

## **A Right to Be Here: Reflections on Imperfection**

A talk given by Juris Rubenis at the Latvian Embassy in Washington D.C. in November 2007

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Some 20 years ago in Latvia and Eastern Europe, when the liberation movements that led to the formation of new independent states were born, we were full of enthusiasm and hope. Tired of the violence and ideological oppression of foreign occupation, we believed that with the renewal of independence and the formation of a free state, we would leave everything wretched and unjust behind us. Freedom was at first something intoxicating for us—being able to express our thoughts, to speak about subjects long forbidden, to come together freely in certain kinds of organizations. This was especially significant for us clergymen, who in Soviet times were sorely oppressed and confined within the four walls of our churches.

But freedom brought an unexpected side-effect: it brought to light many things about us which in Soviet times had been hidden from view. Freedom let it all come out—not just lofty ideas, but also selfishness, egoism, exploitation of others. Disappointment followed. At first, as always happens, we focused our disappointment on other people—on the politicians, the businessmen and our own neighbors. But then, thinking more carefully about all that had happened, many of us grew disappointed in ourselves as well. Suddenly, and quite clearly, we discovered undesirable qualities in ourselves, qualities quite difficult for us to control. So once again, we have returned to those questions which have occupied so many people in modern times: why, even in a free and democratic society, are human beings still not capable of being good, honorable, unselfish—in a word, *perfect*? Why is it not possible to make human beings better? It seems that all of us who have tried to make ourselves better have come to see that this is possible only up to a certain point, after which we make no further progress. People start improving but then come up against an invisible wall, so to speak. Why are human beings like this?

But wait: do not religions, and Christianity in particular, claim that human beings can actually change? Or are all these religions just so many fantasies, illusions, and superstitions that have no connection with real life? Does religion or belief in God really change human beings, or does it merely comfort them? Perhaps religion is only a cosmetic self-delusion? In the contemporary world, including here in the United States, we know of frightful crimes committed by senior clergymen. We have no reason to suppose that none of the guilty ones had ever tried to perfect themselves, to change themselves. But it did not work. All their faith, and very possibly their own desperate efforts, simply failed to suffice. Do we not come upon some very serious objections to religion here? Do these findings not shake the foundations of all religious institutions?

Except for a few dozen special individuals whose saintly lives it is no longer possible to verify, who among us is perfect? And this means that the fundamental question is still unresolved: How do we achieve perfection? Is it possible at all? How do we change the world? How do we change society? These are great, weighty questions which arise at every turn when we observe the imperfections, the errors and the evil in the world and in ourselves.

To be sure, I do not pretend to have all the answers, but only to shed a little light on the questions I've raised and to note some possible solutions that might help us arrive at an answer. And since we are touching on a theme about which we cannot speak in strictly systematic terms, perhaps the best way of talking about it will be through images, parables and metaphors. Strange to say, this is often the most precise way of speaking about reality.

At least at certain moments of self-awareness, we strive for *perfection*, both as individuals and as a society. The problem is that nobody can answer the question: *What is perfection?* Does perfection simply amount to our assumptions about it—the assumptions of imperfect human beings? Is a perfect person simply someone who has not committed any judicially punishable deed and who enjoys a good reputation among his neighbors? Are additional qualities necessary for perfection, such as love, unselfishness, mutuality and patience? Unfortunately, each of the qualities just mentioned, if practiced with consistency, tends to generate some unattractive side-effects.

The world was not created on the basis of my assumptions about perfection. Beings who are not perfect themselves are not capable of judging perfection.

As we think about these questions, we come to see that it is not possible to resolve them without understanding something about the meaning of the world and of human existence as such. As the German theologian Helmut Thielicke has written: “The principal question of ethics is not, ‘What should I do?,’ but, ‘How should we understand the reality within which we must act?’”

What is this strange being—the human being, whom, it seems, we cannot reconstruct with the help of any instrument, not even religion? What guidance does this conclusion give us? Are we to agree with the view of certain schools of psychology that we should reconcile ourselves with *everything* that exists in us, that it should all be legalized? That it is not worth investing in vain efforts to improve ourselves, but instead that we should simply live by following our instincts toward the phenomena around us?

What guidance does this conclusion give to society, to the state, or to the international community? It seems that only by *force*, by pressure and intimidation, is it possible to keep human beings in some sort of minimal order. It seems we cannot hope for more than to reconcile ourselves with the fact that only by means of war and aggression is it possible to bring a little equilibrium into the world.

We know that people in our day are striving not just to change themselves but to change the world. In the past we sought ways of improving only our own cities and our own country; but today many people are ambitious to improve other countries as well, and in the end, if they have the power, to improve the whole world.

But unfortunately, when human beings try to improve the world, the world often ends up in worse shape than it was before.

Do not the assumptions and value judgments we devise in order to understand the world oversimplify it instead? The less I know, the more everything is clear to me. But perhaps the world is meant for endless contemplation; perhaps that which looks imperfect to us is actually some sort of *mystery*. Yes, the imperfections or defects that we see everywhere—beginning with ourselves and ending with global organizations—are a challenge for every person in this world.

What illuminates the world is not its structure but the *ideas* that abide in it. The form is not as important as the content of what we are thinking about. So perhaps the most important challenge in the world is to create an environment in which ideas can emerge. Of course ideas have a life of their own which is to some extent independent of us. Thought obeys a higher order of things than I myself am aware of.

It is not possible to understand the world. But how am I to live in a world which I do not understand?

We can certainly understand our own *assumptions* or *dogmas* about the world, assumptions beyond which we do not go. Dogma is a little house of my own on the shore of an infinite sea. Dogma is an assumption, an explanation of some sort of incomprehensible phenomenon. It is necessary for survival. However, my dogmas shed more light on me personally than they do on God. These assumptions or dogmas may lead us in the right direction or they may lead us in the wrong direction. How often have pious people wanted to fit God into the little box of their dogmas, and how angry they become when God refuses to dwell in it. Our human assumptions can help us only if, in using them, we do not fail to remember that they are only assumptions. It is easy to confuse our dogmas and assumptions with that to which they point. The greater part of the world's population is convinced that they know everything they need to know about themselves, their life and the world (and has not each of us noted something similar in ourselves?). What paralyzes us and blocks our development is not the realization that we know little or nothing, but the assumption that everything is clear to us, at least in its main outlines. Only honest self-scrutiny can help. Not in vain does every service of worship begin with confession of sins, reminding us that human beings are closest to God (the meaning of reality) when they confess their sins.

More than fifty years ago, the famous German theologian Rudolf Bultmann declared that we need to demythologize religion, meaning that we need to break through our assumptions about God to the reality which our assumptions are trying to approximate. In our own day, it is not out of place to speak about demythologizing the world, the world's ideas, in order to break through to what is concealed behind our assumptions—the products of our self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency. I believe that by

consistently demythologizing the world we will suddenly see everywhere the God who is concealed behind all our assumptions and ideas.

The world's feverish activity has no meaning in and for itself without reference to God. Of course I want to find meaning in and for myself, but by shutting God out of the picture I arrive only at the experience of meaninglessness, for the world is not explained by something in me but by something in God. The world, if I may put it this way, is a complementary reality, complementary *to something*; we will not discover its meaning if we tear it away from the principle of its creation. In no sense can the world ever be perfect or complete. It is not possible to find perfection or completeness in it; but it is possible to find a path to God in it. There is no such thing as progress in the world; but there is the act of creation, which includes the stages of creation.

Of course the temptation to sit in God's seat never ceases, be it in a dictator or in a philosopher. If a throne looks vacant, any passer-by will try to sit on it. It is usually those who do not know God who want to sit on his throne. But as soon as someone sits there, people make demands on him which only God can fulfill. And these demands lead to destructive experiences. The thought that it is not I who govern the world is deeply disturbing.

The truth about the world is revealed not to the wise but to those who allow themselves to be God's fools, so to speak. Let us remember that a wisdom greater than my own will always seem a bit foolish to me. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul is trying to say when he declares that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, *God is more than the word "God."* God is everything that is important to us. This means that we are constantly speaking about God without naming him. Even very secular ideas and statements may be essentially religious in form or function. There is an aspect of God that goes by the name of "God" and another aspect of God which is incomprehensible. When we actually encounter God we do not worry about his name.

Faith in its deepest essence is simply faith in the fact that *God is*. The names we give him change. The true God can conceal himself behind many names which seem to have no connection whatsoever with the traditional designation "God." God explains

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 1:27.

himself by means of the world. One may say that the world lives from its relationship with the supreme principle which we must of necessity call God but which actually has no name because it is too grand for words. Maybe this is the reason why a truly consistent atheism is so difficult to achieve. From this point of view, too, we can understand Jesus' commandment never to call our neighbor *godless*.<sup>2</sup>

The world is composed of ideas that dwell in a transcendent reality which should be called God. All of these ideas are half-truths—a kind of masked ball in the presence of God. Our systems of wisdom are half-truths; nevertheless, they point us in a certain direction. But we should not worry about defining our ideas too precisely, and we should not defend them too passionately.

The awareness that “God is” does not require us to explain everything in the world. We do not have to know everything in order to live in the world. If we did, life would be impossible. Let us not forget that from birth to death we live in a reality which we hardly understand at all.

God evokes not just one but a variety of ideas and reactions to himself simultaneously, and all of them have a right to exist. The world is a *unity in diversity*, a complex equilibrium among different beings, and that is the reason why it is not possible to improve it. The world is the simultaneity of different forces existing together, not the dictatorship of a unitary perfection. The doctrine of the Trinity, which so many people find difficult to understand, signals that there are various aspects of God, only some of which are known to us and connected with us.

The world grows wiser by pondering the meaning of its existence, not just by thinking about itself alone. The question, “Why do I exist?,” is the one true philosophical question. Meditating on this helps us understand that everything in the world has its place, but not the first place. Happiness does not lie in everything being the same but in each thing being different. Social doctrines that ignore this fact always lead us into a blind alley. Speaking figuratively: there is either one king or no king at all. Everyone can be poor at the same time, but not rich at the same time. Happiness does not come from supplying all people with an equal share of *idols*—those God-substitutes which we

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<sup>2</sup> Mt. 5:22.

have fashioned for ourselves. Jesus says: “*One does not live by bread alone.*”<sup>3</sup> In the last analysis, if we are not content with our own particular vantage point on the world, then nothing will ever satisfy us. The world has to choose between focusing on the immaterial divine principle which is the meaning of its existence or being disappointed by a long series of idols, none of which is capable of representing God. True, many individuals and social groups still choose the well-worn path of fashioning and supplicating idols, but this always leads to disappointment. The principal difference between God and an idol is that the true God does not fear heretics, but an idol does.

No human being can *lead* the world. In order to do that, one would have to know why the world was created. But the forest, the sea and the wind do not listen to us when we lecture them. That is why violence, when it is used to govern either my own little world or the great world we all share, is not effective. Violence can win tactical victories, but for those victories one must pay the price of terrible strategic losses. In its deepest essence, leadership involves rejecting the ambition to lead, obeying instead the higher principles which govern the world.

Jesus’ path teaches us something very essential, for as we know, he assumed the role of a weak and persecuted man—and prevailed. The message of the New Testament is not that God entered the world to show who is strongest and whom it is dangerous to contradict. On the contrary, its message is that God refused to accept our models for managing the world and human society—the models that the “right” people recognize. God was prepared to suffer and die rather than use his power to the slightest extent. He did not fear looking like a foolish loser in the eyes of all people, dying in the most humiliating fashion, on a cross. In my view this clearly shows that the most important thing is personal decision and choice. When you make the most important decisions in your life, you should not spend too much time looking around you, nor should you be intimidated by the views of the majority (be it the majority of the powerful or of the loudest). “*For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life*”<sup>4</sup>—to true life. The path is so narrow that only one person can walk it at a time. It is especially important to reflect on this in our world today.

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<sup>3</sup> Mt. 4:4.

<sup>4</sup> Mt. 7:14.

There is a profound connection between changes in me and changes in the world around me. Yes, it is always tempting to begin the task of improving things by scrutinizing the world, “other people,” but time and again this approach leads to the same old misunderstandings, and when technology is added in, to ever more painful losses. The world is a school in which one of the lessons that we need to learn is: I can change the world only to the extent that I can change myself.

I need to know just enough about God in order to participate in his world. Note this important new password of the 21st century—not rule, but *participation*. I do not understand enough to govern the world, but I do know enough to participate in it. The great question for human beings is: How do we rightly participate in the world that God has made without trying to remake it in the image of our own primitive assumptions? Where is my place in the world—my God-given place?

What is the significance of religion in such a situation? *Religion* should not busy itself with conjectures about what God is like but instead should clarify what it is that I am to do in the world, given that I am not God. The task of religion is to help people live, not to build walls and serve as a pretext for pushing people away. Religion should remind us that human beings and the world *have a right* to be here. Religion should remind us that the world is governed by God, not by human beings—and that means not by believers and not by the Church, either! The world revolves around God, not around religious leaders.

We are constantly waiting for someone to justify our existence. Not just someone who will justify or excuse our evil deeds, but someone who will justify our life within its own inviolable boundaries. Religion can show a person how to live in such a way as to be able to endure himself as he is, for human beings forgive themselves and others much less than God forgives the world. Let us remember that the most eminent religious figures of the Bible, such as the Old Testament patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are not portrayed as ethically perfect and innocent human beings. On the contrary, when we read the Bible, we are struck by the weaknesses, the sins and the failures of these people. The Bible clearly shows them to be ordinary, imperfect human beings like the rest of us. In this way something important becomes clear: human beings have limits, they will always be imperfect. But in God’s company (and God is never isolated within the limits

of his own existence) my otherwise inconsequential and pitiable life takes on the dimensions of infinity, and suddenly an erring and vacillating human being finds it possible to do something significant for the benefit of the world and for his own benefit! The Bible makes it clear that “religion” and “God” do not relate to some restricted segment of the world. No, the whole world is made by God, the whole world is a temple, and all human beings live in God.<sup>5</sup> *Theology*, that is to say religious ideas—ideas that are often annoying and incomprehensible to the majority of people—delivers the same message that God is also constantly communicating to the world in other ways and in other words.

Theology has limits. Good theology does not rush to supply simplistic answers to the complexity of the world. Good theology calls us to a journey to God, who is the only one who illuminates the world. It is a bad theology that refuses to recognize the world God has made or simply condemns it. Such a theology understands neither God nor human beings. For of God it is written: “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*”<sup>6</sup> When theology takes such a negative turn it makes itself not only irrelevant but positively harmful and dangerous. Such a theology finds its only justification in the desperate “duty” to impose—in its own name, not God’s—excessive and unrealizable demands on human beings.

We cannot change the world, but we can begin living in the world in a different way. We can reflect on the world long enough to like it rather than waiting for it to improve.

*Faith* in God is the capacity to live in his world and ours in a different way. The world is not altered by faith, but suddenly I can see the world in a new light. The God we discover does not improve the world but changes the way I look at it. Discovering God reconciles me with the world. The key to understanding the world lies in my suddenly starting to like it. “*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*”<sup>7</sup> As a Hasidic teacher once said, “How strange it is that only God has something

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 17:24-28.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 3:16.

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 1:31.

good to say about the world.” We cannot understand God, but we can love or not love the world that he loves.

The world differs from God in that God allows something which is not perfect to exist. For its part, the world constantly demands perfection even though it is imperfect itself. Only the true God does not demand of me that I should be a second God. God surrounds himself with that which is not himself.

Why does God not make a perfect world? Because that is not the point of the creation of the world. In making the world, God does not make a second God; we need to understand this once and for all. God does not clothe himself with “order” but with a world. The world is a process God has devised. The world is the “effect” of God, the result of God, a reaction to the being of God. That is why the world does not understand itself. The world understands only a part of its existence. Since the world freely thinks about a reality which it is not possible to understand, we should regard all our thoughts, assumptions, dogmas, systems, “explanations” and “proofs” as stories, parables or poetry. This is what sets the world apart from God, and here lies the chief cause of the world’s problems. The world wants to be what it cannot be. The world demands of itself what God does not demand of it. But the fact that the world exists at all means that God has assigned meaning to it just as it is.

The world is a *reflection* of God’s life. Our capacities and our freedom depend on the degree to which we understand this. All of life in its multitudinous manifestations is the response of matter to the unseen divine principle. Different responses generate different ideas. God permits them all. God permits what we see in the world. This is a supreme mystery worth thinking about—thinking about deeply, and hopefully with patience.

Yet in the world we encounter manifest evil. Is it not the duty of every honorable person of faith to lose no time in doing everything possible to exterminate that evil? Here we should remember Jesus’ parable about the sower.<sup>8</sup> In the daytime the servants sow the good seed, but at night the enemy comes and sows weeds. When the seeds sprout, the weeds appear along with the wheat. The energetic and well-meaning servants come to the landlord and say: “*Do you want us to go immediately and pull up the weeds? But the*

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<sup>8</sup> Mt. 13:24-30.

*landlord says: "No, lest in pulling up the weeds you pull up the wheat along with them."* Every act of aggression only multiplies aggression. When you shoot at someone else you cannot avoid hitting yourself. Everyone who undertakes a consistent struggle with evil must be ready to exterminate a bit of himself also. It is not a struggle between good and evil that is going on the world; rather, there a logic at work which differs from my own. We are incapable of breaking away from thinking *in dualistic categories*, but the idea of the Tri-unity of God proclaims that we can embrace the world only through *trinitarian* thinking. Has any philosophy ever tried to do this? God in his entirety permits the world in its entirety to exist, but I can comprehend only a part of all this. The world is not on the wrong track, but the wisdom that dwells in it is not mine, but God's.

*Benevolence is the non-destruction of evil*, not endless intolerance of things which are not God. Benevolence endures evil. This is a difficult principle to justify or explain on the basis of dualistic categories (good versus evil). But it is the main reason why we human beings still exist in spite of the kind of creatures we are! The evil I struggle against in the world is something in me, not just in you. Perfect love is the capacity to love imperfection. Focusing on evil does not make the world better. It is much easier to say what is bad in the world than what is good. But positive results come from our ideas about what is good in the world, not from our ideas about why the world is a bad place. A God we do not understand is still a better explanation of the world than a chaotic cosmic force on the loose. What I do not understand in the world is simply not designed for me. The world existed long before I first conceived the thought that something is not right in it. The part of the world I do not like is simply something I do not understand. How strange and wonderful it is that when one *feels* that God exists, the world does not seem evil any longer.

The world becomes complete, "achieves perfection," only with the principle which has created it. Each person's best friend is the idea which has created him. To be whole, the world does not need to be perfect; it needs to perceive the God who shines in it. The world is a garden of ideas. In the absence of a divine principle, we suffocate in our own insignificance. The world is only a small portion of all that God generates; it is not all that God is capable of. It expresses one aspect of God. There are other aspects in

him as well. The logic of the world is to be found in the wide variety of vantage points on the fact of the world's existence. All of these vantage points have a right to exist.

The world's perfection comes from thinking about God, not from thinking about itself. One might say— *perfection is the world plus thinking about God*.

The free exercise of thought without reference to God quickly turns into an endless *mirror*, a mirror which is not bearable for long. For freedom creates not perfection but a mirror. But the world is not incomplete; it is simply not understood. And the world is definitely not reducible to the trivial idea that it is a bad place. On the other hand, the price of believing in the true God is to live in a mystery.

How can we change human beings? How can we change the world? Our greatest temptation is still, even in the "Christian world," to effect change through force. But the power of God in the world is the power of *paradise* or *happiness* (which is a difficult concept to explain), which is present or not present depending on the path on which I walk. It is connected with the capacity to be or not to be happy. This is the sole criterion at our disposal for evaluating the world, a criterion available to everyone. The soul recognizes only the power of paradise. The soul understands paradise, not the world. God has not given me power, but he has given me a path to paradise. Paradise is finding God. Dogma, when rightly guided, explains where paradise is to be found, not why I am not the king of the world. The world either discerns the mystery of paradise or there is nothing for it to do. God speaks to me through the events of my life only until I understand paradise. Then he leaves me alone.

The conversation about perfection with which we began these reflections is in truth a conversation about *happiness*, not about unattainable perfection or divine status. There is a huge difference between happiness and perfection. Happiness springs not from achieving perfection but from my awareness and understanding of the one who has made me and sought me out. Happiness is life with God, not the lonely enjoyment of perfection.

God is enough for us. A philosopher who knows how bad the world is never suffices, whereas people who are happy see God, even if they are not aware of it; for God is the part of the world that is enough for us. We can be content with our own existence

or we can be dissatisfied with the universe as a whole. But the only person who is content with what he has is truly rich.