists, landowners and clergy to be without civil rights until the constitution of 1936, because they were considered the pillars of the old order. If not watched carefully, they threatened to become dangerous again. Precisely because the Bolsheviks understood that their concept had to overcome opposition they organized their state as a *dictatorship of the proletariat*, which for reasons of egalitarianism eschewed equality.

The Fifth Similarity

All new orders of life emerged from the native soil of a narrowly limited space and its culture. But from the beginning they carried the impulse to spread far beyond the areas from whence they sprouted. Formulated in the words of the Christians, they were filled with the conviction they had been commissioned to spread the good news to all humankind. They quickly developed into missionary movements. Even where they did not seek to convert, they had a missionary effect because they were pronouncing something that appealed to many people in a wide vicinity.

The Fifth Explanation

Mosaic reform, which isolated the *chosen people* of Israel from all nations and religions, falls outside of the parameters sketched here only superficially, because Israel bore witness to the belief in the one God *Yahweh*, who had created the entire world with all of its inhabitants. Even the non-Jews were God's children. Yes, one day God would reveal himself to all humankind on this earth. For the later upheavals, it is apparent that they drew inspiration early on in the hope that their exciting ideas would promptly spread in all directions. The goal of a worldwide mission was thus by design from the beginning, and this is highly valuable in explaining certain phenomena that might otherwise remain mysterious. Clarified through our first example: why were the two monotheistic confessions – the Jews and the Christians – handled so differently? While the Jews passed undetected – when they kept quiet – the Christians were always exposed to new waves for gruesome persecution. The key to this curiosity is given by the

fact that the Christians, in contrast to the Jews, acted as *eager and open converters* who constantly recruited new church members. It appeared, and we will return to this point, to undermine the state.

With the next two upheavals, the speed with which they spread cannot be understood without recognizing a missionary drive. The Protestantism that arose in Germany could thus gain a foothold in parts of Switzerland, even make strides in Scandinavia and England. The establishment of the United States in 1787 had the inherent conviction that the community that was launched would be a shining example for the entire world. Indeed, the fundamental upheaval in France that followed in 1789, was quite aware of its American pattern. Even now we experience the missionary zeal of America, which has developed a dynamic unseen since its beginnings in the 18th century: now it draws upon the most powerful military machinery in history.

Since the Reformation, the messengers who consciously brought out the news into different areas, gained an even greater medium with the printed word. Figuratively speaking: the seeds were not only sown by zealous sowers, but also through the wind.

The Russian revolutionaries always hoped that the spark of their revolution would jump to other countries. Many socialists in Central and Western Europe attested them repeatedly. Even after the imminent expectation of world revolution waned in the 1920s, a missionary impulse remained. Among others, this had the effect that the Soviet Union—with dire consequences in 1941—could not conceive of a future war aside from an offensive of their own forces, and thus an armed mission was to sweep away the resistance of the capitalists, as was attempted—admittedly without initial success – in the invasion of Poland in 1920. At the same time, previous experiences with Charles XII of Sweden and Napoleon had shown that Russia should reckon with an opponent with superior military clout and more advanced modernity. However, as Clausewitz elevated to a rule for Russia, a defensive retreat deep into the country could hold up and defeat an opponent. This succeeded again in 1943, after the appropriate strategy was found after a series of horrible initial mistakes. In this case the prevalence of the missionary zeal shows a negative effect: it decisively prevented Soviet leadership from finding a timely answer to fit the situation in 1941. Stalin thus suffered the reverse fallacy of the French, who after *defensive* success in the First World War, relied solely on defense. In the Western front, an *offensive* alternative would have been needed against Hitler.

Later our introduction will delve more deeply into the missionary character of our five upheavals of key meaning.