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ESSAY

Postmodernism's Impact on the Study of Religion

Huston Smith

Postmodernism has not displaced modernism; the two outlooks jostle one another as they compete for the current western mind.¹ So my subject is actually the impact of modernism and postmodernism on religious studies. Chronologically, I define modernism as the outlook that dominated the West from the seventeenth to (and into) the twentieth century, but which has had to share the stage increasingly with postmodernism as the decades of our century have unfolded. Substantively, modernism is the outlook that accepted the scientific worldview as definitive, while postmodernism is that scientistic worldview adjoined but not replaced. While the modern mind was flat because science cannot get its hands on values and the vertical dimension that betokens their worth, the postmodern mind is amorphous. Doubting that a deep structure exists, it settles for the constantly-shifting configurations of the phenomenal world. That my definitions focus on worldviews signals that I am approaching my subject metaphysically. I think we get farther that way than if we approach modernity via Hobbes, Locke, and the French Revolution.

With modernism and postmodernism thus defined, what is religion?

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¹I am grateful to Robert Scharlemann for rescuing me from several mistakes as I was writing this address. He should not be held responsible for any that may remain.

RELIGION'S CENTRAL POSIT: A HIERARCHICAL UNIVERSE

It has not been easy for us to maintain our bearings in this tumultuous century, so I propose to roll back the decades to its opening and ask William James to remind us what religion is. In his 1901-02 Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he tells us that "religion says that the best things are the more eternal things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word."

Note at once that by this report religion talks about things—the "best [and] eternal things"—which warns us right off that it is headed for trouble with postmodernism, for "things" sound suspiciously like "essences," and talk about them sounds suspiciously "referential"—words postmodernism is not fond of. But let's stay with James.

The things that religion focuses on, he tells us, are of a special sort. They are the best things, which positions them above their inferiors on value's vertical dimension. Moreover, those "best things" are superior to other things not only in their worth but in their power as well.

The simplest way I know to characterize this religious view of things is to say that it is an "ontological hierarchy." Ontology here refers to nothing more complicated than things that exist (Greek: *on* = being), while hierarchy recognizes that among the things that exist, some are better than others. These better things naturally present themselves imagistically as being above the rest, given the laws of spatial symbolism, which are not arbitrary but are drawn from the structure of the human body. Our heads are more important than our feet, as proven by the fact that if we had to amputate one or the other, we would not debate.

This seems straightforward, but I belabor it because one problem postmodernism has created for the study of religion is to deprive us of the language we need to say what needs to be said. Here at the very outset we have a case in point. Postmoderns continue to validate the word "ontology" while decisively changing its meaning, but metaphysics—which ontology converts into as soon as the things denoted are positioned in relation to one another—is immediately suspect. And hierarchy even more so. I am banking in this statement on our having advanced to the point where we can winnow that suspicion and stop equating hierarchies with masculine thinking and oppression, for in point of fact it is impossible to think—not just think masculinely but to think at all—without acknowledging not only the existence of hierarchies but their appropriateness in certain contexts. Like it or not, we

live in a hierarchical world, wherein gradations not only in size, strength, and complexity, but also in intelligence, skills, and compassion confront us at every turn. So we speak of higher education, higher mathematics, the higher things of life, and our superiors. We needed to go through a period of reproaching hierarchies indiscriminately in order to see how destructive they can be and have been, but I am assuming that we are ready to move beyond that stage in order to target the enemy more accurately. The enemy is oppressive, destructive hierarchies, not hierarchies *per se*. A loving family with small children is a benevolent hierarchy, as is a well-ordered classroom.² To revert to James—who got us into hierarchies right off because religion turns on their existence—God (in whom superlative power and goodness converge) provides us with the paradigm of beneficent hierarchy.

What did modernity do to that hierarchy?

MODERNITY: THE HIERARCHY COLLAPSED

The answer is obvious. Modernity collapsed it to its this-worldly base. We used to refer to this as the rejection of supernaturalism, but now phrases like “the death of God” and the collapse of the vertical dimension are more common. “If anything characterizes ‘modernity,’ ” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported several years back, “it is a loss of faith in transcendence, in a reality that encompasses but surpasses our quotidian affairs” (9 January 1978:18).

The earthquake that effected that ontic collapse was modern science. Prior to its rise, people looked to Revelation for their disclosures of reality, which disclosures typically registered heavens above, hells below, and the earth between. In less pictorial language, the Revelations testified to some version of what Lovejoy called the Great Chain of Being, stretching from the least existent to the *ens perfectissimum*, which (as he tells us) “the greater number of subtler speculative minds and great religious teachers [everywhere],’ through the Middle Ages and down to the late eighteenth century [accepted] without question . . .” (26, 59). Ernst Cassirer bears him out. “The most important legacy of ancient speculation,” he writes, was “the concept and general picture of a graduated cosmos” (9). The successes of modern science, however, persuaded people that science’s reports about reality were more reliable than those of Holy Writ. An intellectual historian has estimated that already by the

²For the consequences of 1960s experiments in freeing education of hierarchies, see Swidler.

nineteenth century, Westerners were more confident that chemical elements exist than that any of the distinctive things the Bible speaks of exist. And science cannot register transcendence, or the vertical dimension. Science monitors observables, especially as quantifiable. It cannot handle values, meanings, purposes, qualities, invisibles, and our superiors.³ As all of these six things lie on the vertical dimension, which science cannot touch, it is not surprising that that dimension collapsed when science displaced revelation as reality's arbiter. If you confine your gaze to a horizontally fixed telescope, things that are at right angles to that telescope are not going to divulge themselves.

I hurry over this point because we are reasonably on top of it (though on the conscious level only; instinctively it remains one of those things we know but never learn). We do, however, need to notice the way philosophy conformed itself to science's ontological reduction by reducing its epistemology concomitantly. Kant oversaw that project. His insistence that the categories of human understanding mesh only with impressions that have an impact on us through our physical senses debarred those categories from service elsewhere, and (by Kant's explicit claim) turned metaphysics into "the science of the boundaries of human reason." Kant's uncharacteristic emotionally-charged descent from reason into sarcasm in dealing with Swedenborg stemmed from his clear realization that "should the philosopher make room in his philosophy for even one [of Swedenborg's reports] of spiritual manifestations. . . what astonishing consequences would follow!" (112-113). Astonishing indeed; nothing short of the collapse of the entire epistemological machinery he was working out to meet modernity's requirements.⁴ Phenomenology followed in Kant's wake, and reformulated his cutoff into "bracketing" questions of existence. But it is time to turn to the impact of all this on religious studies.

MODERNITY'S CONSEQUENCES FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

The most conspicuous effect modernity had on our profession was to

³Strictly speaking, this statement needs to be qualified somewhat. The necessary qualifications, which do not affect my general point here, can be found in the opening chapter of Smith 1976 and 1989.

⁴For full discussion of Kant's struggle with the paranormal generally and Swedenborg in particular, see Kriven.

cause us to distance ourselves from our subject. For the most part, we now project religion onto other people whom we study objectively.

A little satire won't harm us here, and John Updike is up to the job. Those of us who have read *Roger's Version*, Updike's thinly veiled spoof of the Harvard Divinity School, will recall the moment when Dale, a young computer hack who is also a Jesus freak, corners Roger in his Divinity School office to solicit his help in getting a grant to prove God's existence via computers and the new physics. In the course of his pitch he drops his guard and lets Roger know what he, Dale, thinks the Divinity School doing by way of contrast.

What you call religion around here is what other people would call sociology. That's how you teach it, right? Everything from the Gospels to *The Golden Bough*, Martin Luther to Martin Luther King, it all happened, it's historical fact, it's anthropology, it's ancient texts, it's humanly *interesting*, right? But that's so safe. How can you go wrong? Not even the worst atheist in the world denies that people have been religious. They built these temples, followed these taboos, created these traditions, et cetera. So what? Your average normal cheerful nonbeliever says it was all poetic, pathetic foolishness, like a lot of other aspects of human history. I looked over your catalogue before I came, and studying all that stuff doesn't say *anything*, doesn't *commit* you to anything, except some perfectly harmless, humane cultural history. What I'm coming to talk to you about is God as a *fact*, a fact about to burst upon us, right up out of Nature. (19)

Updike is burlesquing of course, but, as we all recognize, only in part. Departments of Bible have become departments of religion which have become departments of religious studies, for though religion is a touchy subject for both government and the university,⁵ it is not easy to fault *study*. So we pour our departmental energies into features of religion that have objective, empirical grounding—philology, archaeology, historical influences and textual parallels—and bracket the question of whether the beliefs that generated those fallouts were mistaken or true. Theology pursued systematically rather than historically seems a breach of academic protocol, and philosophy of religion backs away from talk that seeks to penetrate directly into God's nature, to talk about God-talk. God-talk is talk that is useful for religious purposes whatever we think of those purposes, as distinct from talk that is useful for other purposes.

The phenomenological *epoche* that was earlier mentioned has abet-

⁵For the university because "the university is rooted in the scientific method," as Steven Muller noted on being inaugurated President of The Johns Hopkins University.

ted this distancing act. As phenomenologists of religion we neither affirm nor deny; we merely table the question of whether the gods our students study exist. Our rationale for this move is that bracketing our beliefs enables us to enter more fully into their beliefs, but I am not confident that it works that way. Darrol Bryant has written that "when the injunction not to enforce [our] frame of reference in studying other peoples and religions . . . is transformed into an ontology of ignorance concerning that towards which the believer walks, we refuse to walk the crucial second mile where real compassion and new dimensions of understanding might arise," and it does strike me as curious that when it is a work of art that we propose to access, we counsel "voluntary suspension of disbelief," whereas in accessing a religious standpoint we counsel the opposite. If I may enter a personal note on this point, I have (over the years) been "charged" with belonging to all seven of the traditions I describe in *The Religions of Man*⁶—charged with belonging formally to four, and at heart to the other three—but it never occurred to me to doubt that the objects of their devotion exist. I do not understand how agnosticism could have augmented my empathy.

When we turn from studying other peoples to our own traditions, biblical studies provides perhaps the best index as to how we have been affected. The New Testament scholar Marcus Borg speaks so pointedly to the issue that I shall quote him at length.

To a large extent, the defining characteristic of biblical scholarship in the modern period is the attempt to understand Scripture without reference to another world. Born in the Enlightenment, modern biblical scholarship has sought to understand its subject matter in accord with the . . . image of reality that dominates the modern mind.

In the battle between supernaturalism and rationalism which reached its peak in the early 1800's, the reality of the other world. . . was essentially denied . . . Explanations . . . within the framework of a one-dimensional understanding of reality were offered for texts which spoke of "supernatural" phenomena. . . . Texts reporting miracles were either understood psychosomatically or as mistaken perceptions of quite "natural" events . . .

In our century, the aggressive denial of the twofoldness of reality has largely been replaced by a "bracketing" or ignoring of the question. The major sub-disciplines which have emerged in the past several decades are those which can be done without reference to other levels of reality: studies of the way the biblical writers redacted the tradition

⁶Forthcoming in 1991 in revised edition and inclusive gender under the title *The World's Religions*.

which they received, the form and functions of various literary and oral genres, the rhetorical structure of texts, social factors shaping or reflected in texts, the development of early Christian tradition expressed in the texts, etc. All share in common the fact that they focus on the "this worldly" aspects of the texts: their sources, forms, functions, social and historical "rootedness," etc. They treat the kinds of questions and claims that are intelligible within the framework of the modern world-view.

Borg grants that biblical texts *as texts* are completely this-worldly, but they often speak about another reality which "in modern scholarship . . . is seldom the subject of study." Hermeneutical approaches to both the Old and New Testaments have stressed their historical and this-worldly import. Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible has been dominated by the "covenant-historical" model which holds that what is important is "not what the Old Testament might say about another world, but its concern with historical existence in this world." This emphasis flows partly from the fact that the Hebrew Bible is organized around a historical narrative, but it "is also because . . . in the modern period. . . the visible world of space and time . . . is the world we think of as 'real'."

New Testament scholarship exhibits the same dynamic. Here the influential figure has been Rudolf Bultmann, whose classic essay on the Bible's "three-story universe" was taken as a call to read the Bible existentially rather than ontologically. This meshes with Karl Barth's confessional theology, which intentionally withdraws from the empirical domain and makes no metaphysical claims.

Having veered (via Bultmann) from biblical studies into theology, I shall let short comments on Paul Tillich and Process Theology conclude this section.

Tillich gave us a way to finesse ontology by redefining our subject as "ultimate concern." He was himself seriously invested in the objective pole of that concern, but the times have been against him and its subjective pole has all but preempted his definition. Religion is whatever concerns a person or a people most. This can, of course, be the Living God, but equally it can be nationalism or financial success. Politically, Tillich's move was adroit; it keeps us in business, for almost everyone has something their lives prioritize. But shifting religion's ballast from James' objective claim to a subjective stance has opened the door to what Joseph Kitagawa describes as "the trivialization of religion to such an extent that almost anything seems to fit under its rubric" (13). And some people feel co-opted. Because religion is for them a bad word rather than a good one, they resent being tarred as religious simply

because they give their lives to something. We have the anecdote of Norman O. Brown jumping to his feet and shaking his fist at Tillich following his lecture at Wesleyan University as he shouted, "Your definition deprives me of my God-given right to be an atheist!"

As for Process Theology, it adheres to ontology, and to hierarchy as well, for it positions God almost infinitely above other occasions in power and worth. But it insists that the line between God and the world be drawn within nature so that we can be naturalistic theists (see Smith 1989). To posit a reality that is categorically unlike nature would reopen the door to miracles, which modernity will not countenance. So God must not be an exception to the metaphysical categories that describe the empirical world. God is their chief exemplification.

As a transition to postmodernism, let me summarize the impact of modernism on religious studies through the words, again, of Darrol Bryant:

The problem with the modern study of religion is that it unfolds with a *modern* view of reality that is, in principle, hostile to the truth known in religion. For in the modern view, reality is wholly explicable from within, there is no Beyond that must be appealed to understand what is. Nor is there any Beyond that is mediated in the religious life of humankind. How then, can we understand religion when the implicit ontology or view of things that we bring to the study of religion rules out *a priori* the ontologies of the religious traditions within which religion unfolds?

POSTMODERNISM'S REJECTION OF WORLDVIEWS IN PRINCIPLE

If modernity rejected the traditional multi-storied worldview, postmodernism rejects all worldviews. It rejects the scientific, one-dimensional worldview into which modernity slipped because it recognizes it to be not scientific but scientistic. And it rejects worldviews generally, largely for political reasons. For if a worldview is taken to be an objective report of the way the world is, it will be privileged over the way the world looks from other angles of vision. It will marginalize alternative perspectives and the people who subscribe to them.

So postmodernity differs from modernity, but it does nothing to reinstate the ontological transcendence that James cited as religion's generic posit. Instead, it offers us reality as kaleidoscopic. With every turn of the wheel of time and place, the kaleidoscope revolves and its pieces gestalt anew. Beyond these endlessly shifting gestalts there is no appeal, and as far as we can tell, nothing.

Call it historicism, call it constructivism, call it socio-linguistic holism, call it neo-pragmatism, this is what postmodernity comes down to. It is ambiguity elevated to the level of apotheosis. And thereby rendered self-contradictory, I remark in passing, but of what use is consistency when another turn of the kaleidoscope relativizes the original take. I mentioned politics as postmodernism's catalyst, and this is certainly what gives it its appeal. Who wants to challenge a position that purports to champion the oppressed, and in fact does champion them? But pluralism gives postmodernism stature also. When people lived in tribes and cloistered civilizations, they were not aware of having views of reality; there was, for them, simply the way the world was. Worldviews did not come to attention until global shoulder-rubbing confronted people with alternative versions thereof. But if human history opened with only the *world* (views of it having not yet come to light), and if for an interval both sides of the polarity were acknowledged (the *world* and *views* thereof), with postmodernism, the world vanishes. Only *views* remain. No world. You will forgive me if I insert a quote from Mirabai, India's greatest medieval saint, a woman: "I have felt the swaying of the elephant's shoulders, and now you want me to climb on a jackass? Try to be serious."

The epistemology that banishes the world is commonly called holism. Theoretical holism argues for the organic character of thought: concepts cannot be understood in isolation; their meaning derives from the theoretical systems in which they are embedded. Practical holism goes on from there to argue that, because thinking invariable 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. In considering an idea, not only must we take into account the conceptual gestalt of which it is a part; we must also consider Wittgenstein's "forms of life," and Heidegger's historical horizons and ways of being-in-the-world, whose "micro-practices" (Foucault) give those gestalts their final meaning.

I referred to this holistic epistemology during a conference in Malaysia last summer, and when I assumed my place in the audience to listen to the next speaker, I found myself staring at a visual metaphor for what I had been talking about. Kuala Lumpur is in the tropics, and the stage was a veritable garden, not of potted flowers, but of flowering trees set in huge clay urns. I saw the visible parts of those trees as representing theoretical holism whose components are in explicit view, while their invisible roots represented practical holism's subliminal micropractices on which theoretical holism feeds. There remained the clay tubs in

which the trees were set—clear index of holism's deficiency, for potted soil is quickly exhausted. Insulated from a viable ecosystem, it dies. Gazing on that metaphor for an artificial and unviable epistemology, I found myself wishing for Nietzsche's hammer. I wanted to smash those pots that draw hermeneutic circles around historical horizons and forms-of-life, as if they were isolated and self-enclosed—shut off from other forms of life, and from the trans-human world as well. The central conclusion of Wittgenstein's later years, David Pears tells us, was that "there is no way of getting between language and the world and finding out whether there is a general fit between them" (39), and Richard Rorty says that twentieth century philosophy in general is ending with "the sense of humanity as . . . an historical being . . . whose activities in all spheres is to be judged *not by its relation to non-human reality* but by comparison and contrast with its earlier achievements and with utopian futures" (748).⁷ I repeat: I wanted to break open those pots which left to themselves would stifle and kill their trees. I wanted to restore those trees to the "entangled banks" that Darwin so loved—ecosystems without restriction that extend, ultimately, to include everything.

Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The innner—what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with winds of homecoming. (Rilke:43)

POSTMODERNISM'S CONSEQUENCES FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

If modernism led us to play down religion's transcendent referent where we did not deny it outright, postmodernism is doing something equally disturbing. It is reshaping language in ways that make it difficult to consider the *possibility* of ontological transcendence without being charged with speaking ineptly. If we wish to ask—open-endedly but seriously—whether a reality answering to James' power-worth splice

⁷In another formulation he tells us that we have "replaced the distinction between appearance and reality with the distinction between ways of describing the world which we find useful for certain purposes and those which we find useful for other purposes." From an unpublished paper on "Heidegger and the American Cultural Left."

exists, we are blocked from the question by being told that we are off on the wrong foot in framing the issue as we have. Our wording betrays "metaphysical tendencies," metaphysics here being tagged to repression. It is trapped in a this-world/other-world binary bind. It slopes toward "realism," which "reifies" its referents and turns God into a "being among beings," which would lead us to seek its "essence" through "referential language" that purports to "correspond." As all those words and phrases are dismissive epithets for postmoderns, a language is being woven that places theism in double jeopardy. Theists are made to feel that before they get to the substance of their claim, they violate language in the way they propose to state it. The charge is not identical with the positivists' contention a generation ago that religious assertions are meaningless, but there is a family resemblance.

Wittgenstein and Heidegger were the chief architects of postmodern philosophy, and attempts to provide foundations for science initiated their moves. Wittgenstein moved to his forms-of-life after concluding that science could not be grounded in the Vienna Circle's indubitable certainties of logic and sense data because such certainties do not exist. And the same search for foundations for science drove Heidegger's teacher, Husserl, to phenomenology. Heidegger himself, though, concluded that Husserl's transcendental ego was artificially aloof, so he seized that ego and plunged it into the lived world, converting it into *dasein*. Despite their different routes, Heidegger and Wittgenstein intersect on the common ground of holism. The strength of their convergent moves is their break with subjectivism, modernity's entronement of the Cartesian ego. In making that ego its epistemological starting point, modernity handed individuals hunting licenses to use the things they encountered for their own ends. Heidegger is at his very best in reversing this approach. In contrast to Leibniz's monads which lack windows, *dasein* is little else but windows.⁸ And the things those windows open onto are not to be exploited, but tended, cared for, nurtured, and shepherded. Having enabled those things to be, *dasein's* stance toward them should be one of reverential solicitude.

This is magnificent counsel, infinitely relevant for reversing the course of modernity's rapacious pillaging that endangers our planet. No wonder so many of us claim Heidegger as a religious ally. But as Charles Taylor pointed out at the Applied Heidegger Conference in Berkeley in September 1989, Heidegger's reverential stance toward the

⁸I am indebted to Hubert Dreyfus for this comparison.

things of our world is logically separable from other features of his philosophy, and the question for religious thinkers is whether those other features favor or occlude ontological transcendence. It depends on which Heidegger you read, and what you make of his entire corpus. The early Heidegger does not work in our favor. The closest thing to God that emerges in that totally holistic Heidegger is social practices, it being they that make us, not we ourselves. In that context, Being is no more than the region in which theology works ontically, which makes relativism theology's last word.⁹ In the late Heidegger, however, Being assumes an identity of its own, and gives itself to be known by *dasein* in the poetic names through which we address it. Heidegger himself holds back from some of the names religious texts propose, but as this Heidegger allows for a referent our terms can approximate, he opens the door to discussions as to which terms fit best. If I am right in characterizing Heidegger in this way, he helped to turn modernism into postmodernism, but held back from the latter's unqualified holism.

As for Deconstructionism's part in postmodernism, there is nothing wrong with its project in principle. This essay is itself deconstructionist in seeking to identify the conceptual decisions from which modernism and postmodernism were constructed to the end of asking if we want to remain under their aegis. But Derrida's disinterest in *reconstructing* (after deconstructing has done its job) pulls against the wholeness that religion—and life itself, for that matter—reaches out for. His strength lies in his reminder that there is a surd in every woodpile; no sociolinguistic construct can pull everything together. This sounds promising in suggesting that there is *something* beyond constructs that stands judgment on them. But if we pick up on that point and try to ask seriously what that something is, we are advised that every answer will be a (deconstructable) construct, which sucks us back into holism's Black Hole. To an archer who remains thus under cover, there is no reply.

THIS AUSPICIOUS MOMENT: THE CONVERGENCE OF SCIENCE AND THE WISDOM TRADITIONS

My take on what has happened in and to our discipline has not been a cheerful one. The Autumn 1989 issue of *The American Scholar* reports that "much of modern theology is a deep embarrassment to anyone committed to the life of the mind," adding that "theologians them-

⁹Cf. Heidegger's 1927-28 lecture on "Phenomenology and Theology." Heinrich Ott unwisely bought into that lecture.

selves. . . speak of professional meetings at the American Academy of Religion as a place where one [has] to rummage around in the garbage cans in search of food" (557). Given this bleak assessment, it may come as a surprise to find me saying that I consider this an auspicious moment for the study of religion. The reason is the way science is conspiring with the wisdom traditions to restore the hierarchical universe—which is also the hierophanous universe—to its rightful place as the generic religious posit. I say "science and the wisdom traditions" rather than "science and religion" because the word "religion" includes its institutional expressions, and institutions are invariably ambiguous. Ramakrishna likened religion to a cow that kicks, but gives milk too. If people think they can winnow religion's institutional record more precisely than that, they are welcome to the project. For now, I focus on the way the winnowed wisdom of the human race, as impounded in the "data banks" of the world's enduring sacred texts, has seen reality.

James epitomized its vision as hierarchical, and this is the way science too sees things. Nature presents us with a hierarchy of size: the mega-world of the astronomers, the macro-world of everyday experience, the micro-world of classical physics, and the quantum world that is smaller yet. And there are levels of complexity: Aristotle's mineral, plant, animal, and rational names them in one way, while the disciplines of physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology refine his list.

Two things define a level: (1) Each has its distinctive population; physicists deal with particles, but not with chemical compounds or biological cells; (2) each population is governed by its own distinctive laws; Newton's laws of motion do not hold for Brownian movements. In addition, two principles apply to levels: (a) where complexity is the measure, causation is both ways: from the higher to the lower, and *vice versa*; (b) higher populations cannot be wholly accounted for in terms of lower ones. Reductionism doesn't work.

At some point the levels of science stop. Psychosomatic medicine provides a useful case study as to where the cutoff lies, for it shows science now acknowledging a level of reality—mind—that it formerly ignored. The influences of mind and emotions on the body's immune system can be partially tracked, for thought and feelings are within our purview. The religious question is whether there are additional echelons on the scale of being whose measure is complexity and intrinsic worth. Should they exist, we would be able to sense them only dimly, though momentarily, for they would exceed us in the way our minds exceed the minds of dogs.

Scientists who are also thoughtful human beings are open to the

prospect of additional orders. "We know there's more," Victor Weisskopf once exclaimed to me at M.I.T.; "we just don't know how to get at it." The geniuses of the wisdom traditions developed ways of getting at it, but this is not the place to go into their prayer-and-fastings, their mediational techniques, and their transcendental dialectics. What we want to know is the "more" those spiritual exercises disclosed. Universally it has consisted of registers of being that exceed us by every criterion of worth we know, and doubtless some we know not. Or possibly a single register. When I asked my Syracuse colleague Bill Alston whether he subscribed to a hierarchical ontology, he countered shrewdly, "How many levels?" God and the world he was prepared to grant; additional levels met with his reserve. I have myself found three ontological levels—four if we include the everyday world—surfacing so regularly cross-culturally that they look as if they reflect underlying structures of some sort.

<u>Spiritual Personality</u>	<u>Realities They Focus</u>	<u>Institutional Expression</u>
<u>Types</u>	<u>On</u>	
Mystic	Godhead	Initiatic orders
Monotheist	God	The Great Traditions
Polytheist	The Spirit Realm	Folk Religion
Atheist	Everyday World	Unorganized

For now, I settle for Alston's two levels and table the others.

The domain that exceeds us is invisible, and this emerges in the second, complementing definition of religion that William James offers in his *Varieties*: "In its broadcast terms, religion says that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in rightful relations to it" (59). Modern science, materialistic to the core, rejected invisibles out of hand, and we are still so under its sway that it remains almost impossible for us to take seriously the prospect that there are things that do not need physical underpinnings. But postmodern science is moving closer to the traditional view on this score. Ninety per cent of the "matter" in our universe is now judged to be "invisible"; some say ninety-nine per cent. By invisible, scientists mean that it does not impact any of their instruments. By "matter," which they place in quotation marks here, they mean that it attracts conventional matter. The only kind of attraction they know at that level of magnitude is gravitational, but for all they know the agent could be Aristotle's Unmoved Mover.

The invisible can be scientifically tracked by another route. On the micro-level, the strength of forces relates inversely to size. For example,

“the amount of energy associated with light corpuscles increases *as the size is reduced* . . . The energy necessary to create a proton is contained in a light pulse only about 10^{-13} centimeter in diameter. And the energy of a million protons would be contained in a light pulse a millions times smaller” (Young: 2). One of the tributes the Qur’ān pays to Muhammad is that “he did not begrudge the unseen” (53:11). Now that science, too, has stopped begrudging it, perhaps it will not be long before we academic religionists stop begrudging it as well. But we should be aware of what that means. It means that (a) there is an invisible order, (b) with its own population and ways of behaving, (c) which has the capacity to intervene in orders that are below it in ways that are comparable to the way anxiety can influence the functioning of a digestive track to cause ulcers. In plain words, it means reinstating the supernatural. I was taught that supernaturalism is the ultimate proscription in our profession, for it would ostracize us from the university. Science, though, which now seems to point beyond itself at every turn, has rehabilitated the word for me. Science flings open, not just windows in *agguornamento*, but skylights onto orders of reality that could transcend us.

Of course, nothing in science can prove that those orders are transcendent in excelling us in intrinsic worth—in intelligence and compassion for example. But have we forgotten our Kierkegaard, who points out that though we think we would like proofs, they would dehumanize us by removing our prerogative to decide? Because the last two centuries have worked to decide for us that supernaturalism is *outré*, I enter four problems that currently baffle scientists completely, and I suspect will continue to do so because their answers lie on levels of reality that science cannot access.

One concerns the nature of matter, which invades our material realm disguised as either wave or particle, but which refuses (on our level) to remove those guises to disclose its actual identity.

The second is the nature of life, for as R. C. Lewontin points out, “despite [our] knowledge of the structure of protein molecules down to the very placement of their atoms in exact three-dimensional space, we do not have the faintest idea of what the rules are for folding them up into their natural [living] form” (18).

The third is morphology; what causes the cells of an organism, all endowed with the same DNA, to multiply in ways that produce different kinds of cells for brain, bone, muscles, and hair? This is the issue Rupert Sheldrake’s morphogenetic fields addresses.

Finally, how do biological species arise? Darwin thought he

answered that question, and most of us have been schooled to agree that (give or take a few adjustments like punctuational equilibrium) he succeeded. I think that we are mistaken in so assuming. Evidence from all of the seven fields that Darwinians appeal to—the fossil record, population breeding, natural selection, embryology and vestigial remains, biochemistry, biogenesis, and mathematical probability—is turning against their claim (Smith 1989: ch. 8). Arthur Koestler was no creationist, but already a decade ago he was calling Darwinism a citadel in ruins.

I most want to urge a return to the ontological truth claims of our field as impounded in the world's great religious traditions, a return in which we do not underestimate their enduring validity. At minimum, this would give our students the opportunity to choose which world they want to live in—modern, postmodern, or religious—for as things now stand, the university does not offer them the third of these options. How much the alternative can mean to some of them I shall let one of my recent students attest through a note he appended to his final examination:

Well, that's about it. I'd like to say, though, that this class has been absolutely incredible. I learned a lot but I also had fun. You took something usually relegated to conversations at 4 a.m. with a friend over a steaming pizza and dove headfirst into it, and in the process taught us how to swim through life a bit. Thanks for teaching us. It wasn't a class. It was an adventure.

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