

**PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, AND THE PRIMORDIAL CLAIM**

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Hence there is a single religion and a single creed for all beings endowed with understanding, and this religion is presupposed behind all the diversity of rites.

- Nicholas of Cusa

## PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, AND THE PRIMORDIAL CLAIM

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Primordial means "no matter where or when," and the primordial claim is that there is, first, a Reality that is everywhere and always the same; and second, that human beings always and everywhere have access to it. Not equal access if it is conscious access we are thinking of, for there is no reason to suppose that minds that differ in every other respect -- mathematical talent, musical genius, problem-solving ability -- flatten out when they turn to reality; some people scarcely think about reality at all. But there is no reason to suppose that people in the aggregate -- societies, civilizations, and cultures -- differ in metaphysical talent. Eliade tells us that for archaic societies "the world exists because it was created by the gods, and that the existence of the world itself 'means' something, 'wants to say' something, that the world is neither mute nor opaque, that it is not an inert thing without purpose or significance."<sup>1</sup> One can quibble about the plurality in the word "gods" in that statement -- it would be a quibble, for the alternative to monotheism is not polytheism but dualism -- but is there anything in the entire history of theology that supercedes, let alone retires, that initial, may we say primordial, discernment?

Not everyone will be persuaded by the primordial claim, which takes us back to the individual differences just alluded to. Logical speaking, the primordial is inescapable, being simply the yang side of the yang/yin, one/many polarity that governs thought throughout. (When we apply that logic to things, for example, it is at once evident that everything both resembles and differs from everything else: resembles it in that both exist, differs or there would not be two things but one.) But though it is impossible to dispense with the primordial, it can easily be downplayed, the obvious way being to grant it conceptual status only; it is an important tool for thought, but there is nothing in the objective world that corresponds to it. Nominalism versus realism, the abstract versus the concrete, monism versus pluralism, the one and the many -- the alternatives have been debated a thousand times and will never be balanced to everyone's satisfaction because (providentially, may we assume, to the end that both poles receive their just due?) some minds, as the saying goes, are temperamentally "lumpers" while others are "splitters." This essay argues for the integrating, primordial term as not only indispensable but privileged; if we are to weigh the two poles (and if we are to be thorough we cannot avoid doing so) what endures is more important than what passes, what pervades is more important than what is local. Wholes are more important than their parts for the sufficient reason that they include their parts. Earth exists, but "only heaven is great" (Chinese maxim).

One gets little inkling of all this from the current winds that are blowing in philosophy and religion, so it is with those winds that I shall begin. I could ignore them and simply present the Primordial Claim, but that would be to acquiesce to the current fate of that claim which is to be, not rebutted, but ignored. So if the mountains will not come to Muhammad, let Muhammad go to the mountains. Elsewhere I have presented the Primordial Claim in its own right, in both book and essay length.<sup>2</sup> Here the emphasis will be on its resources for helping philosophy and theology over shoals they are now traversing.

I begin with philosophy, using as my entre the plenary address Richard Rorty delivered at the Inter-American Congress of Philosophy which convened in Mexico City in 1985.

### 1. Philosophy

If nineteenth century philosophy began with Romantic Idealism and ended by worshipping the positive sciences, Rorty points out, twentieth century philosophy began by revolting against a narrowly empiricist positivism and is ending by returning

to something reminiscent of Hegel's sense of humanity as an essentially historical being, one whose activities in all spheres are to be judged not by its relation to non-human reality but by comparison and contrast with its earlier achievements and with utopian futures. This return will be seen as having been brought about by philosophers as various as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Quine, Gadamer, Derrida, Putnam and Davidson.<sup>3</sup>

That says a lot in small compass, so let me repeat it while inserting a few particulars. The nineteenth century began with a reaction against the scientism of the Enlightenment, protesting its claim that mathematical demonstration provides the model for inquiry and positive science the model for culture. It ended, though, by swinging back to Enlightenment predelections and shunting off into literature the counter-Enlightenment sentiments that had given rise to the Romantic Movement and German Idealism. So philosophy entered the twentieth century allied to science. Experimental science being outside its province, this meant following Husserl and Russell into mathematics and logic. Husserl soon deviated from that program to found a brand-new approach to philosophy -- phenomenology -- which would replicate science's apodicticity without using its logic. Heidegger's Being and Time subverted that move and thenceforth continental philosophy renounced both apodicticity and deduction. In English-speaking countries, though, Russell's slogan that "logic is the essence of philosophy" persisted, and ability to follow completeness proofs for formal systems replaced foreign languages as a professional requirement.

Even the Anglo-American attempt to 'do philosophy' via logic eventually abandoned apodicticity, though, for non-Euclidian geometries showed logic to be flexible; since it works equally well with whatever primitives we begin with, it produces nothing that is unequivocal. In their

Principia Mathematica, Whitehead and Russell spelled this out by developing a "logic of relations" to replace the logic of things, and Cassirer and C. I. Lewis went on to relativize Kant whose Critique had dominated modern epistemology. The human mind is not programmed to see the world in a single way. It sees it in different ways as times and cultures decree.

This drive towards pluralism didn't stop with epistemology; it pressed on into ontology. Having satisfied themselves that our minds require nothing of us, philosophers proceeded to argue that the world doesn't require anything of us either. Their way of doing this was to go after Plato's essences and Aristotle's substance, for if these exist they could draw the mind up short and thinking would not be indefinitely malleable. Again it is important to see this second rejection -- the rejection of the fixity of things to accompany the rejection of the fixity of logic -- as motivated by the same determination to stem the tide of the Enlightenment Project in its twentieth century positivistic version, for if there is a way things are is was pretty clear that the twentieth century would take it to be the way the sciences collectively report; the Vienna Circle with its "unification of science movement" was championing just this denouement. Rorty brings these two rejections together and shows how central they have been to our century's philosophy:

I do not think it far-fetched to see such different books as Carnap's Logische Aufbau der Welt, Cassirer's

Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Whitehead's Process and Reality, C. I. Lewis' Mind and the World Order, Langer's Philosophy in a New Key, Hartshorne's The Divine Relativity, Quine's Word and Object, Nelson Goodman's Ways of Worldmaking, Putnam's Reason, Truth and History, and Davidson's Essays on Truth and Interpretation as developments of the anti-Aristotelian and anti-substantialist, anti-essentialist implications common to Principia Mathematica and to the development of non-Euclidian geometries (ibid.).

Again, we should not lose sight of the motivation in all this. Seeing no way in which (in the face of the scientific temper of our century) it could register a view of reality that could compete with the scientific one that was gaining ground, philosophy took the next best step. It went after the notion of a single world view period: the notion that there is one unequivocal, comprehensive way that things actually are, or if there is, that human minds can have any knowledge of what that way is. This meant renouncing what historically had been philosophy's central citadel, metaphysics. Better no metaphysics at all than the one that was threatening to take over.

But if the "post-Nietzschean deconstruction of metaphysics" excused philosophers from thinking about the world, what should they be thinking about? We saw that during the early, positivistic decades of our century when philosophers thought science was the royal road to truth,<sup>4</sup> they latched onto logic as the slice of science that they could service: let the empirical scientists discover synthetic truths; philosophers would monitor the analytic truths that were also needed. In 1951, though, Quine demolished the analytic/synthetic, fact/meaning distinction

with his "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." With the analytic rug thus pulled out from under them, philosophers retreated to ordinary language for a preserve of meaning that didn't depend on logic yet needed attention.

Now, though, the wall around that refuge is being dismantled by Donald Davidson's critique of the distinction between the "formal" or "structural" features of discourse and its "material" ones. The correct theory of meaning, Davidson argues, is one that dispenses with entities called "meanings" altogether; instead of asking "What is the meaning of an expression?" it asks, "How does this expression function in this particular linguistic move?" With this total de-logicizing and naturalizing of language the division between it and the rest of life disappears. Instead of a "structure" or body of rules that philosophers can isolate, study and help others to understand -- or even the multiple structures and rules that Lewis and Cassier talked about -- language now looks like simply another human way of coping with the world.

This helps us to understand why philosophers in appreciable numbers seem to be moving towards closing down their discipline, for if logic isn't philosophy's essence (Quine) and language isn't either (Davidson), what remains? Wittgenstein came to see its only function as therapy -- undoing the mental knots philosophy itself creates. Heidegger announced the end of metaphysics to which Rorty has added "the end of epistemology." And now James Edwards



and Bernard Williams are turning down the lights on philosophical ethics with their Ethics without Philosophy and Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy respectively. What remains after these closures seems to be "conversation" and "play," to which neither Rorty nor Derrida see philosophy as having anything distinctive to contribute.

Philosophy is obviously in crisis and I think we can see the reason why? It is coming to recognize that autonomous reason -- reason without infusions that both power and vector it -- is helpless. By itself, it can deliver nothing apodictic. Working (as it necessarily must) with variables, variables are all it can come up with. The Enlightenment's "natural light of reason" turns out to have been a myth. Reason is not itself a light. It is more like a transformer that does useful things, but on condition that it is hitched to a generator.

We have already watched Rorty point out that for the bulk of this century it was science's premises that powered Anglo-American philosophy whereas continental philosophy turned to literature. He ends his address by noting that politics provides a third possible generator for philosophy, but he advises against it since "to assume that it is our task to be the avant-garde of political movements" would reduce philosophy to propaganda.

There is a fourth possible 'primer' for philosophy, though, which Rorty doesn't mention, perhaps because he is himself powered by it to the point where he simply takes it

for granted. This fourth generator is social science and the rising importance of names like Habermas and Gadamer suggest that the sciences of man are displacing the natural sciences in providing philosophers with their premises and problems. If science shouldn't monitor our thinking because it countenances only half of reality, and metaphysics (which tries to work from reality's whole) is pretense and delusion, let societies -- "forms of life," or cultural-linguistic wholes -- be the final arbitors of meaning, reality, and truth. It's as George Will says: "the magic word of modernity [is] 'society.'"<sup>5</sup>

The concept that points philosophy in society's direction is holism. Even while science powered philosophy, mounting evidence for the mind's propensity to gestalt its experience led Hanson to argue that "all facts are theory-laden" and Thomas Kuhn to write The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, for twenty-five years the most-cited book on college campuses and the one that turned "paradigm" into a household word. Heidegger and Wittgenstein had already pushed matters past theoretical into practical holism, though.<sup>6</sup> Because thinking invariably proceeds in social contexts and against a backdrop of social practices, meaning derives from -- roots down into and draws its life from -- those backgrounds and contexts. This means that in considering an idea, not only must we take into account the conceptual gestalt of which it is a part; we must also consider the social "forms of life" (Wittgenstein)

whose "micro-practices" (Foucault) give gestalts their final meaning. "Agreement in judgments means agreement in what people do and say, not what they believe. Wittgenstein insists.<sup>7</sup>

This move to work in concert with the sciences of man signals more vitality than the proposal to abandon ship, but it seems unlikely that philosophers will content themselves indefinitely with deadending their questions in forms of life. For social wholes are self-enclosed; unrelieved, a form-of-life is a kind of collective "egocentric predicament" if not solipsism. Those predicaments can seem invincible if one accepts their premises, but philosophy has never entirely surrendered to them.

The two boundaries that social holism acquiesces to are, first, ones that separate such wholes from one another, and second, the one that isolates configurations of phenomenal experience as such from the noumenal world that transcends them. Admittedly, both walls are difficult to breach. Two decades of trying to figure out how tribes that speak different languages could communicate have made us conscious of how difficult it is to transcending cultural-linguistic horizons, while phenomenology's epoche all but gives up the effort to transcend the phenomenal world; David Pears calls Wittgenstein's conclusion that "there is no conceivable way of getting between language and the world and finding out whether there is a general fit between them" the central thesis of his later years.<sup>8</sup>

When all is said and done, however -- when we have made every concession we can think of to the difficulty (verging on impossibility) of climbing out of our skins, out of our languages, out of our cultures, out of our times -- the fact remains: Of all life forms on earth, we and we alone, possess the ability to view the world detachedly, which is to say to some degree trans-perspectivally and objectively. This is the important point in Thomas Nagel's The View from Nowhere: that we can think about the world in terms that transcend our own experience and interests -- and, yes, our times and cultures too, the primordialist claims -- considering those from a vantage point which, being not entirely perspectival save as it is humanly so, is "nowhere in particular."

The first place where the limitations of cultural-linguistic holism are beginning to show up is in the difficulties it is having with the problem of relativism. If the issues of philosophy lead to (and deadend in) a plurality of collective, phenomenal configurations of experience leaving us no more than social functionaries, there appears to be no court of appeal for adjudicating between these collective experiences. If forms of-life are the bottom line, what recourse is there for affirming that one such form is better than another? Is there any way we can take seriously the possibility that our own cultural-linguistic epoch, say, may have taken a wrong turn; and again, if so, by what criterion? Pragmatic outcomes seem

to be the only court of appeal, but though useful for provisional purposes, pragmatic criteria never tell the whole story, for if cockroaches are to inherit the earth, that would not induce us to consider them our superiors. Cultural-linguistic holism stammers answers to relativism;<sup>9</sup> it can counter "vulgar relativism" by appealing to currents of consensus that underly superficial differences. But this no more saves the day than the structural sturdiness of a house redeems it if it is about to slide off its mountain perch.

A second besetting problem for holism concerns truth, for which it can provide no basis other than consensus. It seems strained, for example, and in the end indefensible to argue (as Wittgenstein per Kripke argues<sup>10</sup>) that even the rules of arithmetic have no validity beyond the social consensus that supports them.

These difficulties are enough in themselves to suggest that social holism is at best a way-station in philosophy's journey. If we try to anticipate where it might go next, the primordialist suggests that, riding its current insistence that thinking is invariably "situated," philosophy take another look at the possibility that reason's basic situation is the generic human condition. The roots of thinking don't stop with collectivities; they extend deeper, into soil that human collectivities share in common.

What that soil might be we shall come to in a moment, but first a brief transitional section on theology.

### Theology

The section can be brief because mainline theology has lost its independent standing. The major theological seminaries have gravitated toward major universities and bought into their secular styles of thought.\* The minds of mainstream theologians are now vectored more by the modern western mind-set than by traditional doctrine. It is more important to those theologians that their philosophical colleagues validate their work as being, if not true then at least meaningful, than that their ecclesiastical colleagues validate it as being orthodox.

The harm this does to faith -- Bultmann vectored by Heidegger, Teilhard by Darwin, Process Theology by a philosopher who admitted to having read but a single book of theology in his life: Whitehead -- passes largely unnoticed, but it relates to our topic in two ways, one sociological and the other substantive. Viewed from the sociology of knowledge, the most striking fact about the perennial philosophy in its twentieth century revival is that it has occurred (through Guenon, Coomaraswamy, Schuon, and popularizers such as Aldous Huxley) outside the university and its seminary satellites while deriving its force partly

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\*If this is true, we should not be surprised by the consequence. The theological consequence of secularism is atheism, and in the January 30, 1985, issue of The Christian Century Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write: "The central problem for our church, its theology and its ethics is that it is simply atheistic."

from that extramural base.\* As for the substantive point -- the way academic styles of thought in fact compromise robust theological ones -- the fact that the perennialists typically use the word "traditionalist" as their term of self-reference shows that they all but define themselves in opposition to the modernist drift, but there is room here for only a single example of the drift itself. Let it be an immediate one. There is a move afoot to replace what John Lindbeck calls the "experiential-expressive" approach in religious studies with the "cultural-linguistic" approach.<sup>11</sup> Whereas experiential-expressivism sees religions as expressions or objectifications of inner, preconceptual experience of God, self and world, the cultural-linguistic approach insists that experience is shaped by its social context from the start. "Inner experiences are not prior to their linguistic 'exteriorization;' rather, the symbol system is the pre-condition of the experiences -- a sort of cultural, public a priori for the very possibility of 'private' experience."<sup>12</sup>

The overture here to philosophy's notion of cultural holism is obvious, and of course if that holism is accepted without question the jig is up for any sort of universalism,

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\*On the matter of that force, one thinks of Jacob Needleman's Foreword to the collection of Traditionalist essays which he edited under the title The Sword of Gnosis. "On close reading," he writes, "I felt an extraordinary intellectual force radiating through their intricate prose. These men were out for the kill. For them, the study of spiritual traditions was a sword with which to destroy the illusions of contemporary man" (p. 9).

for we have already watched holism deadend in cultural pluralism. But it's not just universalism that's at stake. Ultimately the issue concerns man's position respecting his source and matrix -- whether he is he alienated from it or confirmed by it -- and the issue provides as good an entry as any to the concluding section of our paper.

### The Primordial Claim

Ontologically, the primordialist claims that we are bound to the ultimate so completely that in the end it is difficult if not impossible to differentiate us from it. Epistemologically, he claims that we can know our divine identity. Historically, he claims that the first two claims constitute the core of the Revelation that has spawned and powered the world's enduring religions. As we are living in a time when epistemology has upstaged ontology, it is best that we begin with it.

The Intellect. We can return to the dialectics with which this paper began. Do we know, or don't we? -- are our lives infused with knowledge or nescience? Obviously both, but which side do we come down on? Current philosophy opts for ignorance: "virtually every contemporary...methodology takes as its starting-point how well we know how little we know," James Cutsigner writes.<sup>13</sup> Tradition (a word which from here on will be used as synonymous with "the primordial claim") champions the alternative. Even to be aware of our ignorance is to know, but the point lies deeper. In the traditional view we are theomorphic beings.



Whether we are God (Atman is Brahman) or are made in the image of God (Imago Dei), the point is the same. Because God knows, we who derive from Him/Her/It know as well.

That needs to be said first, but once it has been said the obvious qualifications can follow. If we are God, samsara obscures that fact, while if we are created in the image of God that image has been tarnished by the Fall. So we are confused, bedazed, and temporarily lost -- condemned to live a good part of our lives in considerable darkness. Even so, our gyroscope continues to function, and the needle of our compass still points north.

The orienting faculty that gyroscope and compass token here is not reason; intellectus is not ratio any more that buddhi is manas. The faculty that intellect and buddhi name lies deeper in us than reason; it is something like the tropism of plants that orients them towards light. An entire essay would be needed to account for the faculty systematically; the most we can do here is note a place or two where Western philosophy has moved up to the notion. Plato hinted at it when he spoke of "the eye of the soul." Medieval philosophers forged from his hints the concept of intellect as distinct from reason. Even Hume was on its track when, itallacizing his words for emphasis, he noted that "belief is more properly an act of the sensitive than of the cogitative part of our natures."<sup>14</sup>

If (with small time for history) we look around us today we find allusions to an extra-rational component of

knowing at every turn; it is implicit rather than explicit, but invariably present. Polanyi called it tacit knowing; in common parlance the word "intuition" is invoked. Cognitive psychologists look in its direction when they say that knowing, feeling, and action cannot be separated. We "perfkink," Jerome Bruner tells us; which is to say, we perceive, feel and think at once. "To separate the three is like studying the planes of a crystal separately, losing sight of the crystal that gives them being."<sup>16</sup> Computer programers can make their machines do wonders, but one human capacity they cannot match: the power of a human being to summarize unconsciously his entire past -- all that he has experienced and done -- and let that summary affect his moves and decisions. Programmers cannot instruct their machines to do this because no one has the slightest idea how we do it ourselves.<sup>16\*</sup>

But back to epistemology per se. Consider an animal in the wilds. If we try to connect it to its environment by the physiology of perception we encounter so many inexplicable gaps that rationally (in Hume's sense of reason) we would have to conclude that the animal doesn't perceive its world at all. Yet all the while it behaves as if it perceives it; it proceeds toward food and shelter

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\*A striking example: Japanese chicken sexers are able to decide with 99% accuracy the sex of a chick, even though the female and male genitalia of young chicks are ostensibly indistinguishable. No consciously driven sexing effort could ever approach such accuracy. Aspiring chicken sexers learn only by looking over the shoulders of experienced workers, who themselves cannot explain how they do it.

almost unerringly. With J. J. Gibson's ecological theory of perception pointing the way,<sup>17</sup> animal psychologists are coming to see that they have lost sight of this incontrovertible fact. Trying to account for knowledge as inference from noetic bits hasn't worked. We must begin the other way around, with the recognition that there is a world out there (realism), and that the animals are oriented to it. Noetic bits must assume their place within those givens instead of being asked to try to produce them.<sup>18</sup>

The Traditional notion of the intellect is in line with these developments in psychology; it applauds Gibson's realism. To object that our knowledge is imperfect in both extent and exactitude, and that our representations of the world are colored to some extent by the human noetic equipment\* is to raise red herrings; no one contends otherwise as long as we do not allow the caveats to obscure the truths we have been speaking of.

As for philosophy, the constructive points in its practical holism are likewise to be applauded; knowing is a gestalt affair, and it does ride on micro-practices. But when cultural-linguistic holism turns negative, erecting fences around cultures that are said to be impregnable, the Traditionalist, wearing now his primordialist hat, is unpersuaded. There are ways in which every human being is

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\*Such coloring in no wise justifies the current attack on representational thinking per se. If Foucault is right in reporting that "representational thinking is everywhere at an end," that is a sign that something important has been lost sight of.

almost exactly like every other human being that has ever lived: in his feelings of fear and insecurity, of inadequacy and aggression, of lust and loneliness.\* What does the cultural-linguistic-holist say to this? That it isn't so? That we can't sense such affinities across cultural barriers? That the affinities are unimportant? In the context of current discussions, primordialism can be seen as the attempt to pick up on a neglected point, a most important one: the extent to which, differences notwithstanding, we are all more human than otherwise. Yet similarity is not its final object; the goal is Reality. The commonality that occupies the primordialist most is the generic human capacity to encounter the Absolute. Of course human knowing is always situated. But beyond the childhood traumas in which Freud situates it, the classes in which Marx situates it, and the historical times in which Nietzsche situates it, it is situated in the generic human condition. Finally important in this condition is man's capacity to know God.

The Absolute. Because in the West the word God tends to be tied to his/her/its personal aspects, it is perhaps

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\*"Einstein's discovery of relativity taught us that the division of space-time into past, present and future is an illusion. The past and the future are not remote from us. The people of six hundred years back and of six hundred years ahead are people like ourselves. They are our neighbors in this universe. Technology has caused, and will cause, profound changes in the style of life and thought, separating us from our neighbors. All the more precious, then, are the bonds of kinship that tie us together" (Freeman Dyson, Disturbing the Universe, p. 193).

better to speak of the Absolute to widen the screen. The personal dimensions of the divine are not unreal, but they are not inclusive. They are caught up and assumes their place in the abysmal infinity of the Godhead which our rational minds can no more fathom than a two-dimensional mind could fathom the nature of a sphere. The trans-rational depths of the divine are accessible, but by reason only abstractly and with anomalous residues; kataphatic theology inevitably produces paradoxes analogous to the ones that turn up on two-dimensional maps of our three-dimensional earth. Only in the inclusive light of intellectual discernment can these paradoxes be resolved. Such intellectual knowing requires more than thought. It requires that the subject be adequated to its object according to the dictum that "only like can know like."

The Absolute solves the problem of relativism. Without it, relativism can be deferred -- possibly to the point where some, unburdened by the long look, can live by the "provisional absolutes" the deferral allows. But short of the Absolute no final resolution of relativism is possible.

In the strict sense of the word, the Absolute is eternal: it is beyond time. As the rise of Process Theology suggests, the modern world's absolutizing of time has made God's eternity the greatest stumbling block of traditional theology; Whitehead and Hartshorne concede timelessness to God's abstract outlines, but not to the concreteness those outlines contain. This absolutizing of

time seems out of step with the growing suspicion in science that time is derivative and dependent -- Einstein called "the distinction between past, present and future...a stubbornly persistent illusion"<sup>19</sup> -- but we can let that pass. Process theologians argue that if God is eternal, his foreknowledge precludes human freedom and his immutability rules out love for his creatures. There are paradoxes here to be sure, but the Traditionalist sees even reason as able to resolve them to appreciable degree if eternity is clearly distinguished from everlastingness.

Translated to the phenomenal plane, the absolutizing of time produces historicism. The Traditionalist does not dispute the obvious fact that we are historical beings, or even that we are radically such. The question is whether we are totally such, which is to say historical without remainder. Anselm once said that St. Paul understood Moses far better than he and his contemporaries could. In so saying he acknowledged time's toll; he admitted that it had disadvantaged his generation in comparison with Paul's on the point in question. What in return does historicism concede to Anselm by way of his capacity to transcend his times enough to recognize that Paul's times allowed things his own did not while the age of Moses allowed even more? Unrelieved historicism is unrelieved relativism in its temporal mode, and as Hilary Putnam has stated outright, relativism is unlivable.

The infinite aspect of the Absolute provides the solution to the problem of evil. That finitude exists is beyond question, for here we are as witnesses. The infinite must include the finite -- include it paradoxically, of course, as the Prajnaparamita eloquently testifies -- or there would be something outside the infinite which by definition is impossible. So ontological gradations are required, that between the finite and the infinite being the one that is most important. When these gradations are considered in the mode of value or worth, they produce distinctions between better and worse and vistas open onto the privative view of evil. Esse qua esse bonum est; being qua being is good; evil is the relative absence of good in the way shadow is the relative absence of light. The issue is subtle, but a sentence by St. Augustine points to the direction in which the traditional argument proceeds: "I no longer desired a better world, because I was thinking of creation as a whole: and in the light of this more balanced discernment, I had come to see that higher things are better than the lower, but that the sum of all creation is better than the higher things alone" (Confessions, VII, xiii, 19). Not to affirm that point is to complain about the admittedly-inferior-while-essentially-noble condition that is ours. How noble it can come to be seen is life's open-ended question.

The Transcendent Unity of Religions. The day's mail brings this note from a professor in a leading American

seminary: "For many years I have studied thoroughly the normative texts of Islam and Christianity. There appears to be no evidence in the texts for...esoteric ecumenism." Such ecumenism, the writer goes on to say, is a curtain that primordialists drape over historical religions to veil their distinctive identities.

What is crucial here is to see that the primordialist agrees with the above assessment as long as one stays with the exoteric, relatively literal, reading of the texts in question. Moreover, there is nothing wrong with such reading. If one stays with it one must forfeit the possibility that the world's enduring religions are equal revelations from, and of, the one true God, but nothing turns on believing that they are thus equal. It is infinitely more important to believe -- genuinely, extentially believe -- that the teachings of one's tradition are true in their literal formulations, facing forthrightly the charge of exclusivism if it then arises, than it is to believe that ecumenism is so important that it justifies compromising theological convictions. Togetherness is nice, but it has no rights over truth.

The charge that the promordialist must face is elitism. Is there a reading of sacred texts which, without bypassing their literal meanings, presses beyond those meanings to deeper ones that inform their exoteric expressions without depending on them? Obviously it is a rhetorical question; the Traditionalist believes that there is such a reading and



that he is trying to exercise it. Blue is not red, but both are light. Exoterics can be likened to people who hold that light isn't truly such, or at least that it is not light in its purest form, unless it is of a given hue. Meanwhile academicians have become so fearful that a hue will be overlooked or that some that are known will be victimized -- marginalized is the going word -- that they deny the existence of light itself. There is nothing that hues instance and embody; nothing, in deconstructionist language, that texts signify. All that exists is an endless stream of signifiers.

The primordialist believes there is such a thing as light in itself -- pure white light that summarizes all the wave-lengths -- and that it is the Light of the World.

#### Endnotes

1. The Sacred and the Profane (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), p. 165.
2. Booklength in Forgotten Truth and compressed to essay length in "Perennial Philosophy, Primordial Tradition" in my Beyond the Post-Modern Mind.
3. Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. 59, (July 1986), p. 748.
4. As late as 1960 Quine was still contending in Word and Object that physics "limns the true and ultimate structure of reality."
5. George Will, Statecraft as Soulcraft (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 34.
6. For the clearest statement of the difference between theoretical and practical holism, see Hubert Dreyfus, "Holism and Hermeneutics," in Robert Hollinger (ed.), Hermeneutics and Praxis, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, (1985).
7. Hubert Dreyfus' paraphrase of Wittgenstein in ibid., p. 235.
8. The New Republic, May 19, 1986, p. 39.
9. As in Richard Bernstein's Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
10. See Saul A. Kripke, Wittgenstein on Rules and Private

- Language (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).  
For a critique of Wittgenstein's position on this point see Ernest Gellner, "The Gospel According to Ludwig," The American Scholar, Spring, 1984.
11. The Nature of Doctrine (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).
  12. Timothy Jackson, reviewing John Lindbeck's The Nature of Doctrine, in Religious Studies Review, Vol. 11, No. 3/July 1985, p. 236.
  13. "Toward a Method of Knowing Spirit," Sciences Religieuses/Strudies in Religion, 14/2 (Spring 1985), p. 152.
  14. A Treatise on Human Nature, p. 183. Hume's famous point about causality is that it is impossible to make a "philosophical" -- read rational -- case for it, but without our "natural" belief in the "necessary connection" of cause and effect we could never think beyond the sensory present because we would have no basis on which to reason forward to future events, backward through memory (which relies on causality as well) or even to contemporary unperceived cases.
  15. Jerome Bruner, Actual Minds, Possible Worlds (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986)..
  16. The most thorough discussion of this point appears in Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, Mind over Machine (New York: The Free Press/Macmillan, 1986).
  17. The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, 1979.
  18. See Marjorie Grene, "Perception, Interpretation, and the Sciences," in D. Depaw & B. Weber, Evolution at a Crossroads (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1985).
  19. From a letter he wrote on the death of his closest friend to the friend's widow and son. The full statement reads: "Now he has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."