

Encountering Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy

M. Darrol Bryant

Professor of Religion and Culture

Renison College/University of Waterloo

I want to begin by thanking Prof. Tom Duncanson for organizing this event on the writings and life of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. Here I want to recount something of my encounter with the writings of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. This requires that I sketch something of my situation at the time that I encountered him. My encounter with his writings found me shaken, confused, troubled and remade by what I was reading. His was a voice unlike any I had encountered before. Not a conventional scholar but one who in the words at the end of **Out of Revolution**, "writes a book, even as he stretches out his hand, so that he may find that he is not alone in the survival of humankind."¹

I.

My encounter with the writings of ERH was an intellectual bombshell. It not only blew my intellectual landscape, but it re-oriented my life. But it didn't quite begin that way. I first read ERH when I came from Harvard Divinity School to Canada in 1967 to teach in the religion department at Waterloo Lutheran University (since Wilfrid Laurier University). I came across his just republished **The Christian Future, Or the Modern Mind Outrun**. It was a curious book and I must admit that I didn't know quite what to make of it. I knew it was important but I wasn't quite sure how. I remember being struck by his remark that the Creed was "simply true" – I had and I was still struggling with my own relationship to the Christian faith. But then his characterization of that Creed was so striking, and unconventional. Christian dogma, he said was "not an intellectual formula, but a record and promise of life." And he continued,

¹ Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, **Out of Revolution, Autobiography of Western Man** (Norwich, VT: Argo Books, 1969), p. 758. Here the story of my encounter with the writings of ERH focuses on **Out of Revolution**, **The Christian Future, Or the Modern Mind Outrun**, and **Speech and Reality** with a couple of references to **I am an Impure Thinker**. I think that I have read everything that was published in English and some of the German works, but these were the writings that were most important to me.

Its three articles guarantee our trust in the unity of creation from the beginning (God the Father made *all* things in heaven and on earth), our liberty to die to our old selves (given us by God's Son, who implanted the Divine itself in human life by living as a man, and dying, yet rising again), and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which enables us to commune with posterity and start fellowship here and now.²

I'd studied a lot of Christian thinking but I'd never encountered such a reading of the triune faith of Christianity. ERH said that "God becomes known to us in the powers which triumph over death" and the "climax in conquering death...was the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. By him, at last, death was included as a positive factor within life and was thereby finally and completely overcome: death became the gateway to the future, to new life."³ What? It left my mind spinning. But it went on like this, page after page as ERH articulated his vision of Christianity. Here one encountered a vision of the Christian faith where God is "known as an *event*, never as an essence or a thing."⁴

It was there that he also spoke of the historical process -- the intergenerational life of humanity in time -- in a remarkable way. That process was, he asserted in the words of the early Church fathers, *anthropurgy*. What was that? It was, he explained, the making of humanity, "a process of making Man like God."⁵ (108) This was audacious, outlandish, incredible. But I also suspected that it might be true. This he said was what was going on in history -- it was not dialectical materialism nor the ceaseless struggle for power -- it was, perhaps in the very midst of all this, the making of humanity. "The story of man since Christ has been the application of the Athanasian Creed to everyday life" and "Christian anthropurgy...has gone on and continues to go on before our very eyes."⁶ Nietzsche's madman ran into the village crying "God is Dead," but here we encounter another madman, by any modern standards, crying out that "God is Living." And the

² Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *The Christian Future Or the Modern Mind Outrun* (New York: Harper, 1966), p. 98.

³ ERH, *Christian Future*, pp. 92, 93.

⁴ ERH, *Christian Future*, p. 96.

⁵ ERH, *Christian Future*, p. 108.

⁶ ERH, *Christian Future*, pp. 111, 110.

Living God is known in the making of humanity that is happening before our very eyes. And at the heart of that making-humanity-like-God lay the Christian story which outran the conceits of modernity.

This notion of "anthropurgy" was immensely important to me as I was deeply moved by the civil rights movement and I was flirting with Marxism. In the civil rights movement, I could see a turbulent making of humanity unfolding, and the violence of Marxism was increasingly troubling.

In the **Christian Future**, ERH also characterized the "four Gospels" as a model example of the "rule that one truth must be expressed in different ways for different times of life and that the whole truth is conveyed only on several such levels together."⁷ He wrote of the "Cross of Reality" in ways that moved me as did his assertion that the secret of Christianity was that "life was stronger than death." The idea was stunning, but what to make of it? I put the book back on my shelf.

II.

The following year, 1968, I went to Washington D.C. to participate in the Poor People's Campaign for the Lutheran Council USA. My task was to be at Resurrection City by day and to speak in local churches in the evening about the event. It was a transforming event as I discovered the truth of ERH's dictum "respondo etsi mutabor." And it was from this experience that I wrote my first little book: **To Whom It May Concern: Poverty, Humanity, Community**.⁸

When I returned to Waterloo, I became more involved in the student movement and anti-Vietnam activities. And I tried to teach a bit of the **Christian Future** to some students currently studying at the Lutheran Seminary in Waterloo, and to a SCM (Student Christian Movement) group. I found it nearly impossible as the book meant too much to me and I found it impossible to convey that to others. (Twenty years later a Catholic student who came to the SCM meetings told me that those lectures had been a turning point in his life.) My involvement with students led to my dismissal from WLU. And

⁷ ERH, **Christian Future**, p. 99.

⁸ M. Darrol Bryant, **To Whom It May Concern: Poverty, Humanity, Community** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

while I made plans to return to graduate school, I was invited to go to Europe for a course on “Dialogue” in the World Council of Churches, the Vatican, and Eastern Europe. The course was remarkable: it was my first trip to Europe and the Christians I met that were engaged with Christian ecumenism (in Geneva), the dialogue with other faiths (in Rome) and Marxism (in Czechoslovakia and East Germany) were impressive. While in Europe, I was, surprisingly, invited to come to work with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to organize the World Encounter of Lutheran Youth (WELY). This event would focus on the problems of “hunger and student unrest.” So the next year found me in Geneva and traveling throughout Latin America since the WELY was to be held in Latin America.

I traveled to virtually every Latin American country organizing a week in a rural setting and a week in an urban setting for different groups of young people before they would come together in relation to the 5th Assembly of the LWF. The first person I went to see when I went to Latin America in the fall of 1969 was Dom Helder Camara, Bishop of Recife & Olinda in Northeast Brazil. Helder Camara was a Bishop who had dedicated his life to assisting the poor. He was regarded as a proponent of liberation theology but he differed from many other liberation theologians in his commitment to non-violence. The meeting with him – my first with a Catholic Bishop – was in his simple quarters in a local parish. He had refused to live in the Bishop’s Palace. The church was pock-marked with machine gun bullets that had been sprayed across the church by drive-by vigilantes who opposed his efforts to help the poor.

Throughout that trip I was meeting people who were deeply engaged Christians in the struggles for social and political justice, many of them part of *Iglesia y Sociedad America Latina*. I was also carrying with me ERH’s notion that Christianity in the third millennium would have to “wrestle with the task of revealing God in society” and that “a third Christianity, the Christianity of Hope” was beginning and that it would be “incognito” and a “listening church.”⁹ I remember walking through the favelas of Rio and the barrios of Bogota. I encountered poverty like I had never seen before. I also encountered a kind of Christianity that was a far cry from the pietistic Lutheranism that I had known growing up in North Dakota. I wrote my book **A World Broken by**

⁹ ERH, *Christian Future*, pp. 116, 127.

Unshared Bread for the WELY.¹⁰ It signaled my response to the issues of “development and underdevelopment” and my search for a faith appropriate to the global issues I was now immersed in.

It was only after the WELY was concluded that I realized my job had been to manage the young people rather than to expose them to the social problems that lay at the root of global poverty.

When I returned to Canada, I decided to continue my graduate studies in a Catholic institution, The Institute of Christian Thought at St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto. I thought I would work on the theology of revolution, or hope, or the future. But things didn’t work out as I’d intended. Life intervened and so again did ERH.

III.

For the preceding decade, talk of revolution had been in the air. It was there in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and in the summer of 1968 I had been at the Poor People’s Campaign, the last of Martin Luther King's events. It was there in the student movement. It was there in 1969-70 when I had traveled throughout Latin America and been inspired by the liberation theologians I met. And while I had responded to those currents, I was also uneasy about the romantic and utopian tone of so much of the rhetoric of revolution. Thus I found myself at St. Michael’s in a state of some confusion and uncertainty.

During that first year back in Canada, I continued some contact with WLU and it was in a seminar led by Prof. Aarne Siirala, a Finnish theologian teaching at the WLU Seminary, that I first encountered **Out of Revolution**. I ordered it and I was devoured by it: from Lenin to Luther, the clerical revolutions of the church, the intertwined story of western humanity. I wondered again if I had encountered a mad man. It was overwhelming.

Again, it was a bombshell. It began: "Our passions give life to the world, our collective passions constitute the history of mankind," and it was filled with startling and disconcerting claims like "the revolutions of mankind create new time-spans for our life

¹⁰ M. Darrol Bryant, **A World Broken By Unshared Bread** (Geneva: WCC, 1970).

on earth. They give man's soul a new relation between present, past, and future; and by doing so they give us time to start our life on earth all over again, with a new rhythm and a new faith."¹¹ The book was audacious, disconcerting, inspiring. Eventually, it led me to a renewed appreciation of the past that was my autobiography and to new ways of seeing time and the human story. Rosenstock-Huessy did not romanticize the great revolutions but sought to understand them in their multiformity and in their making of humanity. I learned that the "heart either falls in love with something or someone or it falls ill."¹² I learned that revolution redrew the boundaries of public life and nurtured different human types. ERH claimed that "a different type of man or woman is produced by stimulating or repressing different potential passions; and any special society is based on a peculiar selection in admitting or negating the innumerable desires of our hearts."¹³ I was reading a book that, unbelievably, had as its *topic* "the creation of humankind."¹⁴ I learned that the forms of humanity that were forever being forged were husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers and not Che Guevarra's "New Man." I was astonished to read that "mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, artists and scholars, monks and generals, French and German, English and Americans, are obviously related to each other. Among men *one variety presupposes all the others*..."¹⁵ I saw that nations nurtured different variants on these historical forms, but that they were moving towards a shared destiny: the creation of a multiform humanity. This did not lessen my commitments to social and political change but it did reform my heart and re-orient my expectations, freeing me from utopian illusions.

At this time I published my first article on ERH. It was called *Revolution and World Pluralism* -- not my title -- and it appeared in a Catholic journal, **The Ecumenist**. It opened in this way:

¹¹ ERH, **Out of Revolution**, p. 11.

¹² ERH, **Out of Revolution**, p. 4.

¹³ ERH, **Out of Revolution**, p. 3.

¹⁴ ERH, **Out of Revolution**, p. 5.

¹⁵ ERH, **Out of Revolution**, p. 736.

In *Out of Revolution...* Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy has given a name to the bittersweet process by which man creates new human types and thereby regenerates mankind. That name is *revolution*...that profound, though costly process by which the creation of and differentiation within humankind is continued...But, in Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's words, 'creation goes on as God's creation has always done. A thunderstorm of destruction clears the air; then follows the low rustle of growth and reconstruction.' In this process of creation...the great revolutions have created national nurseries for the continual reproduction of a certain variety of humankind, differentiated mankind by selecting certain combinations of the human heart for perpetual reproduction and rescued us from seeming dead end by venturing into open time and space to refix the boundaries of public life.¹⁶

At the same time, I was at work on my doctoral studies. In a graduate seminar, I had encountered the work of Alan Heimert on the Great Awakening, the events that had consumed the American colonies in the 1740s, and especially Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Heimert had argued that these events had paved the way for the American revolution.¹⁷ I was taken by his argument for the role that religion played in the formation of a *people's way of life* (culture) -- one analogous to what we find in ERH's chapter on *Polybius* in **Out of Revolution** -- even though I came to disagree with Heimert's interpretation of Jonathan Edwards. But there was a curious event that Heimert recounted that was especially arresting to me. He told of the response of the Harvard faculty in 1740 to George Whitefield, one of the principal preachers of the Great Awakening. They were offended by his enthusiasm and I remember thinking: Harvard hasn't changed in 200 years since it was a similar attitude that I encountered at Harvard in the 1960s. I remember sharing this story with Rosenstock-Huessy when I visited him in February of 1972. I also told him that one of my professors at Harvard Divinity School remarked that before the Spirit could descend on HDS, there would be nothing

¹⁶ "Revolution and World Pluralism," **The Ecumenist**, March, 1973, p. 38. I found it extremely difficult to write about ERH and it took me weeks to write these few pages. I was also surprised to discover that one of the faculty at the Institute of Christian Thought, Leslie Dewart, knew of ERH.

¹⁷ See Alan Heimert, **Religion and the American Mind, From the Great Awakening to the Revolution** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

but feathers left. He was amused by these stories too, and said that the rationalist always had trouble with the spirit. And he said some things about his experience at Harvard and the Divinity School in the late 1930s. He recounted how Whitehead had urged him to just "be quiet about God" until he got his position established in the philosophy department.

What I was trying to do was to see the events of the Great Awakening and the writings of Jonathan Edwards in ways that drew upon the insights of ERH in his writings. It was a difficult, often discouraging task, but some of this came to expression in my "America as God's Kingdom" which was published in the mid-70s. I had at least found that ERH had given me a new way of looking at things: at history, at the role of religion in relation to society, at the meanings of speech and language. Later my doctoral work would be published as **Jonathan Edwards' Grammar of Time, Self & Society**.¹⁸

IV.

Throughout the 1970s, then, I was devouring all of ERH's writings that were available in English and struggling with some of his German writings. I had little success with the German since I was always a poor student of languages. Nevertheless, what Rosenstock-Huessy was saying about language and speech was immensely illuminating. In college, the later Wittgenstein and the Oxford/ Cambridge school of the philosophy of language had been very important to me. And I too had "chewed on the bone of language" but in the end found that this way of exploring language too often ended in an arid logical positivism that choked the spirit when it insisted that the only "meaningful language" was the language of science and mathematics; the rest was, in the word of A.J. Ayer, "nonsense." Later, at Harvard Divinity School I had been attracted to hermeneutics and the discussions of the Word and the reformulations of the Christian faith found in figures as diverse as Karl Barth (Volume I/1 of the Church Dogmatics is The Doctrine of the Word of God), Paul Tillich, and Gerhard Ebeling . But in Rosenstock-Huessy I encountered both a language that was inspiring and views about speech and reality that led, in ERH's words, to "a new grammar for social research."

Earlier, in **The Christian Future** I had been alerted to ERH's different views about language and speech -- and saw it in his very writings. Likewise, it was there in **Out of Revolution**, but it was more explicit in his **Speech & Reality**. In his "Grammatical Method" he spoke about the variety of our speech and its relationship to the well being of society.

We sustain the time and space axes of our civilization by speaking, because we take our place in the center of this civilization, confronted as we are with its four aspects: its future, its past, its inner solidarity, its external struggle. And in this deliberate and dangerous exposure to the four fronts of life, to the inner, the outer, the backward, and the forward front, our words must strike a balance; language distributes and organizes the universe, in every moment, anew.¹⁹

And he added,

To the four diseases [of society: anarchy, decadence, revolution, & war], four different styles of speech bring relief. Men reason, men pass laws, men tell stories, men sing... Through speech, society sustains its time and space axes."²⁰

Then I wasn't critical of his "men ..." but now I would say "men & women." Nevertheless, this was amazing to me, for my earlier philosophical studies of the philosophy of language coming from Cambridge and Oxford had led me to such a sense of the ambiguities of words that silence was best, communication virtually impossible. But here ERH was saying that

...as living beings, we are responsible for the conservation of the accomplishments of the past, the fulfillment of the future, the unanimity of the inner, the efficiency of the external front of life" and that "human survival and revival depend on speech."²¹

¹⁸ See my "American as God's Kingdom" in **Religion and Political Society**, J. Moltmann, et. Al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) pp. 49-94 and **Jonathan Edwards' Grammar of Time, Self, and Society** (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Euguen Rosenstock-Huessy, **Speech and Reality** (Norwich, VT: Argo Books 1970), p. 19. In the same year, 1970, Argo also brought out **I am an Impure Thinker**.

²⁰ ERH, **Speech and Reality**, p. 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 25.

Earlier, I had read Martin Buber but found in ERH a much richer and more differentiated understanding of speech. It was only later that I learned of ERH's involvement in a circle of thinkers that included Buber and of ERH's critique of Buber's "speech thinking."

I continued to read and reread his books, especially **The Christian Future, Speech and Reality** and **I am an Impure Thinker**. I know that many people I knew then got a bit exasperated with my preoccupation but it was all part of the major reorientation I was undergoing. It even entered my relationship and marriage to Susan Hodges. I remember reading to her passages on marriage and relationships -- "the whole body must be rapt to its new calling...when body and soul are completely dissolved and completely remade..." from **Out of Revolution** and "to marry means to create a body of time" from his remarkable "Tribalism" in **I am an Impure Thinker**.²² Some of his words were even incorporated into our wedding in 1975. Her response was more positive, but I also remember one friend exclaiming, "You are always interested in mavericks and I want something more main-line." He was right. ERH was not conventional. This was perhaps why I always loved the title "I am an Impure Thinker." He was no Kant in quest of pure reason; his quest was for life's secrets, processes, and names. His were insights into language, its connection to social life, the ways in which it was the "life blood" of society and continually redeployed us on the "cross of reality." These insights and perspectives continued to influence me as I completed my work on Jonathan Edwards and those formative times in the American experience and began to offer courses at Renison College, where I began to teach in 1973.

Over these past nearly thirty years at Renison, I have continued to read and reread ERH. I am amazed at each rereading as I learn new things or things that I had not noticed before. His works remain inspiring and challenging. I would never say that now I've got him, though I obviously have my own judgments about the meanings of his

²² See **Out of Revolution** p. 469 and "Tribalism" in **I am an Impure Thinker** pp. 121 -137 which taught me more about marriage and family than anything I had ever read before.

works.²³ I have tried to offer a course on his writings -- but I felt it was unsuccessful. I have had more success in bringing some bits and pieces of ERH into some of my courses.

Beginning in the late 1970s I became more engaged by the emerging dialogue of people of different faiths. But here too I turned to ERH for some assistance and direction. Somewhere in his writings he remarks that war breaks out when we quit speaking to one another, peace begins when we resume speaking to one another. In the relationships of the different religions, there has been an absence of speaking to one another -- and great, often murderous, conflict. And I had come to believe that it was crucial that men and women of the different faiths be in dialogue with one another. Thus for the past two and a half decades my efforts have been directed to dialogue between people of different faiths. My book **Woven on the Loom of Time**²⁴ (New Delhi, 1998) is my attempt to see the world's religious ways in relation to one another. And I like to think of it as, at least, informed by Rosenstock-Huessy's vision. I feel similarly about my book **Religion in a New Key**²⁵ which tries to spell out the consequences for the study of religion of the dialogue of men and women of different faiths.

V.

Here I have focused on my encounter with certain writings of ERH and especially with his vision of Christianity, the making of humanity, and the centrality of speech on the cross of reality. These themes are not exhaustive, but they are certainly near the heart of his writings. And it is his writings that make all the difference. I have sometimes been distressed when the circle of those interested in ERH have focused their attention on the

²³ For my judgments about the meaning and/or interpretation of ERH see my "The Grammar of the Spirit: Time, Speech and Society" pp. 233-260 in **Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, Studies in his Life and Thought**, eds. M. D. Bryant & H. Huessy (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1986). This volume grew out of the June 1982 conference on ERH held at Renison College, Waterloo, Ontario. For my response to ERH's **Planetary Service** see my "Meditations on Peace in a Planetary Society" in the **International Journal on World Peace**, Vol. XIII, March 1996, pp. 21-42.

²⁴ M. Darrol Bryant, **Woven on the Loom of Time: Many Faiths and One Divine Purpose** (New Delhi: Suryodaya/Decent Books, 1999).

²⁵ M. Darrol Bryant, **Religion in a New Key** (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2002). It was originally published in India in 1993 but has now been doubled in length for the second edition. My work in organizing interfaith conferences during the 1980s & 90s was shaped by ERH's views of how dialogue creates relationships.

hadith -- to use a Muslim term -- of ERH rather than his writings. It is his writings that matter and that will endure. It is also important, I believe, that those of us who have been moved and shaken by ERH attempt to bring his insights to bear on our own projects -- academic or otherwise. I have indicated some of that impact in relation to my own thinking and life.

George Morgan remarks that ERH is "one of the deepest and most original thinkers of our time."²⁶ I agree and I have found myself continually challenged and instructed by his writings.

²⁶ See George Allen Morgan, **Speech & Society** (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1987), p. ix.