

BRILLIANT ANSWERS TO THE WRONG QUESTION

POSTMODERNISM AND THE WORLD'S

RELIGIONS

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In the wake of its Traditional and Modern periods, the Western world is now generally regarded as having become Postmodern.²⁷ And as the entire world is still (at this stage) westernizing, I propose to think about religion's relation to Postmodernism. Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed of the University of Cambridge has written a book about *Post modernism and Islam*,²⁸ but my statement differs from his in two respects. I shall not limit my remarks to Postmodernism's relationship to Islam, and I shall give "post-modern" a different twist from the one he gives it. Because Dr. Ahmed approaches the subject sociologically, his book is really about Postmodernity as a life-style. Postmodernism, by contrast, suggests an outlook: the basic sense of things that gave rise to Postmodernity in the first place and now reflects its way of life.

Of the two, it is (as I say) Postmodernism that is my concern, but because it has become deeply implicated with Postmodernity, I shall summarize Dr. Ahmed's depiction of the latter before I turn to my own project. Instead of defining Postmodernity, he describes it by listing what he takes to be eight of its features.²⁹

1. It is animated by a spirit of pluralism, a heightened scepticism of traditional orthodoxies, and a rejection of a view of the world as a universal totality

²⁷ I am indebted to Professor M. L. Vanessa Vogel for her helpful suggestions after reading an early draft of this essay.

²⁸ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

²⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 10-28.

2. It is powered by the media which provide its central dynamic.
3. It is paired with ethno-religious fundamentalism, which it exacerbates where it has not actually generated it.
4. It is bound to its past, even if mainly in protest.
5. It centres in the metropolis.
6. It presupposes democracy, but has a class element. Urban yuppies are its core.
7. It thrives on the juxtaposition of discourses, an exuberant eclecticism, and the mixing of images and media.
8. It is not given to plain and simple language.

In the context of Postmodernity thus described, I proceed now to target Postmodernism, the position that has conceptually parented it.

Contrasts tend to throw things into relief, so I shall define Postmodernism by contrasting it with the traditional and modern outlooks that preceded it, using epistemology as my point of entry.

Even today, when traditional peoples want to know where they are—when they wonder about the ultimate context in which their lives are set and which has the final say over them— they turn to their sacred texts; or in the case of oral, tribal peoples (what comes to the same thing), to the sacred myths that have been handed down to them by their ancestors. *Modernity* was born when a new source of knowledge was discovered, the scientific method. Because its controlled experiment enabled scientists to prove their hypothesis, and because those proven hypotheses demonstrated that they had the power to change the material world dramatically, Westerners turned from revelation to science for the Big Picture. Intellectual historians tell us that by the 19th century Westerners were already more certain that atoms exist than they were confident of any of the distinctive things the Bible speaks of.

This much is straightforward, but it doesn't explain why Westerners aren't still modern rather than Postmodern, for science continues to be the main support of the Western mind. By headcount, most Westerners probably still *are* modern, but I am thinking of frontier thinkers who chart the course that others follow. These thinkers have ceased to be modern because they have seen through the so-called scientific worldview, recognizing it to be not *scientific* but *scientistic*. They continue to honour science for what it tells us about nature, but as that is not all that exists, science cannot provide us with a worldview— not a valid one. The most it can show us is half of the world, the half where normative and intrinsic values, existential and ultimate meanings, teleologies, qualities, immaterial realities, and beings that are superior to us do not appear.³⁰

Where, then, do we now turn for an inclusive worldview? Postmodernism hasn't a clue. And this is its deepest definition.³¹ In placing Postmodernism's

³⁰ This important point is not generally recognized, so I shall spell it out. The death-knell to modernity, which had science as its source and hope, was sounded with the realization that despite its power in limited regions, six things slip through its controlled experiments in the way sea slips through the nets of fishermen:

1. *Values*. Science can deal with descriptive and instrumental values, but not with intrinsic and normative ones.
2. *Meanings*. Science can work with cognitive meanings, but not with existential meanings (Is X meaningful?), or ultimate ones (What is the meaning of life?).
3. *Purposes*. Science can handle teleonomy— purposiveness in organisms— but not teleology, final causes.
4. *Qualities*. Quantities science is good at, but not qualities.
5. *The invisible and the immaterial*. It can work with invisibles that are rigorously entailed by matter's behaviour (the movements of iron filings that require magnetic fields to account for them, e.g.) but not with others.
6. *Our superiors, if such exist*. This limitation does not prove that beings greater than ourselves exist, but it does leave the question open, for "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence".

³¹ Ernest Gellner defines Postmodernism as relativism— "*relativismus über Alles*" (*Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*)— but relativism is not an easy position to defend, so postmoderns do everything they can to avoid that label; Clifford Geertz's "anti-antirelativism" is a case in point. The T-shirts that blossomed on the final day of a six-week, 1987 NEH Institute probably tell the story. Superimposed on a slashed circle, their logo read, "No cheap relativism". By squirming, postmoderns can parry crude relativisms, but sophisticated relativism is still relativism. Postmoderns resist that conclusion, however, so I shall stay with their own self-characterization.

“rejection of the view of the world as a universal totality” first in cataloguing its traits, Dr. Ahmed follows the now generally accepted definition of Postmodernism that Jean-Francois Lyotard fixed in place a decade ago in *The Postmodern Condition*: “incredulity toward metanarratives”.³² Having deserted revelation for science, the West has now abandoned the scientific worldview as well, leaving it without replacement. In this it mirrors the current stage of Western science which leaves *nature* unimaged. Before modern science, Westerners accepted Aristotle’s model of the earth as surrounded by concentric, crystalline spheres. Newton replaced that model with his image of a clockwork universe, but Postmodern, quantum-and-relativity science gives us not a third model of nature but no model at all. Alan Wallace’s *Choosing Reality* delineates eight different interpretations of quantum physics, all of which can claim the support of physics’ proven facts.³³

An analogy can pull all this together. If we think of traditional peoples as looking out upon the world through the window of revelation (their received myths and sacred texts), the window that they turned to look through in the modern period (science) proved to be stunted. It cuts off at the level of the human nose, which (metaphysically speaking) means that when we look through it our gaze slants downward and we see only things that are inferior to us.³⁴ As for the Postmodern window, it is boarded over and allows no inclusive view whatsoever. The current issue of *The University of Chicago Magazine* features on its cover a photograph of Richard Rorty announcing that “There is no Big Picture.”

This conclusion admits of three versions that grow increasingly shrill. *Minimal*, descriptive Postmodernism rests its case with the fact that today no accepted worldview exists. *Mainline*, doctrinal Postmodernism goes on from there to argue for the permanence of this condition. Never again will we have a worldview of which we can be confident— we know too well how little the human mind can know. Members of this camp disagree as to

³² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), pp. xxiv, 3ff.

³³ Alan Wallace, *Choosing Reality* (Boston and Shaftsbury: Shambala, 1989).

³⁴ No textbook in science has ever included things that are intrinsically greater than human beings. Bigger, of course, and wielding more physical power, but not superior in the full sense of that term which includes virtues, such as intelligence, compassion, and bliss.

whether reality has a deep structure to be known, but they agree that if it has, the human mind is incapable of knowing it. *Hardcore*, polemical Postmodernism goes a step further by adding “Good riddance.” Worldviews oppress. They totalize, and in doing so marginalize minorities.

These three Postmodern stances set the agenda for the rest of my paper, for I want to argue that the world’s religions question the last two, and qualify importantly the first.³⁵ Negatively, they deny that inclusive views necessarily and preponderantly oppress. Positively, they affirm that the human mind is made for such views, and that reliable ones already exist. Before I enter upon these constructive points, however, I want to take a quick look at recent French philosophy. For though it was mostly the unbridled historicism of German philosophers— Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger— that paved the way for Postmodernism, as our century closes,³⁶ it is the French who have taken the lead. There is time to mention only one of them, and Jacques Derrida is the obvious candidate for being Postmodernism’s most redoubtable spokesman. His deconstructionism is said already to be a mummy in Europe, but in America no one has been able to topple it from its pedestal where it presides, more or less, over the Postmodern scene.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION: DERRIDA AND DECONSTRUCTION

Dr. Ahmed rounded off his characterization of Postmodernity by noting that it is “not given to plain and simple language,” and deconstructionist prose reads like a caricature of that point. Derrida calls “stupid” the view that deconstruction “amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language,”³⁷ but whose fault is this when he ensconces “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”³⁸ (there is

³⁵ To highlight the opposition between Postmodernism and religion, I am intentionally tabling in this statement the differences among religions that I explored in my *Essays on World Religions* (New York: Paragon House, 1992).

³⁶ This article was written by the author in 1994. (Ed.)

³⁷ In Richard Kearney, *Dialogue with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 123-24.

³⁸ One has to read quite a way to learn that this does not mean what it says. It means [per Rodolphe Gasche, *Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 281] that “nothing outside the text can, like a last reason, assume

nothing outside the text) as the veritable motto of his movement. Even sympathetic interpreters have trouble explaining that motto. John Caputo, for example, assures us that Derrida does not “trap us inside the ‘chain of signifiers,’ in linguistic-subjective idealism, unable to do anything but play vainly with linguistic strings;” but a page or two later he tells us that “there are no things themselves outside textual and contextual limits, no naked contact with being which somehow shakes loose of the coded system which makes notions like the ‘things in them-selves’ possible to begin with and which enables speakers to refer to them.”³⁹ Small wonder satirists have a field day. “Deconstruction goes well beyond right-you are-if-you-think-you-are” Walt Anderson reports. “Its message is closer to wrong you are whatever you think, unless you think you’re wrong, in which case you may be right— but you don’t really mean what you think you do anyway.”⁴⁰

I mention this because the costiveness of Derrida’s prose makes one wonder if it serves, not to camouflage a leaky theory; I do not say that, but to make it pretentious. Where there is so much mystery, can profundity be lacking? Let us see.

Derrida insists that, contrary to its public image, deconstruction is an affirmative project,⁴¹ for its essence consists of its “openness to the other.”⁴² John Caputo (upon whom I rely as a helpful interpreter of Derrida) glosses that definition as follows:⁴³

Derrida’s thought is through and through a philosophy of “alterity,”...a relentless attentiveness and sensitivity to the ‘other.’ [It] stands for a kind of hyper-sensitivity to many “others”; the other person, other species,

a *fulfilling function*,” which in itself is not the plainest way of saying that there is nothing outside a text that determines that it has only one plausible meaning.

³⁹ John Caputo, “Good News about Alterity: Derrida and Theology” in *Faith and Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 453.

⁴⁰ Walt Anderson, *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 87.

⁴¹ See Jacques Derrida, “A Number of Yes,” translated by Brian Holmes, *Qui Parle* 2 (1988), pp. 120-33.

⁴² In Richard Kearney, op. cit., p. 124.

⁴³ John Caputo, *ibid.*

“man’s” other, the other of the West, of Europe, of Being, of the “classic,” of philosophy, of reason, etc. [The list goes on].

This understanding of deconstruction helps to situate it in the context of Postmodernism, for if Postmodernism is “incredulity toward metanarratives,” Derrida’s “openness to the other” fuels that incredulity. For metanarratives brook no alternatives, so that to side finally with “others” is to renounce worldviews.⁴⁴

Let’s look, then, at “sensitivity to others” as deconstruction’s hallmark. Advancing it as such makes the position attractive, immensely so, for if God is included among the “others,” deconstruction (in this reading) sounds a lot like religion, for surely religion’s object is to deliver us from narcissistic self-centeredness into the otherness of God and, through God, to other people.⁴⁵ Deconstructionist prose swells with virtue, which places its critics in the position of seeming to be either personally insensitive or politically reactionary—the latter, deconstructionists frequently explicitly charge. But the question is: does deconstruction do more than *preach* the empathy we all aspire to? Do its claimed “skills” help us *develop* and *deploy* that virtue? Its theological enthusiasts see in it “a rich and vigorous catalyst for religious thought [for being] an open ended call to let something new come...an approach that lets faith function with an enhanced sense of advent, gladdened by the good news of alterity by which we are summoned.”⁴⁶ But this sounds like using the Christian connotations of Advent to bless modern enthusiasms for quantity, the thrill of novelty, and the prospect of progress—the more new arrivals the better. What if the newly welcomed guest turns out to be the Devil in disguise? Should skinhead Neo-Nazis and the Klu Klux Klan be given the same hearing as widows and orphans? Our hearts

⁴⁴ Metanarratives (or worldviews) other than the one in question can exist, but not as such; which is to say, not (from the position of the one in question) as true. Worlds are not made for one another. The words Worldviews, Absolute, and Truth are mutually implicated.

⁴⁵ Caputo develops this connection. “Although Derrida is not a religious writer, and does not, as far as I know, hold any religious views, his thought seems to me in no small part driven by a kind of biblical sensitivity, let us say a hyperbolic hypersensitivity, to the demands of the other, to the claims laid upon us by the different one, of the one who is left out or cast out, who lacks a voice or hearing, a standing or stature” (ibid., p. 466).

⁴⁶ John Caputo, ibid., p. 454, 457.

invariably go out to the “others” that deconstructionists name, but have they discovered techniques to help us winnow hard cases? A countless number of possible contrasts to (or negations of) the present situation obviously exist. Which ones deserve our attentions?

This is no small question, but the deeper point is this. Deconstruction is first and foremost a theory of language. This should temper our expectations right off, for those theories come and go— structuralism, generative grammar; what will be next? Two things, though, characterize the constant parade. First, the deeper theorists dive into language, the bigger their problems become. A review of Randy Harris’ recent book, *The Linguistic Wars*, concludes by quoting a linguist as saying, “You know, language has got us licked. The score is language, one billion, linguists, zero.”⁴⁷

The second constant in the ongoing procession of language theories is that it has little effect on the ideas that people use words to shape.⁴⁸ Caputo grants this, at least in part.

To the age old dispute between belief and unbelief, deconstruction comes equipped with a kind of armed neutrality. [It] neither includes nor excludes the existence of any positive entity. There is nothing about deconstruction...that affirms or falsifies the claims of faith; nothing that confirms or denies the claims of physiological reductionists who see there only the marvellous promptings not of the Spirit, but of certain neurotransmitters.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ In David Berreby’s review of Randy Allen Harris, *The Linguistic Wars* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) in *The Sciences*, January/February, 1994, p. 49.

⁴⁸ There was a dramatic moment in the December 1980 meeting of the American Philosophical Association when Richard Rorty pressed his critics to offer examples of cases “where some philosophical inquiry into conceptual foundations of X provided any furtherance of our understanding of X.” Many think that his challenge has not been met, and it is time (it seems to me) to put the same challenge to deconstruction. Confining our self to this essay’s concern, is there a single passage in the Hebrew canon (say) whose religious message can be deepened by deploying skills that Derrida possesses, but rabbis through the ages lacked?

⁴⁹ John Caputo, *op. cit.*, p. 463.

This claimed neutrality, though, is deceptive, for in our materialistic age, deconstruction's "heightened sense of suspicion about the constructedness of our discourse" (Caputo) works more against intangibles than against neurotransmitters. Practically speaking, this places Derrida in the camp of the massed powers of cognition that oppose the human spirit today. When Saul Bellow tells us that⁵⁰

the value of literature lies in "true impressions." A novel moves back and forth between the world of objects, of actions, of appearances, and that other world, from which these "true impressions" come and which moves us to believe that the good we hang on to so tenaciously— in the face of evil, so obstinately— is no illusion.

When (as I say) an artist expresses such views, religionists take him at his word, but not Derrida. His "heightened sense of suspicion" will not allow "presences"— his word for Bellow's "true impressions"— to be accepted at face value.⁵¹

Some things do need to be deconstructed. Scientism needs all the deconstructing it can get, and the Buddha's deconstruction of the empirical ego by showing it to be a composite of *skandas* that derive from *pratitya-samutpada* (co-dependent origination) is a marvel of psychological analysis. But the Buddha tore down in order to rebuild; specifically to show that "utter [phenomenal] groundlessness (nonbeing) is equivalent to full groundedness (being)."⁵² Likewise Pseudo-Dionysius. No one saw more clearly than he that "the intelligence must interpret, correct, straighten out, 'reduce', and deny the

⁵⁰ Saul Bellow, *It All Adds Up* (New York: Viking, 1994), p. 97.

⁵¹ This exaltation of method over intuitive discernments is an academic disease of our times: in the case at hand, "presences" are rendered suspect, and confidence is shifted to the deconstructive method. But "if the optic nerve has to be examined in order to be sure that vision is real, it will be necessary to examine that which examines the optic nerve; an absurdity which proves in its own indirect way that knowledge of suprasensible things is intuitive and cannot be other than intuitive." (Frithjof Schuon).

⁵² David Loy, "Avoiding the Void: The Lack of Self in Psychotherapy and Buddhism," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 2, p. 153.

images, forms, and schemes in which are materially represented the divine realities they are unable to contain.” But this “radical critique and rejection by the intelligence of each of the [Divine] names that are more or less accessible to it indicate definite steps *forward* of this same intelligence *in the direction of its own divinization*.⁵³ One looks in vain for anything approaching such exalted issues from Derrida’s dismantlings. They look like the latest brand of our century-long hermeneutics of suspicion, mounted this time linguistically.

I fear that in giving the space that I have to Derrida my wish to come to grips with at least one instance of Postmodernism may have drawn me too far into his circle, for hand to hand combat never avails against these philosophers; their minds are too agile. So before proceeding to Postmodernism’s religious alternative, I shall drop my dirk, back off a distance and aim a javelin at the premises from which the philosophers work. For in Yogi Berra’s aphorism, they make the wrong mistake. Misjudging what our times require, they provide brilliant answers to the wrong question.

Already at the opening of this century Yeats was warning that things were falling apart, that the centre didn’t hold. Gertrude Stein followed him by noting that “in the twentieth century nothing is in agreement with anything else,” and Ezra Pound saw man as “hurling himself at indomitable chaos”—the most durable line from the play *Green Pastures* has been, “Everything that’s tied down is coming loose.” It is not surprising, therefore, that when in her last interview Rebecca West was asked to name the dominant mood of our time, she replied, “A desperate search for a pattern.” The search is desperate because it seems futile to look for a pattern when reality has become, in Roland Barth’s vivid image, kaleidoscopic. With every tick of the clock the pieces of experience come down in new array.

This is what we are up against, *this* is what Postmodernity is: the balkanization of life and thought. Perpetual becoming is preying on us like a deadly sickness, and (deaf to E. M. Forster counsel, “only connect”) Postmoderns think that more differences, (and the increased fragmentation,

⁵³ Rene Roques, preface to *Pseudo-Dionysius* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 7, 6). Emphasis added.

distractions and dispersions these produce) is what we need. If we could replay at fast speed a videotape of our century's social and conceptual earthquakes, we would see the deconstructionists scurrying around like madmen in hardhats, frantically looking for places where a little more demolition and destabilization might prove useful.⁵⁴ Here Dr. Ahmed's analysis of Postmodernity fits perfectly, for after defining it as "a rejection of the world as a universal totality," he proceeds immediately to note that "the media provide its central dynamic" Postmodernism and the media reinforce each other through their common interest in difference, for novelty—sequential difference—is the media's life blood. Nothing is so important but that in three days it will not be replaced by headlines reporting what happens next, however trivial it may be. Is anything more interesting than what's going on!

In turning now to Postmodernism's religious alternative, I shall continue to speak of it in the singular and simply assume what I argued in *Forgotten Truth*; namely, that a common metaphysical "spine" underlies the differences in the theologies of the classical languages of the human soul, the world's great religions.⁵⁵ Tackling in reverse order the three modes of Postmodernism that I delineated earlier, I shall report as straightforwardly as I can—there won't be much time for supporting arguments—the religious claims that people need worldviews, that reliable ones are possible, and that they already exist.

RELIGION'S RESPONSE TO POST MODERNISM

1. Worldviews are Needed

As religions are worldviews or metanarratives— inclusive posits concerning the ultimate nature of things— its custodians cannot accept polemical Postmodernism's contention that on balance they oppress. George

⁵⁴ "The point of deconstruction is to loosen and unlock structures...to allow [things] to function more freely...open-endedly. It warns against letting [things] close over or shut down, for this would imprison something in systems which struggles to twist free" (Caputo, 456-57). What, specifically?

⁵⁵ Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth, The Common Vision of the World's Religions*, Harper San Francisco, San Francisco: 1976/1992 (repr. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1984, 2002)

Will has observed that “the magic word of modernity is ‘society;’” and the present case bears him out, for it is almost entirely for their social repercussions that Postmoderns fault worldviews.⁵⁶ In applying that measuring rod they simply assume (they do not argue) that religion does more harm than good. That this runs counter to social science functionalism, which holds that institutions don’t survive unless they serve social needs, is conveniently overlooked,⁵⁷ but the deeper point is that the vertical dimension— the way religion feeds the human soul in its inwardness and solitude— gets little attention.

When the personal and private dimension of life (which intersects the vertical) is validated, it is not difficult to see the function that worldviews serve. Minds require niches as much as organisms do, and the mind’s niche is its worldview, its sense of the whole of things, however much or little that sense is articulated. Short of madness, there is *some* fit between the two, and we constantly try to improve the fit. Signs of a poor fit are the sense of meaninglessness, alienation, and in acute cases anxiety, which Postmodernity knows so well. The proof of a good fit is that life and the world make sense. When the fit feels perfect, the energies of the cosmos pour into the believer and empower him to a startling degree. He knows that he belongs, and this produces an inner wholeness that is strong for being consonant with the wholeness of the All. The very notion of an All is a red

⁵⁶ The break up of colonialism following World War II got mixed up with Marx’s hermeneutic of suspicion in a curious and unfortunate way. Marx was able to show quite convincingly that much of what capitalists took for truth was actually ideology— but his successors slipped into assuming that because the capitalists thought their truth was objective and they oppressed people, belief in objective truth must be a cause of oppression. No Descartes, no imperialism. There is great irony here, for Marx mounted his hermeneutics of suspicion to clear the ground for his view of things which he considered objective. His stratagems, though, were powerful and took on a life of their own. Eventually, (with help from Nietzsche, Freud, and others) they turned against their fathers by undermining confidence in objective truth generally.

Parenthetically but importantly: that knowledge (to the degree that it is such) is objective, and that objectivity is not fully such if the context that insures it is less than inclusive are momentous points; but in this essay I can only assume them, there being insufficient space to argue for them.

⁵⁷ On survival, we have Clifford Geertz’s report that “though it is not logically impossible for a people to have [no] metaphysics, we do not seem to have found such a people” (“Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols”, *Antioch Review* [1957], p. 338).

flag to deconstructionists for seeming to disallow alterity; and in a sense it does disallow it, for, being whole, God cannot be exclusive. But as God's inclusiveness is unique in including all the "otherness" there is— God's infinity is all-possibility— alterity is allowed as much room as it can logically have.

One would think that Postmodern theologians, at least, would honour this sense of ultimate belonging that religion bestows. Heirs, though, to modernity, they too have adopted "society" as their watchword, allowing social considerations to upstage ontological ones. Both absolutism and relativism have bright and shadow sides. The virtue of the Absolute is the power it offers the soul; its danger is the fanaticism into which the power can narrow. In the case of relativism, its virtue is tolerance, and nihilism is its shadow side. Where social considerations predominate it is the dark side of absolutism (fanaticism) and the bright side of relativism (tolerance) that are noticed, these being their social components. In both cases, the vertical dimensions— which would reverse our estimates of the two— are underplayed if not ignored.

2. Worldviews are Possible

In proceeding from the need for worldviews to their possibility, I have in mind of course the possibility of *valid* worldviews, not castles in the air. The religious claim that the human mind has access to such views challenges *mainline* Postmodernism in the way its pre-ceding claim— that worldviews are needed— challenged Postmodernism's polemical stance.

Mainline Postmodernism takes its stand on human finitude, arguing that as finite minds are no match for the infinite, there can be no fit between the two. What gets overlooked in this disjunction is the subtleties that finitude admits of: its degrees, modes, and paradoxes. With its *fana, anatta, and maya*, religion ultimately denies that finitude, as such, exists. Postmodernism cannot comprehend that, any more than it can comprehend the other side of the paradox: that finitude hosts the Atman, Buddha-nature, *imago dei*, Uncreated Intellect, and Universal Man. God alone exists, and everything that exists is God.

These are difficult concepts, so I reach for analogies. A wisp of spray is not the ocean, but the two are identically water. Or if we imagine an infinite lump of clay that tapers into tentacles and then into filaments that dwindle toward nothingness, the final tips of those filaments are still clay. To the religious spirit, such thoughts can serve as powerful spring-boards in suggesting our connectedness to God. Which connectedness— this is the immediate point— has epistemic implications. Postmoderns burlesque those who protest the cramped, Postmodern view of the mind, charging them with claiming that the human mind is capable of a God’s eye-view of things, as if omniscience were the only alternative to Kant’s categories. Worldviews are human views, which means that they conform to human modes of thought in the way a bird’s-eye view of the world honours its modes. But Blake’s dictum is decisive here: “I see through my eyes, not with them.” That the world, taken as the whole of things, looks different to God and other species than it does to us does not prevent there being better and worse, right and wrong ways that human beings take it to be. In a subordinate sense, the right way includes many right ways— as many as appropriately different ways of being human decree. Differences in the world’s great theologies provide an important instance of this, but here the point is that mistakes are possible and do occur, Postmodernism being one of them.

The components of Postmodern epistemology that work most heavily to obscure the realization that there can be valid overviews are two: perspectivalism carried to the point of absurdity; and a mundane, humdrum conception of knowledge.⁵⁸

Perspectivalism becomes absurd when the obvious fact that we look at the world from different places, hence different angles, is transformed into the dogma that we therefore cannot know things as they actually are. For Kant, it was our human angle (the categories of the mind) that prevents us from knowing “things in themselves;” and when psychological, cultural, temporal, and linguistic filters are added to this generic, anthropological one, we get constructivism, cultural relativism, historicism, and cultural-linguistic

⁵⁸ For a reasoned presentation of these two important points which I can only mention here, see the section titled “Two Dogmas of Scepticism Concerning Spiritual Reality,” in Donald Evans, *Spirituality and Human Nature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993).

holism respectively. What dogmatic perspectivalism in all these modes overlooks is that to recognize that perspectives are such requires knowing to some extent the wholes that demote them to that status. Without this recognition, each “take” (as they say in movie making) would be accepted as the thing in itself. Visually, we need only move around the room to get a sense of the whole that shows our perspectives to be no more than such; but the mind is a dexterous instrument and can put itself “in other peoples’ shoes,” as we say.⁵⁹ When the shoes belong to strangers, we transcend cultural relativism; when they are removed in time we transcend all-or-nothing historicism. When this is pointed out to Postmoderns they again burlesque, charging their informants with claiming to be able to climb out of their skins, or (in the case of time) hopping a helicopter for past epochs. Both images are self-serving by pointing their spatial analogies in the wrong direction. The alternative to perspectivalism is not to get out of one-self or one’s times, but to go into oneself until one reaches things that are *timeless* and elude space altogether.

As for Postmodern epistemology, this too was initiated by Kant who argued that knowledge is always a synthesis of our concepts with something that presents itself to those concepts. (We can think of a tree as an object without knowing whether there is such an object until we confront something that fits our concept of a tree). An important question for worldviews is whether human beings have faculties, analogous to their sense receptors, for detecting immaterial, spiritual objects. Kant thought not, and epistemology has largely gone along with his opinion; but religion disagrees. There is no objective way of adjudicating the dispute, for each side has its own definition of objectivity. For science, common sense, and Postmodernism, objective knowledge where it is countenanced is knowledge

⁵⁹ This, of course, is precisely what Postmodern anthropologists deny. The discipline that began as the effort to learn about other peoples and cultures now obsesses over the impossibility of that project. Anthropologists now evidence their seriousness by recognizing that “facts” about other peoples are only superficially such. When the ever-shifting, culture-bound, contradictory and deserving-of-deconstruction meanings of the natives interface with the anthropologists’ meanings that partake of the same problems, what hope is there for minds to meet? Those who seek such meetings are reduced to reporting the anguish of their field experiences in which they and their subjects try to break out of their respective islands and reach out to one another, with failure built into the project from its start.

that commends itself to everyone because it turns, finally, on sense reports that people agree on. Religious epistemology, on the other hand, defines objective knowledge as adequation to the real. When the real in question is spiritual in character, special faculties are required. These need to be developed and kept in working order.

Unencumbered by run-of-the-mill epistemology and perspectivalism gone haywire, religions accept their worldviews as their absolutes, which is to say, as true. That word is no more acceptable to post-moderns than “all” is; Wittgenstein prefigured the shift from modernity to Postmodernity when he characterized his turn from his early to his late period as a shift from truth to meaning. Here again the post-modern preoccupation with social matters obtrudes, for the fanatical impulse to cram truth down other people’s throats leads Postmoderns to back off from truth in general, especially if it is capitalized. In so doing they overlook the fact that truth is fallibilism’s prerequisite, not its alternative. Where there is no *via* (way, truth) to deviate from, mistakes have no meaning.⁶⁰

Working my way backwards through Postmodernism’s three versions, I come lastly to its minimal claim which simply reports that we have no believable worldview today. “We have no maps, and we don’t know how to make them” is the way one of the author’s of *The Good Society* states the point.⁶¹

Whereas the two stronger versions of post-modernism need to be challenged for interfering with the human spirit, this minimalist position, being at the root a description, poses no real problem. The description can, though, be qualified somewhat. In saying that we have no maps, the “we” in the minimalist’s assertion refers to Western intellectuals. Peoples whose minds have not been reshaped by modernity and its sequel continue to live by the maps of their revelations.

⁶⁰ Robert Kane’s *Through the Moral Maze: Searching for Absolute Values in a Pluralistic World* (New York: Paragon House, 1994) makes this point convincingly.

⁶¹ Richard Madsen, one of the authors of *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah et al. (New York: Knopf, 1991).

Prone to assume that maps must be believed fanatically if they are to be believed at all, polemical Postmoderns condemn religions for fomenting disharmony. But it is useful here to refer back for a last time to Dr Ahmed's characterizations of Postmodernity, which include its being "paired with ethno-religious fundamentalism". Postmoderns over-look that pairing. They do not perceive the extent to which their styles of thought (with the dangers of relativism and nihilism they conceal) have *produced* fundamentalism; which fundamentalism is the breeding ground for the fanaticism and intolerance they rightly deplore.

If mainline and polemical Postmodernism were to recede, the obsession with life's social dimension that they saddled us with would relax and we would find ourselves able to think ontologically again. An important consequence of this would be that we would then perceive how much religious outlooks have in common. For one thing, they all situate the manifest, visible world within a larger, invisible whole. This is of particular interest at the moment because currently science does the same. Dark matter doesn't impact any of science's detectors, and the current recipe for the universe is "70 parts cold dark matter, about 30 parts hot dark matter, and just a pinch for all the rest—the matter detectable to scientific instruments."⁶² The further unanimous claim of religious cosmologies, though, finds no echo in science, for (being a value judgement) it is beyond science's reach. Not only is the invisible real; regions of it are more real and of greater worth than the visible, material world.

The inclusive, presiding paradigm for traditional cosmologies is the Great Chain of Being, composed of links ranging in hierarchical order from meagre existents up to the *ens perfectissimum*; and the foremost student of that concept, Arthur Lovejoy, reported that "most educated persons everywhere accepted [it] without question down to late in the eighteenth century."⁶³ To that

⁶² *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 October 1992, A 16.

⁶³ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 59. Ernst Cassirer corroborates Lovejoy on this point: "The most important legacy of ancient speculation was the concept and general picture of a graduated cosmos" (*Individual and Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, p. 9).

endorsement, Ken Wilber has recently added that the Great Chain of Being is “so overwhelmingly widespread...that it is either the single greatest intellectual error ever to appear in humankind’s history— an error so colossally widespread as to literally stagger the mind— or it is the single most accurate reflection of reality yet to appear.”⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

To propose that religions cash in their theological metanarratives for metaphysical similarities they share would be as absurd as to urge people to peel off their flesh so the similarities of their skeletons could come to light. But if the warfare between science and religion could wind down, religions might find themselves co-existing relatively happily within a minimally articulated metanarrative of faith that encompassed them all in the way the eight current models of the quantum world share the context of what quantum physicists in general agree on. Or in the way in which, in the modern period, competing scientific theories shared the metanarrative of the scientific worldview.

Were this to happen, the atmosphere would be more salubrious, for I know no one who thinks that the Postmodern view of the self and its world are nobler than the ones that the world’s religions proclaim. Postmoderns acquiesce to their dilapidated views, not because they like them, but because they think that reason and human historicity now force them upon us.

It has been the burden of my remarks that this is not the case.

⁶⁴ Ken Wilber, “The Great Chain of Being,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 33 no. 3 (summer 1993), p. 53.