

*Material related to The Presence of the Word  
(from earlier drafts of the manuscript)*

LECTURE COPY

Contemporary man differs from earlier man not in being less religious but in being more secular. In the Hebreo-Christian view, it must be remembered, religion and the secular, while they may sit uneasily with one another, are not direct opposites. Knowledge of the secular world does not compromise religion. God made all things, including the secular universe, and found them all good. From earliest times, reflection on religious subjects has been massive. Indeed, in early society the religious dimension of existence was virtually the only field of inquiry massive enough and accessible enough to be able to command a lifetime of reflection from anyone. The difference today is that, while the religious dimension of existence still provides more than ample matter for a lifetime of study, so, too, do countless other subjects--geophysics, molecular biology, genetics, inorganic chemistry, fourteenth-century nominalism, the cultural history of the Enlightenment, the economic history of the Near East, and so on indefinitely.

The increase in secular knowledge has neither eliminated nor simplified the religious dimension of man's existence. It has complicated it beyond measure and in fact given it greater extent than ever. For it has revealed human existence as entwined with the physical universe with a circumstantiality which earlier man had been unable to realize. Earlier cosmologies could regard man as in one way or another of a piece with his physical surroundings, even as he transcended them. The analogy of the "little world" or microcosm, man himself, with the "great world" or macrocosm, the entire physical universe, is an old philosophic theme. But the real connections, such as we are now increasingly able to spell out in terms of genetic development following upon long-term, patterned, stage-by-stage evolution of the inorganic universe, eluded pretechnological man. Until the first major modern technological break-through, the first effective assembly line, the printing press using movable alphabetic type, the accumulation, storage, and retrieval of knowledge had been too arduous for that development of science which has filled the past few generations and finally reconstituted human life.

Since we know in always richer and richer circumstantial detail how human life connects with the cosmos in which it has put in its appearance, or, better, how this cosmos gradually has evolved to the state where, at least on our planet, it could serve as a cradle and home for man, the problem of the religious significance of human life has vastly enlarged. It used to be that man could say he was made in the image of God and let it go at that, for he had hardly the vaguest idea of what cosmic processes, inorganic and organic, had preceded his own advent and led up to it. Now that we know that man

came into being at the end of a cosmic and organic evolutionary process some five to ten billion years in length, the making of man takes on dimensions previously unthinkable.

Until the past few generations, man had been able to situate himself circumstantially in the universe so little as to make the universe religiously insignificant, relatively speaking. One could, of course, rise from a contemplation of creation to a contemplation of its Creator. But, by contemporary standards, the work of situating man within creation was not particularly onerous. Generally speaking, man could take his place for granted, and, having done so, could in good faith religiously abandon the cosmos. Now he is compelled to situate himself in it, if for no other reason than that he knows so much about it and about his connections with it--historical, geographical, genetic, physiological, chemical, and psychological.