Basic Concepts
of Biblical Religion
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Basic Concepts
of Biblical Religion:

Pain, History, Unanswerable Questions

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Prologue

We live in a time when, for many in society, God is missing or incredible. For Christians, this climate penetrates the life of the Church everywhere. The world can ignore the Church, but the Church cannot ignore the world. Some seek to revive the Christian world in which God was everywhere available, even if that world has to be confined to a subculture that must defend itself against the larger culture. They would revive what we think we remember of the scholastic glory of eight hundred years ago. Others, within the Church as without, try to come to terms with the brokenness of human existence, included in which is our apparent abandonment. I think the second course is the better of the two.

What may come as a surprise is that there are resources within the tradition for doing that. One can find the natural complaint in the Psalms. The beginning of Psalm 42 is only one example; there are many others. So the condition is biblical. More theoretical than the Bible is a passage in Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Translations of the whole commentary are scarce, but this passage has attracted enough alarm that it is translated in more than one place. At issue is whether it is appropriate to use "I am who I am" (qui est, in Lombard's Latin) as a name of God. That question already has problems, but leave those for later. Aquinas answers,

> When we proceed into God through the way of negation [*via remotionis*, not *via negationis*], first we deny of him all corporeal things [or corporeal realities]; and next, we even deny intellectual things as they are found in creatures, like goodness and wisdom, and then there remains in our understanding only the fact that God exists, and nothing further, so that it suffers a kind of confusion. Lastly, however, we even remove

from him his very existence, as it is in creatures, and then our understanding remains in a certain darkness of ignorance according to which, as Dionysius says, we are best united to God in this present state of life; and this is a sort of thick darkness in which God is said to dwell.[1]

John Courtney Murray summarizes Aquinas's position:

"One thing about God remains completely unknown in this life, namely, what God is" (*Commentary on Romans*, chapter 1, lesson 6). He states the truth so often and so uncompromisingly that some of his commentators have become a bit alarmed at the patent poverty of the knowledge of God he permits to man in this life.[2]

What Rocca translates as existence and Murray as is-ness is in the Latin just *esse*, the infinitive of the verb to-be. Murray translates the Hebrew of Exodus 3.14, in answer to Moses's question for God's name, as "I shall be with you as who I am shall I be with you" — which names our anxiety as much as it does God himself.

The "existence" of God is not like the existence of creatures, and it would be better to call it something other than "existence," so that we can then say, without equivocating on the meanings of *exist*, "God does not exist. For reasons best known to himself, he chooses not to exist." Or we could just say, "God does not exist; he acts." That puts us where we are: in the dark (as Aquinas said) and, naturally, somewhat anxious. It is that condition that I would like to unravel in this book. There are more ways to God than just the *via negativa*, but the other ways are all too often used to shield believers from the via negativa. The other ways have become perplexed, and there is wide (though hardly universal) recognition that one source of problems is evasion of the via negativa. We come to those late in the book. There is a great deal more to the basic concepts of biblical religion than just the hiddenness of God, and with some preparation, it may become possible to welcome that dark hiddenness.

[1] Gregory Rocca, "Aquinas on God-Talk: Hovering Over the Abyss," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993) 641, pp. 648–649.) Aquinas's Latin can be found at http://www .corpusthomisticum.org/snp1008.html. Super Sent., lib. 1 d. 8 q. 1 a. 1 ad 4.

[2] John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God*, p. 70. He translates the passage from *Super Sententiarum* on his p. 72.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Theology Perplexed

To say that Christian theology has been perplexed for the last few centuries is like observing that the world is round: everybody knows it. Yet there is no general agreement about *how* we came into our present perplexities. There is considerable literature on the problem. And there is no consensus on how to proceed from here.

One example of the genre is Louis Dupré's *Passage to Modernity*.[1] He examines the history from the medieval period to the present, for the most part going back no further than medieval Scholasticism. Dupré poses the problem as one of explaining how the medieval synthesis (meaning Aquinas, preeminently) gave God, man, and the world easy access to one another. In the centuries that followed, it became increasingly difficult to make sense of any of them in relation to the others.

Many have told how we came into the modern world. Lest the present history seem unduly presumptuous, let me make my approach clear in its contingent origins. It is not as if I had more insight than scholars of greater learning. Like most students, I took courses in many disciplines and subdisciplines of philosophy and theology. Problems in one class could sometimes be solved with concepts from another class, concepts that were overlooked in the first class, often because of disciplinary comity agreements. The history of philosophy and theology has been divided up, and the sub-

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[1] Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity; An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

disciplines don't always speak to each other. This division of labor has been forced to some extent by the explosion of the technical literature. It is increasingly impossible to be familiar with it all.

One thesis of the present inquiry is that at least some problems in the history of Christian theology in the last eight hundred years could be made much easier with ideas from biblical scholarship and the history of religions. This approach has been made possible by the progress in those two disciplines in the last two centuries. The Christianity that we thought we knew and understood has been radically re-understood in biblical studies, and the changes have consequences for the history of philosophical theology on the way to the modern world. There has also been progress beyond biblical studies, specifically in philosophy. Dupré got about as far as the seventeenth century and pronounced himself (and the people he studied) at an impasse. Out of that impasse in the nineteenth century, new approaches in philosophy have given us resources that the seventeenth and eighteenth-century problematics didn't have.

There are two stories in the background, and they are interwoven. One is the career of radical monotheism, world-affirming historical religion, historical-covenantal religion, or just biblical religion. The other is the career of philosophy in the West, from the pre-Socratics and Plato to the twentieth century. Both the religious and the philosophical histories have in other tellings filled many volumes, and we shall presuppose a general familiarity with both stories, including here only a few features that matter for the present argument.

Let me begin with an anecdote by way of illustration of our situation and our problems. Once, after I enjoyed the privilege of listening to a class of high-school philosophy students describe their reading (Marlowe's *Faust*), their instructor asked me, with anticipatory canary-feathers all over his mustache, "Is there a God? Does God exist?" or something like that.[2] I replied that that is the wrong place to begin. First, you have to answer two much more basic questions. (1) Is human life a part of nature alone, without history, or is human life fully understandable only in terms of history (of which nature is only a part)? (2) What do you want to do about the pains of life? How do you want to handle them? Are you interested in putting some sort of positive construction on them, or are they just barren,

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[2] I am indebted to Gary Parlapiano for the invitation to visit his daughter's class.

to be avoided if possible? Do the pains of life spoil life? Or is life good in spite of the pains? Is life good even in full view of its pains? Can the pains be integrated into a good life?

There are many ways to approach Christian philosophical theology. One could just rely on intuition, trusting that unexamined presuppositions will not cause trouble. One could examine those presuppositions. And since biblical religion is a form of covenant, one could focus on the original circumstances of covenant. Intuition can take care of itself well enough. It is because our presuppositions are forgotten, not spelled out, or misunderstood, that we are in trouble today.

Our state would be reminiscent of a phase before a paradigm shift, but it has been in this phase for centuries. We have unsolved problems, and we are not sure how to proceed. It is my contention that we have neglected some of the available resources in the tradition. They could help if we can begin to re-understand our history. I certainly don't claim to present a new paradigm whole and complete. Such claims are usually just marketing hyperbole. But if we can see central elements of the tradition in a new way, we can make sense of them in the philosophical terms of our own time.

One cannot really blame the philosophy instructor who asked me whether God "exists," because his question reflects ideas that are everywhere in culture today, even in academic philosophy of religion. The term 'God' makes sense (or people think it does), and it makes sense to ask whether one of these "gods" exists. What is a God, "the" God? An undetectable entity that interferes with the natural course of events to the advantage of those who think it exists and the disadvantage of those who don't? That idea, too, is available everywhere, though there may be people secular enough not to know or care. The undetectable entity etc. is like a human person: it knows as we know, is conscious as we are conscious (but it never sleeps), and it knows *everything*, even the future. You can talk to it, and it hears and listens, just as we do. The "God" is a human writ large. It makes itself known by interfering with the natural course of events (hence some people think there are problems with science here), and it can talk to people (though the model for this is hazy, and no mechanisms are supplied). Never mind that much more sophisticated, more cautious ways of thinking about God are available in the tradition. This is the "model" of God that we think has become perplexed. Yet it is not as old as it ap-

pears to be. Indeed, it may be only a little older than the modern world, and the biblical and patristic understanding of God may subtly be rather different. Those who persist in faith and Christian observance do better than this crude model of God in their *practice* but rarely have much better *explanations*.

We live in a time when few are familiar with the Bible, and fewer still know its history. How many begin Isaiah every year on the first Sunday of Advent, dwelling with the king of prophets all the way to Pentecost? How many take Jeremiah in course readings through Lent (or start Genesis, the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets a few weeks after Epiphany (remember Septuagesima?), finishing sometime in late Summer or early Fall)? And the New Testament throughout? That is the lectionary tradition for the Daily Office.[3] A few do it, but it is strange to the culture. The Bible used to be familiar enough — in the English-speaking world, in the Authorized Version — so that a few words of allusion could suffice for a poet or a novelist to conjure up an entire image and beyond it a world, as context for some project in modern literature. To be sure, this was not from reading the Office but from using the Bible as the basic text for acquiring literacy. Often no other books were available.

How many notice in Genesis that some stories get repeated or have non-biblical parallels? A patriarch passes his wife off as his sister (three times) in order not to be killed by the local sheik? Joshua winnows his army of ten thousand down to three hundred, a story told also of Alexander? Or discrepancies regarding the divine Name (Exodus 6.3, Genesis 15.7)? Anachronisms? Changes in the Law?[4]

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre conjures up a nightmare scenario of loss in which only fragments of science survive, little integrated, less understood, and unable to make progress in understanding the natural world. His vision is shocking to our age, for we know science well, we know how to integrate the sciences, and we are making progress unimaginable a few centuries ago. Popular knowledge of the sciences is widespread; they are the chief source of our worldview. We approach everything in naturalistic

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[3] Catholics call it the Liturgy of the Hours.

[4] A concise but fairly full list of problematic passages can be found in H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament* New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963 (originally published in 1950).

terms, an instinct that runs far deeper than one might suspect. Yet what if it were otherwise, what if the scientific heritage were stymied, fragmented, divided among quarreling parties, cut off from its roots in life and in history? What if it just pasted labels on phenomena, without real explanation, much like the phlogiston theory of combustion?

MacIntyre's scenario was deliberately chosen to be shocking because unimaginable in regard to science. His claim was that the analogy applies to ethics today. Like such an imagined forgetting of science, the Western tradition has lately forgotten most of how ethics works. Our focus in this essay is not on ethics but on biblical religion itself.

I think we are at a point of opportunity, the chance to look at the history of Christian philosophical theology from a new perspective. Sometimes progress can be made where before a tradition was at an impasse when some idea well-attested in the tradition but overlooked is retrieved from its obscurity and marginality, given a new context and made central. A changed starting point can make all the difference in the world.

1.2 Basic Life Orientation

Though not a widely used term, what would "basic life orientation" (BLO) mean? Not exactly the same thing as faith, but related. It does not get much attention from philosophy. We open with a concept that is not well understood, and we shall end on one. But something like basic life orientation is what philosophy of religion is called to investigate. The term has an intuitive usability, and so we shall use it. Here, I limit the inquiry to BLO in historical-covenantal-transcendental "religion."

Basic Life Orientation must in some sense embody a comportment toward *ultimate reality* (u-r), another vague and open concept. It should be acknowledged at the outset that people do not agree on what ultimate reality is. Christians and Buddhists don't agree, for only one example, and I would like to keep the disagreements cordial — but also candid: the disagreements appear to be real. Readers can multiply examples easily.

Where we speak of BLO, Edward Hobbs used another term in this role, *understanding*.

> By an *understanding*, I mean a relationship one takes up toward one's existence; or a construction of the meaning-

> significance of one's universe as it is engaged with the self
> and the self with it, in terms of which every decision is made;
> or a relationship between the self and its universe in terms of
> which all decisions are made....
>
> An understanding is not an opinion, but rather the basis for
> action....
>
> The understanding is implicit in the way one involves oneself
> in his existence; speech and thought make it explicit. And in
> the process of making explicit, we may deceive others or our-
> selves concerning our real foundation of choice and action.[5]

Hobbs went on to say that understandings used to go by the names
of the gods. I would use the more functional term *bloids*: The bloids are
whatever *b*estows *l*ife *o*r *i*mposes *d*eath. That may seem simple, but it is
not. What really living really is is open to definition at the pleasure of
believers. As usual, people disagree.

BLO is doing the duty of the former term "religion," because it is less
misleading, and it perspicuously names the phenomenon of interest. Mary
Eberstadt, relying on Stanley Kurtz, names some of the functions of a
BLO: It provides a world-view, answers "the big questions about life,"
gives "small" acts and events a place in larger narratives, and "provides
a rationale for meaningful collective action."[6] People have an instinctive
intuition for what a "secular" religion has to do, or for what the "gods,"
spoken tongue-in-cheek, mean for human beings.

1.3   Clearings

A note about the logic of the rest of the book. I would name it "clearings":
Any basic life orientation, any vision of ultimate reality invites a question,

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[5] Edward C. Hobbs, "Recognition of Conceptuality as a Hermeneutical Tool," pp. 472–
473. The essay is reprinted from F. L. Cross, ed., *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte
der altchristlichen Literatur*, Band 88 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964), pp. 464–477. This
understanding of understanding draws on resources in Heidegger and Bultmann. It is not
as colloquial in usage as it appears to be. See section 5.6.

[6] Mary Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God* (Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press,
2013), p. 55, quoting Stanley Kurtz, "Culture and Values in the 1960s," in *Never a Matter
of Indifference: Sustaining Virtue in a Free Republic*, ed. Peter Berkowitz (Palo Alto, CA:
Hoover Institution Press, 2003), pp. 50 and 31.

> Can you point to places in life
> where your proposed ultimate reality shows itself?

Such places we can call clearings, places in life that show what life is really about. We naturally ask, especially in a time of religious pluralism when people do not agree about ultimate reality, What is it about life that leads you to choose an ultimate reality and respond to it as you do? What are the clearings in life and the world where you can see your proposed ultimate reality show itself?

In effect, the question asks why this or that proposed life orientation? But to ask *why* is highly ambiguous, as we shall see in section 5.7. Answers can construe the question in many senses. Two matter here. To ask *why* can be a demand for justification, or it can be merely a request for an explanation. "Justify yourself" is different from "I don't understand what you are doing with your life."

Often enough, people don't worry about such questions, and get through life quite comfortably without formal theory or systematic answers. People can have informal answers (as in the comic strips or TV shows) without thereby committing to any kind of system or theory. And just as often, an advertised life orientation is not entirely the real life orientation. Only when thinking as philosophers (or examining one's conscience) do such questions become pressing.

Some answers will appear in the chapters on pain and history — answers typical of biblical religion. My answers will be explicitly confessional: there is no justification for biblical religion. It is something one chooses, not something that can be derived from anything more basic or from anything shared universally.

1.4   The Plan of the Book

This section lists some basic features of historical-covenantal (i. e., biblical) religion. The term comes from Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*. It could be emended to historical-covenantal-*transcendental* religion, or something like that. He describes the historical-covenantal community of faith as traveling through history in company with a transcendent Other, so the emendation is apt. Some of the points that follow are not well understood. About some, there is a spectrum of legitimately Catholic

opinion.

Several disclaimers: There is no claim that the list of features of historical-covenantal religion presented here is complete. There is legitimate disagreement about at least some of them. A traditional curriculum in theology comes *after* the features presented here. In that sense, what follows here is history and philosophy of religion, not theology proper.

In chapter 2, we begin with the fundamental affirmation of life in this world as good, in full view of its pains.

In chapter 3, we see the gross anatomy of a BLO that is oriented to history rather than just nature. The Exodus and covenant will stand out prominently.

In chapter 4, we see pertinent features both of the world and of being human.

In chapter 5, we see a little about how we think about things in the world, in preparation for thinking about God.

In chapter 6, we come to the mystery of God.

This book is only a prolegomenon, and a brief one at that. It is not a complete systematic theology: it is about what *kind* of religion is biblical religion, or world-affirming historical religion, or historical-covenantal-transcendental religion. Most of the parts of a systematic theology are not here. What is here is merely a start, asking, "What kinds of things are we talking about?" Even that is incomplete: there is not an adequate discussion of analogy. Nor do we ask how we know or name God, both of which are necessary if theology is to reach its larger goals. Despite the affirmation of the Definition of Chalcedon, there is no Christology here, neither the Person nor the Work of Christ, though a little of the Work of Christ appeared in *Living in Spin*, chapter 7, on the Eucharist. Just as there is no Christology here, there is little that would apply specifically to rabbinic Judaism, though I hope it is broad enough to support Judaism as much as Christianity. There is no explanation of sin, sanctification, halakhah, or justification. Nor of last things. All that has to come later. This book is an inquiry into matters that are *presupposed* in theology and not always clearly spelled out.

Chapter 2

Dealing with Pain

2.1 Page 122

In a supplementary essay appended to *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, "Faith in Gods and in God," H. Richard Niebuhr observed that we have many centers of meaning in life, and they all fail in the end. "The causes for which we live all die."[1] What is there left to believe in? Only the "Void" from which we come and to which we return. What is it about reality and the world that dooms all our causes to frustration? That question has no answer, because any answer would be a thing or being or phenomenon or aspect of the world. "What it is we do not know[2] save that it is and that it is the supreme reality with which we must reckon." Niebuhr observes that some of us face it with trust rather than distrust: "And insofar as our faith, our reliance for meaning and worth, has been attached to this source and enemy of all our gods, we have been enabled to call this reality God."[3]

Niebuhr's point has been made in terms gentler but no less paradoxical. John Silber once wrote, about the humanities when the humanities lose sight of the truth that Niebuhr saw so well,

> The humanities succeed, when, confronting man with his ap-

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[1] *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 122. Sometimes google can find some of the surrounding text on the net. In any case, all readers should own a copy of *Radical Monotheism*.

[2] I am told by my Thomistic friends that Aquinas says similar things.

[3] Also p. 122 of *Radical Monotheism*.

proaching death and eliciting that dread appropriate to this thought, they encourage him — in celebration of life — to invest with passionate seriousness in enterprises and in an existence that will not endure. Mankind and the humanities flourish in no other way. This is their purpose, their relevance, their necessity.[4]

This is not very concrete, and may be more terrifying than reassuring, but it is there, at the beginning.

2.2   Exposure, Limitation, and Need

Things look a little better when the pains of life are made concrete.

Edward Hobbs used to encapsulate the heart of biblical religion for his students in a simple transformation of the pains of life into blessings. The pains come as Exposure, Limitation, and Need:

(1) In the face of the situation which exposed or revealed the discrepancy between one's pretensions and one's actual life-as-lived, one responded with acknowledgment of the true situation and a "change of understanding" (Greek: metanoia, poorly translated "repentance");

(2) in the face of the situation which confronted one with the contingency or limitation of his existence, one responded with creative thankfulness for the new — albeit in many cases unwanted and limited — possibilities presented by the limiting situation itself;

(3) in the face of the encounter with others in their need for help, one responded with action directed to the benefit or good of those others.[5]

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[4] "The Alienation of the Humanities," (*Academic Questions* 2 no. 3 (1989/Summer) 11), p. 21.

[5] The thesis that we meet God in disappointments transformed into blessings comes from Edward C. Hobbs, "An Alternate Model From a Theological Perspective," in H. A. Otto, ed., *The Family in Search of a Future* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), pp. 32–33

He usually elaborated some, but at this juncture, we have a point of departure opening the way to solutions to many problems that were before refractory. Indeed, this essay is largely an exercise in working out the consequences of Hobbs's insights about Exposure, Limitation, and Need. The idea that the pains of life can be transformed into blessings is not new (it's in the Bible), though Edward Hobbs's appreciation of it may be.[6] If it is true that the pains of life bear blessings, then the problems of modern theology can presumably be solved, even if we don't always see how right now. This should give us the confidence to proceed and the maneuvering room to question or relativize the Western philosophical tradition that Louis Dupré found incoherent in its modern forms.

It will take a lot of work to unpack the implications of this commitment to embracing all of life as good, in full view of its pains. Nevertheless, one thing should be seen early, to make clear what is involved in the commitment to Exposure, Limitation, and Need. We shall return to it and develop it further below. There is a way to see whether someone really is committed to embracing *all* of life as good, even its pains. It is a clearing, a place in life that shows what people are doing with their lives.[7] In other ages, other clearings will emerge. But for our own time, that clearing is abortion: Are you prolife? In general, when abortion is not an issue, are you prolife when life hurts? In particular, what about abortion? If all human lives are affirmed as good, in full view of the pains of life, do you really mean that? Or are some lives not good *enough*? Are you consistent? If some lives are not good enough and may be prevented or terminated, then you do not always think that all human life is good. For you, Exposure, Limitation, and Need bring good — except when they don't. We who watch you are not obliged to keep a straight face.

When some lives are judged not good enough (or inconvenient, or embarrassing), some say those lives may be prevented or terminated. There are of course subterfuges, pretences, self-deceptions, and distractions from the real issue. We are told that the proposed victims are not yet or no longer fully human. We come to that again below (p. 32). But for now,

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[6] It is everywhere, but it is spelled out explicitly in Job 2.10, Isaiah 45.7, and Romans 8.28, and it appears in the Babylonian Talmud at Berakhot 60b. It appears in the covenants of both the Priestly editor and the Yahwist's narrative, though it takes a little more background to spot it. See Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975).

[7] *Elementary Monotheism*, chapter 12, "Clearings," has more detail.

the seriousness and implications of a commitment to embrace Exposure, Limitation, and Need should be made clear. It should not be done lightly.

2.3   Pain and Evil

Evil is pain plus taking offense. There is plenty of pain in life, but not all pain is evil. Pain hecomes evil when we take offense at it or at some source of it. Evil can be attributed to many things, human actors prominent among them. Human actors are the prototype.

People casually speak of the larger pains of life as evil, implying not just that they hurt but that something or someone is to be blamed for them. Something is not right, we easily think, about a world in which such pains and destruction occur. The logic of such thinking needs more work than this chapter can undertake and must come in later chapters. The urgency of the problem is undeniable, simply because the pains of life destroy us in the end and, all too often, destroy us long before we think things *should* end.

This is the problem of ultimate reality and how we are constituted so as to relate to it. Before we come to that (chapter 4 ff.), the world that we relate to needs to be expanded from nature to history. That is the task of chapter 3. To affirm human life in this world construed simply as nature was the basic life orientation of aboriginal nature religions. To affirm human life in this world taken as essentially historical is much harder, for greater pains have to be faced, often meaningless, pointless, wasteful, destructive and absurd. Affirming human life as history *has* a history, and that history and its implications need to be reviewed next. Then we will be in a position to return — by stages, very cautiously — to the problem of pain and its sequel, the question of transcendence.

Chapter 3

History, Exodus, and Covenant

3.1   Nature and History

The last two centuries of scholarship have come to appreciate the importance of history in biblical religion and the contrast to religions focused on nature. Mircea Eliade's *Cosmos and History* is devoted to the contrast. In religions of nature, nature has its ways, and the participant's job is to fit into nature naturally, respecting the harmony of nature and disturbing nature as little as possible. Ritual is devoted to celebrating nature and healing any damage to its harmonies. Nature is incidentally polymorphous, which is why there were so many gods in ancient nature religions. In a world that lacked the conceptual means to understand history, nature religion is the only way to affirm human life in this world. It is the aboriginal religion everywhere, albeit in different forms in different cultures.

For nature religions, the unpredictable, the disorderly — anything that doesn't follow the order of nature — is a meaningless surd at best. Since it often brings suffering and always breaks any meaning to be had from nature alone, it was usually taken to be evil. In a word, what is beyond the order of nature is *history*. Affirmation of human life in this world as history will take an approach different from the nature religions.

As a matter of the history of historical religion, it began almost unawares, when a few people escaped from Egypt more than three thousand years ago and were grateful.[1] Their literary executors have left us the start of a tradition (in the Exodus) that grew by stages into the world-affirming

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[1] For more on the historicity of the Exodus, see my *Living in Spin*, section 6.1.2.

historical religion we know.

In the past five hundred years, a nature-focused BLO has returned, unawares and insidiously, in changes of theology and culture. It has become overt enough so that the term "naturalism" is widely used and, in one of its meanings, denotes rejection of biblical religion. Indeed, in the terms of a scientific world, it has become impossible to make sense of the transcendence that biblical religion requires. We are perplexed:

> By the waters of naturalism we sat down and wept;
> our captors asked us to sing a song of history.
> Lord of History,
> how can we sing your song
> on the alien soil of naturalism?
> If I forget the difference between nature and history,
> let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!

In the passage to modernity, history was eclipsed or forgotten, to be rediscovered in the nineteenth century. People did not see that the proper contrast to nature is not the supernatural but history. The supernatural (which used to be, in Lutheran and even Scholastic terms, just grace) was re-understood as violations of natural laws and then ruled out by modern science. History, forgotten, is the doorway into transcendence, but it takes a lot of work to see that.

3.2   History, Relativity, and Pluralism

A little familiarity with modern theology, as theology students encounter it, suffices to dispel the colloquial myth that science is the major problem for theology. More about science below. What theology students are introduced to is the challenge of critical history, historical and cultural relativity, and religious pluralism.

History, relativity, and pluralism are, respectively, species of Exposure, Limitation, and Need. In a very distant sense, it was troubles with science that set off an avalanche, for in the eighteenth century, when scholars were perplexed, they began to re-read the Bible more carefully and then write history critically. A useful summary can be found in Edgar Krentz, *The*

Historical-Critical Method.[2] The first results of critical historical scholarship can be found in almost any introduction to the Old Testament. H. H. Rowley's *The Growth of the Old Testament*[3] is out of date, but its opening section on the Pentateuch is quite clear and lists some of the major evidence for what came out of source criticism, the Documentary Hypothesis.

That history, relativity, and pluralism (HRP) are respectively species of Exposure, Limitation, and Need (ELN) is easy to see. The import of critical history is that things in the Bible did not happen the way we thought — in the naive nineteenth-century tradition. It also undermines the easy comforts that came with certainty in philosophical theology. Historical and cultural relativity create limits on what the faithful mind and covenantal community can do. Unnoticed is that this is not nihilistic relativism, for in historical relativity, we actually do know, relative to our own time and culture, what to do and how to make sense of the world. Religious pluralism means that other cultures may make legitimate demands on the evangelizing Church; they are not simply to be steam-rolled in a kind of cultural imperialism.

Quasi-literalist seminarians who encounter critical history have lampooned their professors in the words "First, we destroy your faith." They cannot see that after critical history, faith gets rebuilt on a much firmer basis, grounded in real history. There is here a neuralgia of absoluteness, a craving for a-historical absolutes that comes from Platonist instincts rather than from the Bible. Section 3.1, "Nature and History," briefly noticed the naturalistic desire to escape from the frights and dangers of history, but that is part of nature religion, and it survives as a natural craving even in supposedly historical religion. Hence the long Christian tradition of turning philosophy to the service of evading the risks and anxiety of living in history.

Modern culture affords a certain irony here, for natural science, which is not about history, has learned to live quite gracefully with the historical relativity of its own theories. This was worked out by Thomas Kuhn and his conversation partners in and after *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Historical religion, by contrast, which ought to understand living in

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[2] Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975. Reprinted, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002.

[3] Harper Torchbooks, 1963 (originally published in 1950).

history by native instinct, is making rather heavy weather of critical history and historical relativity.[4] Go figure.

People crave a-historical absolutes to comfort them in the disorder of history. I think there are only analogies, and in the end, analogies between the future and the past are unpredictable and unsystematic. The analogies do not have a univocal core, to borrow the language of another dispute. There are only family resemblances between events now and to come and events in the past. We can only trust that the future will reward our faith as the past rewarded our forefathers' faith. It may not work out as we would like it to or fit our present interpretations of history past and future.

3.3   Covenant

We have bumped into something: The human community of faith stands in a personal relationship with some sort of reality that transcends particular events in history but is also manifest in those events. Transcendence we come to below. The relationship to it is one of covenant: an agreement of mutual promise and trust, though between unequal partners. The idea was taken from the model of Hittite suzerainty treaties.[5] There are three models of covenant: lord and vassal, husband and wife, father and child. Obligation rests on love and loyalty, not fear or rationality. There are six parts to a typical Hittite lord-and-vassal treaty, and they appear in the texts and tradition in the Common Documents.

> (1) preamble: introducing the sovereign
> (2) prologue: history
> (3) stipulations governing the relationship
> (4) arrangements for regular
>   public reading of the document
> (5) list of gods who are witnesses

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[4] This observation is elaborated in my "The Barbour-Smith-Gilkey Paradox: Historical Relativity in Natural Science and Historical Religion." *Theology and Science* 4 no. 1 (2006/April) 87–99.

[5] See e. g., Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), chapter 11, esp. pp. 235–236. Westphal cites George Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, 1955), but the particulars of Hittite treaties and their application in the Common Documents can be found in many places.

(6) blessings for keeping,
     curses for breaking the covenant.

Covenant is offered, it is not imposed; but also, in the perspective of the Biblical writers, it was not negotiated.[6]

Faith in the God of the Bible is not the result of any kind of reasoning, whether deductive or inductive. It is a choice. It is also irrevocable, and in that sense is like marriage (as marriage used to be understood).

There are many covenants in the Bible; in fact, it is a history of the making of many covenants. We tend to think there are only a few, or only two (in the Old and New Testaments). But there are three with Abraham alone, in Genesis 12, 15, and 17. The covenant at the Exodus appears in several forms. The covenant with the Monarchy is probably dearest in the affections of the tradition. There are covenantal moments in the covenant renewal ceremonies of the Former Prophets. Joshua 23–24 is one of the greatest, but Nehemiah recounts another, later instance. The form is given in Joshua's words, "Which gods will you serve? As for me and mine, we will serve HaShem.[7] What is your choice? What is your pleasure?"[8]

Another event, Moses's job interview at the Burning Bush, has many features of a covenant, and it presents a contrast to the covenant with the Monarchy. God tells Moses to return to Egypt and bring all his friends out here, into the desert, where God will provide for them. It is ironic: they are to leave the comforts of civilization for the hazards of the desert — but imperial, metropolitan civilization is organized in service of a nature religion, and out in the desert, they will find their way into history. Moses asks for some reassurance. He asks for God's *name*. God has said he will *be with* Moses, but the name he gives is not reassuring: "I shall be with you as who I am shall I be with you."[9] In the covenants with the Monarchy (e. g., II Samuel 7), it appears that God has given a guarantee to the Monarchy in perpetuity, and moreover, it is given in human terms. At the Burning Bush, by contrast, Moses is not in control, and how the promises will play out is not at all clear. The center of the Common Documents is the Exodus and the two covenants of its story: the covenant at the Burning Bush and the covenant with the Monarchy. The Exodus story culminates

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[6] That perspective will be revised below.

[7] The common Hebrew circumlocution to avoid pronouncing the Name of God.

[8] The second Joshua challenges his disciples in the words "Who do you say that I am?"

[9] John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (Yale University Press, 1964), p. 10.

in the covenant with the Monarchy and its downfall. Those who regularly pray the Psalms know this, for the Exodus and the Monarchy run through them all. They also know the aggrieved cry in Psalm 89 after the downfall of the Monarchy.

I would summarize with an observation from the history of religions: covenants are written by human beings, as all human religion is a human invention. To say this much is merely to observe how history of religions and the social sciences operate: they are in no position to say that any particular covenant was written by a God, but they do very much focus on the human authors. So how can Merold Westphal say that the covenants in the Common Documents were dictated by God to the Israelites? In effect, the covenant has two authors, but they didn't write in committee; the human authorship is ordinary and familiar, but the transcendent authorship is of another order entirely. (Transcendence, pretty much by definition, is not easy to understand.) We shall unravel a little of that puzzle when we get to generalizing the Definition of Chalcedon from its original application, restricted to the doctrine of the Person of Christ, to all divine activity in the world (p. 46). All we have now is a question: how can a covenant be offered by God? Here is a provisional answer, and I don't have much texture or detail for it: Ultimate reality enters into our covenants,[10] but its interpretation of our covenants may surprise us. Its interpretation may not be our interpretation. So be careful, be very, very careful, when you declare a covenant with ultimate reality.

3.4   Seven Lessons of the Exodus

Here is a different list, of seven features of this sort of religion. They came with experience, as the Hebrews escaped from Egypt to the Sinai desert and had to learn to live with their God.[11]

(1) They had no use for governments that arrogated to themselves divine power. For these people, no human institutions are sacred. This much is clear from their mistreatment at the hands of the Egyptian sacral kingship. Here is the root of civil and political freedom, for the move to de-

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[10] See *Unwelcome Good News*, section 6.1.

[11] This section duplicates section 6.4 of *By the Waters of Naturalism*, available at http://www.jedp.com/waters.pdf.

sacralize human institutions at the same time was a move to hold governments responsible.

(2) They could not become one people if they were to retain their previous ethnic- and nature-based identities. The companion principle to the desacralizing of governments was a community of moral obligation which was in principle open to all and from which none could be excluded who wished to join. This was a necessity if they were to become one people. This is familiar in the commandment to love one's neighbor as another like oneself. The situation out of which this arises, ethnic plurality, did not become clear until biblical scholarship of the last century or so pieced it together out of scattered hints in the texts. The unity that was forged out of this plurality was in fact a pluralistic unity.

(3) If these peoples were to become one, they would have to surrender or at least relativize everything that separated them. The deities of nature lose their ultimate status at this point. To consummate such a move to history, they had to desacralize nature itself. What is kept from the world-affirming nature religions is the affirmation of this world and of nature in it, even when nature is no longer sacred.

(4) Human life necessarily has some focus of loyalty, confidence, and meaning (at least it does if it is coherent), and that focus had to be placed outside of the forces and phenomena of nature and beyond human institutions: in something transcendent. I find the Shema implicitly present at this point, the command in Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." The first three commandments of the Decalogue grow out of this. The term that I invoke at this point, "transcendence," is of recent coinage (Placher, 1996), but the roots of the concept in human practices can be confidently located here in the Exodus and the texts that have come down to us from it.

(5) The believer is to welcome the transcendent holy into the world, rather than seeking escape to it from the world. (This is a radical difference from something that only came later and was not world-affirming at all. That religion is known in the West as Gnosticism, and it is not part of our story.) This lesson is the point at which the world is affirmed in all its pains as good. The world in its pains is then something to be consummated and perfected (the Hebrew word for this is *tikkun*), not something to be escaped from or trashed or merely used.

(6) A project such as this one must, in order to work, have some kind

of behavioral standards which inculturate these loyalties. These standards will be inculturated somewhat differently in different times and places. As the tradition has it, these standards were the Law given at Sinai. The age of that tradition is not entirely clear. In any case, the Law has been greatly developed, locally adapted, and amended since its origins.

(7) Last, but not least, there was to be continuing attention to past history in order to keep this confidence for future history in perspective, with its hazards, obligations, and promises. Other items could be added, but I think these are among the most important. The order among them is to some extent arbitrary.

Look at the inter-relationships between these seven features of the Exodus.

I have put first the relativizing of human governments and institutions because it grows most directly out of the Hebrews' experience of oppression at the hands of a government that absolutized itself. As the concepts grew, this one came to be dependent on the fourth, the turn to a transcendent Other: if human institutions are to be relativized, then they are made relative *to* something else. It was the prohibition on locating that Other within the world of nature or human institutions that lies at the root of the later understanding of transcendence, though that understanding appears at the start in the prohibition of visual images.

The transcendent reality is then to be loved. "Love" is doubtless too weak a word for the human attitude toward a reality that is mysterious, both attractive and awesome, and in its awesomeness, a little terrifying. One is dependent before this Reality, not a peer to it. But the Shema has "love," and sacred fear has to be understood as part of that love. This ultimate reality is to be loved even when it brings disappointments. This religion will not be entirely easy.

It took a long time for the desacralizing of human governments to develop into the kind of liberty that the modern world knows or even into the structured liberties that the medieval polities knew. Nevertheless, the root is here. The modern sense of vigilance for liberty against governments that arrogate to themselves absolute power comes from the departure from Egyptian sacral kingship. As history testifies, the Egyptian arrangements were common, and modern returns to absolute government have happened all too often, in every age since.

The move to desacralize nature along with human institutions bears

some comment. It is easy to overlook the degree to which nature, ethnicity, and human institutions were all of a piece in the world-view of the second millennium BCE. Then, one could not disestablish one without disestablishing all three. Yet even in the modern world, where they can be separated, it is not really possible to center the focus of human loyalty in nature if it is also to be located as something manifest in history. Nature does not become less awesome or less beautiful when it becomes less sacred. The root question here is whether human beings will understand themselves in terms of nature or history. The challenge to human self-understanding, both as offer of opportunity, and as critique and exposure, potential reproach, comes at the point where human actions are to be characterized. And the best that nature can do by way of understanding human action is a pathetic shadow of what history does.

Though the sacred is to be met "in" history, that does not mean that the sacred is an actor in history in the same sense that other actors are. The sacred is manifest in history in ways that it is not in nature. But for purposes of external history, it rules no empires, passes no laws, collects no taxes, wages no wars, and so on. Human beings do all these things. To be sure, some, who stood in the Exodus tradition, spoke of their God being also their king, as if the sacred *could* indeed rule, legislate, tax, war, and so on. The Bible has quite enough of such language. Yet standing in the present, seeing what we can see, with the distinctions that we can make, we have to say that, no, the "divine" does not act in history — in anything like the way that ordinary mortals do, whether lowly or high-born. That does not rule out *other* ways in which transcendence could show itself in history, and so "act." I put "divine" and "act" in scare-quotes because it is still not very clear how they might work in a historical religion.

We distinguish between the transcendent, the immanent, and the intramundane.[12] History in some ways parallels nature at this point. For history as merely the intramundane, what we later called "external" history, no more has room for God as an explanation than does nature. Yet transcendence has an immanent presence, a presence in history that does not disturb or displace any intramundane actors. That presence shows it-

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[12] Intramundane things are explicable simply in terms of other intramundane things; transcendence is immanently present where a phenomenon asks (or people ask) for explanations beyond the merely intramundane. These definitions are different from the common two-part distinction between the immanent and the transcendent.

self where human beings, in making sense of their own experience, naturally borrow the language of human action and interpersonal experience, to make sense of their experience of life as a whole, of the cosmos as a whole, of ultimate reality.

God is no more an intramundane historical actor than he is an intramundane natural cause. That is to say, God is ruled out as an explanation in "external" history, the historical narratives in which the narrator asks about relatively objective movements and causes in history. In "internal" history, where the lives of the narrator and his community are at stake, what best brings to language the human experience of history is (or at least, was) the language of human relationships, borrowed by analogy and transferred for use in making sense of ultimate reality.[13]

One may protest at this point, and protest fairly, that such a move is "subjective." All analogies are. We see again the issue with which we began, a desire to be responsible (which "objectivity" was supposed to supply), and a desire to avoid being left holding the bag (which subjectivity supposedly implied). Responsibility is both sought and feared.

Let me note last something we shall meet again, the fifth lesson, that transcendence is to be welcomed into the world. This is because the world is good, and human life in the world is affirmed as good. The alternative is to locate transcendence utterly outside the world, because the world is bad and defective. That alternative is one that we do not consider in this book; it is available from Gnosticism. The choice that we are interested in, to affirm human life in a world that has so much pain in it, will be a lot of work. It is easier in a superficial sense not to affirm the world and life in it. We shall explore only the affirmative side of that choice, in order to keep this book within manageable limits and to stay close to the central focus on the difference between history and nature. But it is only fair to note that it is not necessary to affirm human life in this world, either as nature or as history. Other possibilities do exist.

3.5   The Exodus Holds the Bible Together

The story of the Exodus begins with preparation in Genesis and continues through II Kings, to the fall of the Monarchy: the Pentateuch through the

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[13] For more, see section 5.3, on H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation*.

Former Prophets. Indeed, it is the story of the preparation for, inauguration of, haps and mishaps of, and downfall of the Monarchy. The Later Prophets comment on the misbehavior of the Monarchy, and, in its aftermath, on the settlement in Second Temple Judaism in the Persian period. Call it, if you like, the Exodus writ large, the "grand" Exodus, for there is more in the escape from Egypt than just the escape from Egypt. There are many covenants along the way (as we have already noticed), but the grand Exodus is the story of a journey through history of a people in company with its Lord, the Lord of history. The Writings are informed by it, sometimes criticize it (Qoheleth, Job), and learn how to continue the Covenant after the loss of its center-piece, the Monarchy. The covenant with the Monarchy is in the end radicalized in a return to an earlier covenant, that at the Exodus, a covenant that, unlike the Monarchy, cannot be taken away from the Covenant People.

The Exodus is more than an escape from Egypt, more even than the entry into the promised land; it is an Exodus from nature into history. In the third millennium BCE, before the Exodus, in the time of the Patriarchs, the world could barely make sense of history, and even less look to history for meaning in life or "life more abundantly," to use a phrase of later coinage. The patriarchs were anomalies of transcendent faith in a naturalistic world, and they would have been no more than that if their own journeys had not led to the Exodus. What it means to live in history is never exhaustively understood, but many of the most basic commitments took a thousand years to become clear. The history of the last millennium BCE, the Monarchy and the Persian period, issuing into the Greco-Roman world, was a time when many features of nature religion survived even in biblical religion. Israel grew out of them only gradually — by steps and by stages. There are atrocities along the way, some commanded by the deity. The character of that deity changes along the way. Sometimes the voice of the text (and so the implied voice of God) can be heard only in the implied reader, who knows better than the people in the story.

For all that, it begins as a story of how a God who transcended the forces of nature and powers of history took a few families, marginal in their culture, turned them into a people and a nation, and brought them into a place of safety and prosperity of their own. The promise of life in abundance began a very bumpy road and then apparently ended in disaster in the Exile: Israel gone forever, Judah in captivity in Babylon. The Monarchy

was never to be restored, but under the Persians, that same transcendent Lord of history brought his people back from exile, and the Covenant was re-established on a new basis. The Exile and return were a new Exodus. The prophets who announced it spoke of it as a repetition of the Exodus.

It happened again, in the Disasters of the First Century: When the first Christians had to make sense of the life and disastrous death of Jesus, the image they used was the Exodus. The key is in the structure of the Synoptic Gospels, and Jesus is the new Joshua, the one who leads Israel into the promised land.[14] Jesus is both the new Joshua and the shepherd of the new Israel. Look at the parallels:[15]

> Both Israels start out in the promised land;
> both Israels go down to Egypt;
> there is a slaughter of innocents in both stories;
> both Israels are tested and fed by angels in the desert;
> both Israels re-enter the promised land,
>   crossing the Jordan at Jericho;
> both Israels, after a period of activity,
>   go up to Jerusalem,
>   where a new life is inaugurated.

This is not an accident. Quasi-Marcionite modern Christian readers, who think they can start the story with Jesus, tend to ignore the model in the grand Exodus story, but it *is* in the texts. In effect, what the Gospels are saying, again in a time of disaster (first, the death of Jesus, then in two failed Jewish revolts and the Destruction of the Temple), is that what God did for us long ago in the Exodus and the Exile, he is doing again for us now. At this point, we can see that the Common Documents are not just a *prologue* for the New Testament; the Exodus is the *model* for the New Testament. The Exodus is the backbone that holds the Bible together.

Some consequences: Jesus did not come to get us out of an evil world, he came to be with us in a world that, if painful, is still a good world. It is a world of history that began before he came and is not finished today. Jesus is not a way to get out of the risks of history, he radicalized the way to

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[14] In Greek, unlike Latin, the names Jesus and Joshua are the same.

[15] These follow Matthew more than the other gospels, but they are all structured by Old Testament typology, and this is generally recognized by New Testament scholars.

live in and with the risks of history. The center of the Bible is the Exodus; Jesus comes later. The Exodus gets repeated and radicalized in the New Testament.

In regard to the Common Documents, the centrality of the Exodus is generally understood.[16] With regard to the New Testament, the basis in the Exodus is not well assimilated.[17] It is not original with me. I learned it from my New Testament teacher, Edward Hobbs, who published some of it already in his 1958 dissertation at the University of Chicago. The structural relation of the Synoptic Gospels to the Exodus was seen again by Meredith Kline.[18] More generally, the literary phenomenon is called *typology*, and it was well-known in patristic hermeneutics. In typology, an older story is paralleled in a new story, and the older story provides the key to understanding the newer. One can find an explanation of it in recent scholarship in Leonhard Goppelt's *Typos*.[19]

3.6   A Responsible Liberty of Interpretation

Biblical religion in the beginning of the Common Era displays a feature only hinted at before: The covenant community has a responsible liberty of interpretation (RLI), considerable discretion in the conduct of covenant and of its life and affairs. It is well-attested in the New Testament and the Talmuds but rarely visible in the older scripture. The "liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free" is one instance. The many places where Jesus gives the apostles the authority to forgive sins (or not) are another. "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15.28) is yet another example. The epistle to the Galatians is devoted to that liberty.

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[16] It is widespread in the technical literature, but one place where it is concentrated is in Gerhard von Rad, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch" (1938), reprinted in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM, 1966).

[17] In regard to the Mishnah, it is obvious, but the New Testament has not been obvious. There is a difference, the full significance of which is still not well understood. The Mishnah is based on the halakhic, or legal, matter in the larger Exodus, where the Gospels are based on the aggadic, or narrative matter in the Exodus.

[18] Meredith G. Kline, "The Old Testament Origins of the Gospel Genre," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975) 1–27.

[19] Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: the Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*. German, 1939. English translation by Donald H. Madvig. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

The liberty of interpretation was remarked because it was lived; the first Christians were conscious of it, they knew they were making choices, and they were confident that they were right to do so.[20]

There is an extended reflection on the liberty of interpretation that is all but theoretical in the Bavli, in Baba Metzia. It arises in a dispute about how to clean an oven, whether one may clean the oven as a whole, or instead must take it apart and clean the parts,[21] and the story is known as "the Oven of Achnai," for its owner. The passage in the Mishnah upon which the Gemarra expands is merely an injunction to forbearance and consideration of others. What the commentary draws out of that is a lot more. Abuse in commercial transactions grows to abuse in general, shaming another especially. The example of the oven of Achnai illustrates the issues.[22] Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is the holdout, against the other rabbis in the dispute. He appeals to nature: a carob-tree is transported in witness for him, and a stream of water flows backwards, and so on. The others recognize the argument as irrelevant naturalism and dismiss it accordingly. Rabbi Eliezer appeals to Heaven, and a voice from heaven says he is right. The majority quotes Deuteronomy 30.12, that "it is not in heaven," and Exodus 23.2, that the majority rules.[23] Rabbi Nathan asks Elijah what God made of all this, and Elijah replies that the Holy One said, "My sons have defeated me. My sons have defeated me."[24] God both disagrees with *and* approves the decisions of the human covenantal community. We return to where the lesson began: forbearance for others. The translation says that the majority excommunicated rabbi Eliezer, but the translators' footnote says that the text has it that "they blessed him, a euphemism for excommunication." This is how disagreements are to be conducted: Even when the covenant community is split, there is to be forbearance and respect. Would that it were always so; oceans of blood would have been saved — in the Reformation alone, to cite one example. Other more recent, and far more

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[20] Cf. Peter Berger on social construction, section 4.2 below. Choice is everywhere, and it goes "all the way down," to BLO itself, and to ultimate reality, the way the world is. We see it again in section 5.6.

[21] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzia, Seder Nezikin, volume 1. London, Soncino Press 1935, folio. 58b ff., p. 347 ff.

[22] It appears on p. 352, folio 59a–59b.

[23] Whether the Exodus text will bear the weight the Talmud puts on it is unclear to me. But *they* clearly think it will.

[24] Soncino edition, p. 353.

important, examples are obvious.

One consequence of the responsible liberty of interpretation is that we should expect to see pluralism in the history of the covenant community. We do. It runs through the Bible, as Edward Hobbs found in a paper assigned to him by the Pacific Coast Theological Society. Since the full text is on the web, I shall not summarize it here but merely note that he found pluralism from the beginning to the end.[25]

Responsibility was not part of the task assigned to Hobbs, and he said nothing about it in his PCTS paper. People can easily hear the liberty or the responsibility, but seldom both, in the discretionary authority granted to the covenant community. Yet clearly the community holds its members to answer, as the story in the Talmud illustrates. Is there any rule by which it judges, other than its own discretion? Yes and no; ultimately, there are many rules of thumb but no rule that would excuse the community from responsibility for its choices.

A responsible liberty of interpretation is a feature of the life of a covenantal community, and that dynamic is accessible to the historical and social sciences. It is this-worldly. We trust that into our covenants ultimate reality really does enter, though on its terms, not ours (p. 18 above). How are we to think about such a synthesis of the this-worldly (covenants written by humans) and the transcendent (ultimate reality that shows itself in our covenants)? We come to that in section 4.5.

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[25] Edward C. Hobbs, "Pluralism in the Biblical Context." Discussed by the Pacific Coast Theological Society, November 16–17, 1973. On the net at http://www.pcts .org/pluralism.html.

Chapter 4

About Being Human

We return by stages to the problem of pain (and "evil") at a deeper level. The present chapter is merely about being human in the world, but even here, many of my claims, though supportable from tradition and the technical literature, are still exploratory and tentative. At this stage, mere caution may suffice. Sometimes the phenomena are not well understood, or the applications of tradition are not traditional, and more work than I am capable of is needed. In later chapters, something more radical than just caution will be needed, when we come to the subtleties and hazards of transcendence.

4.1 Human Existence is Relational

Many have seen the relationality of human life, but one who did not is Martin Heidegger. He gives a definition of human existence in *Being and Time* that was a breakthrough in philosophy, but in it, he missed our relating to other people. Human being, *Dasein*, is the sort of being that has a stake in its own existence, that has an interest in its own existence:

> Dasein[1] is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that being is an *issue* for it. But in that case,

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[1] *Dasein*, meaning there-being, is Heidegger's term for the sort of being that humans are. It is the kind of being that has a there, i. e., has a world and relations to other entities in the world.

> this is a constitutive state of Dasein's Being, and this implies
> that Dasein, in its Being, has a relationship towards that Being
> — a relationship which itself is one of Being.[2]

This kind of being is different from that of inanimate nature (the merely present-at-hand) or tools (the ready-to-hand), and it is present in animals to a somewhat lesser extent.

All true, but any Dasein's being is always already *also* an issue for *other* Daseins, as their being is an issue for the Dasein or person in view. The German is not philosophically very helpful.[3] I choose phrasing a little different from both Stambaugh and Macquarrie and Robinson: Dasein is the sort of being that has an *interest* in the being of both itself and other Daseins. Dasein stands to gain or lose from what other Daseins are, say, and do. We have stakes in each other's existence from the beginning, from before we are born. The extent and nature of human involvements with other humans is limited only by language and imagination, which is to say it is not limited at all.

When we relate to something or someone in the world, we always encounter also other people. When we relate to another person, we relate to one who is also the focus of inter-personal relationships. To modify Kierkegaard only slightly, a human self is a relationship that relates itself to itself, but is constituted as such by other people.[4]

Western philosophy has sometimes noticed the importance of other people, sometimes postponed it until after analysis of individuals, sometimes consigned it to an appendix, sometimes ignored it entirely. Heidegger bumped into some of it in *Being and Time*, section 26, "The Dasein-with of others, and everyday Being-with." His remarks bear inspection, for in a few brief sentences he saw the phenomenon of interest. Why he did not give it the central place it deserves is a question we cannot answer. He

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[2] Macquarrie and Robinson translation, p. 32; German p. 12. Joan Stambaugh's translation has "in its being, this being is concerned *about* its very being."

[3] It is colloquial, possible to explain but difficult to translate. Heidegger says of Dasein, as a Seiende, that "es diesem Seienden in seinem Sein *um* dieses Sein selbst geht." The translators have "helped" it along, rendering it in technical language.

[4] Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, in *Fear and Trembling and Sickness unto Death* (Princeton University Press, 1941, 1954), Part First, section III, p. 146. He of course was interested not in being constituted by other humans but in being constituted as a self-relating self by God.

perhaps had an excuse: he was in a hurry to get to his real interest, being
for its own sake. We have no such excuse.

> According to the analysis which we have now completed, Be-
> ing with Others belongs to the Being of Dasein, which is an
> issue for Dasein in its very Being. Thus as Being-with, Dasein
> 'is' essentially for the sake of Others. This must be understood
> as an existential statement as to its essence.

Emphasis is appropriate: it is the being of Dasein to be for others; Da-
sein is not just being-there, the sort of being that has a "there," a world,
Dasein is always already being-*for*. One could clearly add that being-for
includes being-*against*. The possibilities in both kind and degree are not
enumerable.

> Even if the particular factical Dasein does not turn to Others,
> and supposes that it has no need of them or manages to get
> along without them, it is in the way of Being-with. In Being-
> with, as the existential "for-the-sake-of" of Others, these have
> already been disclosed in their Dasein.

Other people are existentially present in anything or anybody we encounter
in the world — even luminous gas clouds in Hubble telescope pictures, in
places we will never go. Even more so in humble spoons. This is part of
the ontology of things and people in the world: we don't just encounter
them as individuals, we always encounter other people in them, for they
are constituted by their own involvements with other people.

> Being-with is such that the disclosedness of the Dasein-with
> of Others belongs to it; this means that because Dasein's Be-
> ing is Being-with, its understanding of Being already implies
> the understanding of Others.[5]

The "understanding of Being implies the understanding of others": it is
common in some places in philosophy that a human always already has an
understanding of being, but it is not so common that that understanding
of being is grounded in an understanding of others. For all his insight,
Heidegger didn't quite go that far.

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[5] The passages above are from *Being and Time*, Macquarrie and Robinson trans., pp.
160–161 (German 123).

One culture that may know this idea is the Bantu language family. It has a proverb "umuntu ngmuntu ngbantu," which has many translations, among which is "becoming a self through other selves."[6] That is close to what Heidegger should have said.

One consequence at this point is that it is impossible to be an individual except in some sort of social context. Personhood is an instance of meaning, and meaning occurs only where there are others existentially present to share it. This small, poorly explored philosophical insight provides the basis for the sociology of knowledge. In a caricature form, I am whoever I am only because other people remind me who I am. Real life is not quite that grotesque, but there is some truth in the wisecrack.

The interpersonal character of human existence rescues human interpretation from arbitrariness. I can pretend to myself that the moon is made of green cheese, but that pretense eventually has to meet other people, and though some cultures could collectively support such an interpretation, eventually, it has to face empirical test, and that testing always comes in community. Other people may not be physically present, but they are always existentially present. Reality may not conform to Enlightenment illusions about objectivity, but it does impose responsibility on people. Reality may not be objective, but both reality and other people will nevertheless object if reality is misconstrued beyond certain limits. This is what responsibility is made of, and the context for it is tradition-bound rationality.[7]

One thing that happens when this sort of being acquires language is *meaning*. Meaning is always interpersonal: it *can* be shared, whether or not it *is* shared. If it is not shareable, it is not meaning. The later Wittgenstein made considerable effort to dismantle philosophers' fantasies about private languages and pain that is intelligible only to the one pained.

In section 2.2, when we dealt with abortion, we silently passed by the issue of the moral and ontological status of an unborn baby, a fetus or an embryo. Spelling out that issue, we can now see why the embryo, from fertilization onward, is the sort of being we later recognize as Dasein. It

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[6] I am indebted to William Stoeger, SJ, for this observation.

[7] The concept of tradition-bound rationality comes from Kuhn and MacIntyre, among others. It appears in section 5.1 below. A longer summary of it is in *Living in Spin*, sections 5.4.3 and 5.4.4.

is not the same being as the gametes were before fertilization, and in the normal course of development, it will be born as a live human being. What is it that holds it together ontologically, *as* one being? Not the numerical identity of any of its constituent molecules, for they are all fungible, and some are simply dispensable. What holds it together ontologically is its future development as a being that has an interest in its own future, and in whom other such beings also have an interest. It *already*, from the moment of fertilization, is the kind of being that has a stake in its own existence (and in whose existence other such beings also have a stake). It will be some time before it knows that it is such a relationship, but it already has a stake in its future. Its development may fail or be frustrated, but in that case, it is not something other than a human being; it is a failed human being. The only place that makes any logical sense to define the start of human life is at fertilization.

4.2   Sociology of Knowledge

The discipline of sociology grew up a hundred and some years ago and its tasks emerged only slowly from particular problems. What it became was a study of the production, distribution, consumption, and uses of knowledge.[8] Knowledge always has at least two functions: showing a culture's members their way around the world, and justifying both social structure and the cosmos to its members.[9]

Heidegger saw that the world is not just a passive and inanimate collection, what one gets after lumping together all the things that "exist." The world is something active, the world worlds, and in its worlding, it enables people in it to make sense of things in the world. It enables people to distinguish figure from background, for example: in effect, it defines things and gives them a place in the world. The worlding of the world is something that grows out of *inter*personal relations, and that Heidegger underestimated.[10] He did see that when we deal with something or

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[8] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday, 1966.

[9] Cosmology and sociodicy: or cosmic and juridical order. We shall see these again in the first function of the Indo-European tripartite ideology, section 4.4 below.

[10] The ontological relationship between the world, people, and things in the world is circular; each presupposes the others. Sociology of knowledge may be hopelessly ontic

someone in the world, we always also meet the presence of other people in the background, but he wasn't much interested, and didn't pursue the phenomenon.

For purposes of sociology of knowledge, the world is a human social construction. After the publication of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (circa 1960) and Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), some people concluded to a nihilistic relativism, in which there is no truth. That is a silly social constructivism. A sensible social constructivism can see that relativity is not relativism. Sociology of knowledge, after all, may bracket the truth claims of the people it studies, but it cannot bracket its own truth claims. How to handle relativity has been intensely discussed for the last half-century (and discussion goes back to Plato), and it will be for as long as can be foreseen. It is not simple, and its subtlety takes some careful unpacking.[11] If one avoids the silly versions of relativism, it still remains that the shared understanding of things in the world both differs in different communities and also changes over time. To oversimplify a complex issue, some social constructions are better than others: so how do we choose rationally between them? That gets explored in section 5.1, on tradition-bound rationality.

Sociology of knowledge is not neutral at this point: it is a Western academic discipline, and it is committed to the truth claims of its own theories. It is committed to the reality of history, historical relativity, and the possibility of knowing something of history, because all these are presupposed in its own theorizing. Its own truth claims are accordingly qualified or nuanced with the knowledge that they may be revised by future sociologists. Truth is then not a Platonist sort of absolute truth that is not relative to history or culture, though I defer for the moment the question of truth itself.

We trust that truth enters into our socially constructed engagements with the world. I think ultimate reality shows itself in our social construc-

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rather than ontological, but it does tell how the world is maintained in vivid detail. That provides good raw material for an ontological description. See both *Social Construction* and *Sacred Canopy*.

[11] Alasdair MacIntyre's article, "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy" (*Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 59 no. 1 (1985 September) 5) is one place to start. The article appears also in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, Thomas McCarthy, eds., *After Philosophy; End or Transformation?* MIT Press, 1987.

tions also,[12] though it is apparently possible to believe that the world of experience and sensation is a world of illusion.[13]

We shall return to these questions when we come to the character of truth and to the hermeneutical circle extended from paradigms in particular disciplines to basic life orientation as a whole,

4.3 Sacred Canopies

The analytic of *The Social Construction of Reality* can be applied to religion, and the result was Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*. A problem arises, and it takes on a deceptively simple appearance: When worlds are human social constructions, not given in nature, they are unstable and have to be maintained.[14] In the recent past, maintenance of the Christian world has lost much of its plausibility, and the result has been a secularization of culture. But there is more here than just "secularization" and its challenges to "religion," as a little argument may hope to show.

Maintaining the socially constructed reality is a function performed by religion, whether that religion is "religious" or secular, whether it is recognized as a distinct function or not. The reality that religion provides is supposed to make a home for man in the cosmos, primarily through language, secondarily through social institutions built on that linguistic construction of the cosmos. Such a cosmos functions, in effect, as shelter, shelter from a chaos and meaninglessness that can induce panic and terror if not tamed. To call it anxiety is an understatement, but probably an appropriate one.[15] When chaos becomes apparent, the subjective result has been called "anomy," loss of order in the cosmos. When the socially constructed reality works well (too well, we would say), its inhabitants are no longer capable of knowing their own collective hand in its construction.

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[12] Cf. *Unwelcome Good News*, section 6.1.

[13] See Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapter 9 for examples. Even when the world is taken as illusion, that illusory character shows itself to those who think the world an illusion, and so ultimate reality still shows itself, even in such a world.

[14] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 6.

[15] The term anxiety offers a theoretical connection to the Daseinanalytik in the early Heidegger, and to structures within human existence itself; remembering always, to supply what Heidegger neglected, the importance of other people in the constitution of human individuals.

This has been called alienation.[16]

The task is bigger than just fending off cosmic chaos, however. Berger speaks of *theodicy*, but he has plucked that word from a very troubled context in theology, significantly changed its meaning for purposes in sociology, and defined it to be an obligation of any culture to its members. The phenomenon would better be called *sociodicy* than theodicy.[17] The task is not the defense of God[18] but justification of the social order to its members — or to its *subjects*, to use an older and more candid language. That really is a necessary function in any society, just as theoretical sociology claims.

The need for sociodicy arises because of stupidity, forgetfulness, incomplete socialization — and above all, self-interest. They lead to non-cooperation with social expectations. Most importantly, there is an unequal distribution of power, resources, rewards, property, and so on, and that has to be justified to those who want more than they get. Details may be left to sociology.[19]

The social order, roles, expectations, and so on were set up by others before me. This fact makes them "objective," that is, given outside of me, and not changeable easily or arbitrarily.[20] This does not mean that the social order cannot be changed at all, especially by group action.

The most efficient way to protect that socially constructed order is to get people to believe they have no choice in its structure. This is a step beyond its objective facticity, its givenness before any particular individuals come into it. How to convince people that the social order cannot be changed? "Let the institutional order be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its *constructed* character."[21] When it is presented as fixed in nature, as part of the cosmic order of things, its constructed character will be unnoticed or overlooked. A society shaped by nature religion will

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[16] The word *alienation* is slippery. In colloquial usage, it often means being alienated *from* the approved institutions (i. e., in resentment of them), not alienated *by* those institutions from one's own participation in the social construction of reality. The term has passed through Marxist usage on its way to sociology.

[17] I am indebted to Ethan Moore for the term.

[18] Contrary to the pretenses of his volunteer defense lawyers, their client has skipped bail. God does not appear as a defendant in human courts; see Job.

[19] See *Sacred Canopy*, chapter 2, "Religion and World-Maintenance."

[20] *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 10.

[21] *Sacred Canopy*, p. 33. Emphasis in the original.

present itself as part of nature, even though historically-religious outsiders know it is not. Naturalistic insiders actually believe the social world is not a human creation but really is the natural order.

Convincing a society's inhabitants that a cosmic and social order cannot be changed and is in no way the product of human choice or construction has benefits beyond justifying the social order. It relieves anxiety. It fends off existential dread and cosmic meaninglessness in a particularly efficient way. The anxiety of meaninglessness in the cosmos is greatly aggravated when the human hand in the construction of the cosmos is apparent, for then the constructed cosmos loses some of its overwhelming objectivity. Hiding that collective human hand works so well to palliate anxiety because it makes the human origins of the cosmos *inaccessible* to society's members: literally unthinkable.

Berger's title names the phenomenon: between humans and the sacred cosmos is a sacred canopy, shielding people from contact with howling chaos and meaninglessness. In a sacred canopy, the inhabitants look up and see stars (think Hubble Telescope pictures and their explanations), but the stars are painted on the inner surface of the canopy. They are a human interpretation. And that is just astrophysics and cosmogony; most of the human world lies beyond the reach of the sciences.

Presenting choice as necessity is a form of bad faith. It is a deception that has consequences, often unjust or violent, for those who call attention to the human origins of the socially constructed order. Berger and Luckmann are quite clear about the processes of universe-maintenance when they take disciplinary form: Coercion of refractory insiders, liquidation of outsiders' worlds, and if necessary, liquidation of both deviants and outsiders themselves.[22] What is so offensive about deviants and outsiders is not their disobedience. Outsiders are not bound to obey at all; in their case, offensiveness stands out in clarity as something much more threatening than disobedience. What deviants and outsiders do is *expose* the human origins of the socially constructed cosmos. It is no different when that cosmos is covenantal. Dissenters constitute this Exposure simply by existing, whether they want to expose or not. The Other Exodus Tradition,[23] rabbinic Judaism, merely by being there, exposes the human

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[22] *Social Construction*, p. 114 and passim.

[23] Yes, I am asserting by presupposition that Christianity is itself an Exodus tradition.

covenantal origins of Christianity.[24] To spell things out, rabbinic Judaism, by its mere existence, exposes Christianity as a human social construction. In so doing, it keeps us honest (or would, if Christians could hear). He who keeps us honest does for us the Work of Christ. Mostly, we are ungrateful. Anti-Jewish theology is the thread that, if pulled on, would unravel also other ways of protecting Christian theology from being exposed as a human covenant.[25]

The issue is about owning or hiding the human origins of covenants into which ultimate reality truly does enter, and about denying the hazards of covenant. The hazards of covenant should be acknowledged, but that needs to be done in such a way that the newly socialized are not delivered into terror before cosmic meaninglessness but rather shown a way into a certain kind of confidently enjoyed anxiety before the Void that we saw on p. 122 of *Radical Monotheism*. That controlled anxiety, known in the Common Documents as "fear of the Lord," includes a large measure of thrill and relish. So how do we mediate between the need to allay terror and anomy and the obligation to be honest about the human origins of a sacred cosmos? That is more than I know.

Peter Berger did his homework in biblical theology fairly well. He saw that religion can unmask as well as mystify, religion can expose as well as conceal the human origins of human socially constructed realities. His problematic appears to come from a sociological analysis of religion, but it takes for granted a view of religion in its own time (the 1960s) that fits Berger's own situation as a Liberal Protestant. In effect, it was designed to solve a problem, and that problem was one he lived with. What he and other sociologists called secularization or secularism came from roots in biblical religion, as he well knew from reading the technical literature of Old Testament scholars. Nevertheless, secularization *appeared* to be a current of social change inimical to "religion." The phenomenon appears in a different light after John Courtney Murray's account in *The Problem of God*. It was a change not from "religion" to secularity but from the medieval and modern problematic to a postmodern problematic

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See my *In the Beginning, Exodus* for a detailed argument. Or see sec. 3.5 in this book.

[24] See section 3.6 above, the story of the Oven of Achnai, where the human conduct of the covenant is acknowledged candidly.

[25] We return to this briefly below, in section 6.6, p. 97.

that retrieved the biblical problematic of God and basic life orientation. The current of social change that Berger and many theologians lamented is, in this light, not a bad thing but a good thing: a return to biblical roots. In the medieval and modern problematic, religion (meaning Christianity) was supposed to be not just "objectively" correct but provably so. Philosophy had provided many proofs. When all that unraveled in the twentieth century (with plenty of warning before), people thought biblical religion was coming to an end.[26] Some, of course, welcomed this prospect and encouraged it because they wanted to see the end of biblical religion. Others, not recognizing it for its biblical roots, took it as hostile and deplored it. In truth, it was merely returning to its classic form in the biblical period: The basic life orientation of biblical religion is a *choice*, not an inference, and one often made in marked contrast to the surrounding culture.

Peter Berger's project in *The Sacred Canopy* was a reproach directed at centuries of theology. But the situation is not quite as grim as he thought it, and the resources were available in texts that he knew and read.[27] Together, the sociology of knowledge and the warnings that came with awareness of sacred canopies have laid the groundwork for recovering a covenantal theology. They provide the anthropological basis on which covenantal theology is built. It is because of the sociological structure of knowledge and reality that covenant is an appropriate response to the world, rather than some form of logical inference that claims not to be relative to history or culture or human choice.

The sociology of knowledge, in unmasking the constructed objectivity of the humanly created cosmos, also poses another problem, to which we come below: If we live in a world that is a human social construction, in what sense does reality truly enter into it? To write the world of appearances off as an illusion is a choice, not an inference, and it is not the choice of biblical religion.[28] But that leaves us with the problem of transcendence

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[26] Berger has since retracted part 2 of *The Sacred Canopy*, about inevitable secularization. At a distance, he parallels Ernst Troeltsch of a half-century earlier. Troeltsch, also a Protestant Liberal, assumed that Christianity was supposed to be "absolutely" (i. e., objectively) the best religion, and he was honest enough and shrewd enough to see that on those terms, the Christianity of his day could not deliver on its (perceived) obligations.

[27] Covenant can be found in Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* which he cites. Two volumes: New York: Harper and Row, 1962 and 1965, translating the German of 1957 and 1960.

[28] The choice to treat the world of appearances as illusory is outlined in chapter 9 of

in biblical religion acutely sharpened.

4.4   The Trinity and its Cultural Origins

The concept of the Trinity appears to be an example of a socially constructed cosmic reality. It can illustrate some of what has gone before and prepare for what is still to come. In the Indo-European world, everything in heaven and earth is divided into three departments or functions: the world is seen through a "tripartite ideology."[29] The first function has to do with legitimacy and order and is presided over by two deities in charge of cosmic and juridical (or social) order. The second function has to do with action and is presided over by the god of war. The third function has to do with sustenance, nutrition, health, and so on. All this can be found in the technical literature.[30]

In the Indo-European pagan religions, mostly nature-focused, the gods act when they bring gratification in life. When the inversion of goods by biblical religion that we saw on p. 122 of Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism* (section 2.1 above) is viewed through the lens of the tripartite ideology, what results is Exposure, Limitation, and Need (section 2.2 above), respectively the work of God the Son, God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit. Details are elsewhere and need not be repeated here.[31]

That this is an example of a socially constructed reality should be obvious. Other cultures before contact with Indo-Europeans do not display this tripartite ideology, and it was one (but only one) influence shaping the doctrine of the Trinity. (Others were the biblical inheritance and its radical monotheism. There may be more.)

It is tempting to say that the three Persons of the Trinity are then just

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Merold Westphal's *God, Guilt, and Death*, about exilic religion.

[29] This was the conclusion of many years of work in comparative mythology and anthropology by Georges Dumézil. It is not widely known outside those disciplines and still an open issue within them, and so it is somewhat conjectural.

[30] A good guide to Dumézil's work can be found in C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil.* 1966; 2nd ed., 1973; 3rd ed., University of California Press, 1982.

[31] Andrew P. Porter and Edward C. Hobbs, "The Trinity and the Indo-European Tripartite Worldview," *Budhi* (Manila) Vol. 3, nos. 2&3 (1999) 1–28; http://www.jedp .com/trinity.html. It appeared also in *Elementary Monotheism*, ch. 3, and in *Unwelcome Good News*.

"modes" of some underlying unity, and that after noticing the cultural origins of the doctrine, all Trinitarian ideas are modalist. This would be an error, not least because the orthodox (non-modalist) doctrine of the Trinity is *itself* an example of the tripartite ideology. The error presupposes that it is possible to know or conceive of God as he is in himself, thus getting "around" the limits of human interpretation. As Alasdair MacIntyre noted invoking Hegel among others, it is impossible to separate reality from the concepts we know it with.[32] To think one can get around human interpretation leads to nonsense. To think that God can get to things in themselves independent of all interpretation would be just as incoherent, but showing that would take a lot of work. An anthropomorphic God would be required, and that is a category error that leads to much trouble.

The tripartite ideology itself is not well understood. At a minimum, we would like to understand the relationships between the three functions. Disappointment in each of them, Exposure, Limitation, and Need, would come next. When that inquiry is pursued, I suspect what people will find is that Limitation begets Exposure, and Need proceeds from both — replicating the relationship in the orthodox, non-modalist doctrine of the Trinity. But for the present, that is just speculation. Order, action, and sustenance will have to be given some conceptual depth, and they will be rooted in a philosophical anthropology.

The challenges posed by non-Indo-European cultures are not much noticed, let alone well-understood. They sometimes see things that the Indo-Europeans, especially in the West, have missed. Christianity in non-Indo-European cultures (Korea, e. g.) tends to exhibit non-tripartite understandings of the Trinity. This highlights the problems of hermeneutics and transcendence: How are we to understand our own understanding of the world, eventually including transcendence? And how are we to conceive of ultimate reality entering into our humanly interpreted world? That is the issue in the Definition of Chalcedon.

Some general observations are possible. Even if the conjecture about cultural origins turns out to be wrong (and it may), we still have to deal with Exposure, Limitation, and Need. These pains in life are real. They are typical, and they have to be faced. In effect, the work of God is still as it is in the doctrine of the Trinity. Since the conjecture about cultural

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[32] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy," p. 6.

origins is plausible, it should be met candidly. The Christian claim would then be that once the human situation is understood in tripartite terms, the Trinity is the right way to make sense of biblical religion and ultimate reality. What it would mean for Christians to construe human life in other than tripartite terms is not entirely clear. Even speculation would require the ability to think in a non-Indo-European language, and, ideally, to draw on a rich philosophical tradition in that language.

4.5   Chalcedon, Acts of God — and Science

There is a principle in the Definition of Chalcedon that is applicable far more broadly than just to the doctrine of the Person of Christ.[33] Robert Sokolowski explains the issue. First, he quotes Chalcedon:

> We teach ... that one and the same Christ, the Son, the Lord, the Only-Begotten is to be recognized in two natures without mixture, without transformation, without division, without separation; the difference of the natures being in no way abrogated through the unification; the properties of each nature remaining, rather, preserved. (Denziger, 148.)[34]

Leaving aside the doctrine of the Person of Christ, this principle can be applied more generally, to any and all acts and manifestations of God in the world.[35] It is about transcendence. Greco-Roman culture could not conceive of a transcendent ultimate reality as biblical religion understood it. That is, the only way the Greco-Roman world could conceive of a transcendent reality showing itself in this world was by "cutting a hole"

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[33] A full exposition of the doctrines of the Person and the Work of Christ belongs in theology proper. This essay is limited to the preliminaries to theology, in philosophy, history of religions, sociology, etc. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Peter Berger saw the pivotal role of the doctrine of the Person of Christ. It appears in the history of religions, not just doctrine. See *Sacred Canopy*, pp. 76–77.

[34] Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 35.

[35] Strictly speaking, the Definition of Chalcedon applies only to the doctrine of the Person of Christ. One can be as monophysite as one likes about acts of God outside the Person of Christ and still be quite "orthodox." The project of the present essay, however, is to ask what theology would look like if it were consistently Chalcedonian in regard to all of life.

in this world, by interfering with the natural course of events, by inserting itself in place of some worldly phenomenon or causation. By contrast, and for the patristic councils,

> What is according to nature, and what reason can disclose in nature, retains its integrity before the Christian God. And second, they tell us that we must think of God as the one who can let natural necessity be maintained and let reason be left intact: that is, God is not himself a competing part of nature or a part of the world (Sokolowski, p. 36).

Both sides of this quarrel are alive and well today. One cannot think of science as a threat to theology, or conceive of God as the "God of the gaps," except by conceiving divine action and presence precisely as interference with the natural order of things, as causes that *override* natural causes.

In the conflict between science and religion as it has been understood for the last three or four centuries, God has to act by causing motions, motions different from what would have happened without divine action, and that means he has to override natural causes. That controversy is too tedious, tangled, boring, pointless, and well-known to summarize here. It presupposes a view of action as will- or intention-caused motion (volokinesis, as I called it in other places). We will see better in section 5.2 below.

Some have interpreted quantum indeterminacy to indicate that natural determination of natural motions is incomplete, drawing the conclusion that there is room enough in the interstices of natural causation for God to act. This theoretical move would make God act by causes essentially no different from natural causes, in the gaps of natural causation, gaps that are supposedly provided by quantum mechanics, gaps that cannot be closed by newer science.[36] In other words, some resolutions of quantum indeterminacy are natural; others are acts of God. Or perhaps all are acts of God. But this is tacitly to bypass all the important questions about action: What motions are part of or relevant to an act, and how should those included be characterized? These are questions about narratives, not about material trajectories of moving bodies. Quite apart from its silent presuppositions in its concept of God, it mislocates the being of acts (human as well as

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[36] If I interpret his work correctly, a big if, this is the project of Robert John Russell in "non-interfering objective divine action (quantum NIODA)."

divine) solely in some chosen material trajectories and hides all questions about their choosing (narrative editing) — which trajectories, and why?[37]

This is a logical move akin to the materialism that ignores all problems of formal causes,[38] and it underlies the so-called conflict between science and religion. The fallacy of this kind of materialism consists in thinking one can deal with material causes alone, without ever confronting questions of why some phenomenon or thing is whatever it is — the problem of *formal* causes. It leaves unanswered questions about why a thing holds together as *one* thing, and not just a heap of molecules. This materialism is epidemic, for it is too easy to say we don't need to ask why a spoon is a spoon; we can see it, and we know how to use it. But the mode of being of many beings (especially spoons) is more complex than just a material assemblage, and it is easily misunderstood. It requires more than just material causes. Spoons are relatively simple; human acts are conceptually more complex, and divine acts more so than mere human acts.

Paul Ricoeur recognized the project of synthesizing action and natural causes in a single kind of causation and saw its problems.

> There are no gaps in determinism — it is total or not at all, its supremacy is in principle coextensive with empirical objectivity. To think of anything as an empirical object is to think of it in terms of law. Thus we must renounce the attempt to lodge fundamental structures of willing (project, self-determination, motivation, motion, consent, etc.) in the interstices of determinism, that is, in a general cosmology which would take phenomenal order of physical causality as its initial datum.[39]

Ricoeur's text would be more rigorous if it said "no gaps in naturalism" instead of "no gaps in determinism." Indeterminacy does have a place in the discourse of naturalism. Indeterminacy notwithstanding, the discourse of naturalism has no gaps into which existential concepts could be lodged. To try to do that is a category error; it is to misunderstand both naturalistic and existential concepts utterly.

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[37] It also presupposes a way of thinking about God (probably anthropomorphic) that goes unexamined and uncriticized.

[38] See *Living in Spin*, section 3.3, especially 3.3.2.

[39] See Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: the Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 68.

The naturalistic mind of analytic theism instinctively protests that what is indeterminate in natural causes can be determined by other causes. On the contrary, randomness is still, in effect, a natural cause; and it has a legitimate place in the discourse of naturalism. Ricoeur's point is that existential concepts like motive, will, and intention do *not* have a place in naturalistic discourse. They come from another kind of discourse, another language game, concepts with a different semantics, concepts that are not reducible to or translatable into naturalistic terms.

Neither of naturalistic discourse or the discourse of action is reducible to the other. There is only a diagnostic relation between them, and diagnosis presupposes knowing existential categories (and so the real being of what existential categories deal with) *before* correlating them with naturalistic trajectories. Charles Reagan commented on *Freedom and Nature*:

> It was readily apparent, even in the early days of modern science, that certain "anthropomorphic" concepts had no use in the languages of the natural sciences. It has been only lately, however, that we have recognized this to be true in reverse: scientific concepts have no use in much ordinary discourse, especially discourse describing "mental" states or activities, such as thinking, willing, imagining, feeling etc.
>
> Since these contexts are distinct, concepts cannot be nonchalantly transfered from one context to the other: … Removing anthropomorphisms from scientific languages made those languages increasingly more coherent. So also, avoiding "scientism" in "mentalistic" contexts has enabled us to eradicate many confusions and puzzles.[40]

An example of a better approach may help. Edward Hobbs demonstrated as an argument in form criticism that the New Testament miracle stories have the same literary form as TV advertisements and could be read accordingly.[41] TV advertisements are not about whether Mr. Clean could

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[40] Charles E. Reagan, "Ricoeur's Diagnostic Relation," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 8 (1968) 586.

[41] Edward C. Hobbs, "Gospel Miracle Story and Modern Miracle Stories," in *Gospel Studies in Honor of Sherman Elbridge Johnson*, ed. Massey H. Shepherd Jr. and Edward C. Hobbs, *Anglican Theological Review*, Supplemental Series, Number Three, March 1974,

in physical fact rise out of a kitchen sink in a burst of sparkles, like a ge-
nie rising from a magic lamp. Yet proponents of a literal interpretation of
miracles would, if their hermeneutic were adopted here, complain that it
is unfair to rule out apriori the possibility that Mr. Clean could do such a
thing. On the contrary, to even *ask* whether Mr. Clean could "literally" do
what he appears to do in the TV ad is a category error, to mistake the *form*
of the advertisement.[42] If anything, TV advertisements *presuppose* that
the literal interpretation is false; they make their point only on the ironic
basis of that presupposition. To make the category mistake of taking an
advertisement literally is to commit precisely the fallacy that Chalcedon
rejected: truncating one discourse to make room for another. The irony-
challenged, of course, will never be able to conceive any non-naturalistic
interpretation of acts of God. For them, transcendence is conceivable only
in naturalistic terms, i. e., as an invisible extension of the natural, but one
that works more or less like the intramundane natural.

The fallacy that Chalcedon reacts against has a simple general form.
It consists in thinking that two different discourses dealing with the same
phenomenon can be synthesized, by interpreting them to have the same
logic, the same categories of explanation. That is the easy way to make
room in one for claims in the other, but it doesn't work. It can and does
happen that one needs to take into account the results of the other, as when
theology should not be contradicting the results of critical history or any
other science, whether natural or social.

In one form, this fallacy is even simpler and was long ago common
knowledge. It consists in overlooking the principle that a contradiction
can be posed only between two answers to the *same* question. Answers
to different questions may bear little relation to each other, and if their
contexts are forgotten, logical havoc results.[43] One instance that bears
on relations between science and religion can be found in Collingwood's

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pages 117–126. Available online: http://www.pcts.org/ journal/miracle.html, .pdf, .dvi; or
as http://www.pcts.org/journal/hobbs2002a.html.

[42] Having recognized the NT miracle texts as advertisements, one will rightly ask, Ad-
vertisements for what? The short answer is Exposure, Limitation, and Need. For a little
detail, see *By the Waters of Naturalism*, sections 3.3 and 7.2 and passim.

[43] This was the point of chapter V, "Question and Answer," in R. G. Collingwood's
Autobiography (Oxford University Press, 1939). Ever the dutiful philosopher, he didn't
point out that confusion about which question is being answered (or which story one is part
of) is the pivot of jokes. His adversaries would have taken it as humor at their expense.

treatment of causation in the *Essay on Metaphysics*.[44] Aristotle famously observed that being is said in many ways. The same goes for causation. Collingwood exhibits three or four senses of merely *efficient* causation, none of which is reducible to any of the others. The relationships between them are always diagnostic, which I think means hermeneutical as well.

We have seen a recurrent pattern of different discourses, both true, neither truncated. Respecting both the this-worldly and the divine is what Chalcedon insisted on in the doctrine of the Person of Christ.

The principle generalizes, and it applies to sociology of knowledge in particular: In the discourse of the sociology of knowledge, all human religions, including all covenants, are human social constructions.[45] In the discourse of confessional theology, a covenant is an act of God, offered by God and not negotiated.[46] It is a category error to think that one discourse must be truncated or interfered with to make room for the other discourse. Learning this lesson in the case of the doctrine of the Person of Christ took several centuries, and it was a difficult lesson. The category error of mistaking God for an objective phenomenon within the world is very tempting. It leads to a very comforting form of bad faith, the pretense that what was a human choice was instead necessity, because acts of God have been objectivated and thereby alienated from the human acts of faith by which they are perceived and defined (cf. sec. 6.6). This shields the covenant community from responsibility for its choices.

Natural science is not the principal challenge to theology — critical history, historical and cultural relativity, and religious pluralism are.[47] The next step after Chalcedon is to say that ultimate reality truly enters into this world, shows itself, and acts. It shows itself and enters into our humanly

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[44] R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 1939) chapters 29–34.

[45] Cf. sections 4.2 and 4.3

[46] See Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, pp. 235–236. But what sort of theology is it that has so many and so various covenants in it? The two decalogues (Exodus 20 (E) and 34 (J)) that are wildly different? This requires something a bit beyond the reach of the irony-challenged.

[47] We saw this above in section 3.2. It was argued at length in *Elementary Monotheism*, chapter 9, and in "History, Relativity, and Pluralism," *Budhi* (Manila) VI nos. 2 and 3 (2002) 223–234. A pdf is at http://www.jedp.com/hrp.pdf. Critical history, historical and cultural relativity, and religious pluralism are respectively instances of Exposure, Limitation, and Need. More recent challenges are the confessionality of covenantal religion, and more simply, just making sense of transcendence at all.

and socially constructed realities. How is a matter of transcendence. There are many ways to misunderstand that, but only one need be emphasized here: To think one has grasped transcendence or proven its presence is a symptom of the category error that Chalcedon opposes.

Another kind of caution is worth note here. H. Richard Niebuhr, in *The Meaning of Revelation*, spoke of two kinds of history: history as written by insiders and as written by outsiders. He also said that the view from outside (often critical) is a moment in the life of insiders and so an occasion in their history.[48] Like the principle of Chalcedon, this qualification also generalizes: Some intramundane phenomena perspicuously display the presence of transcendence. We call that immanence. What is said about immanent phenomena from an intramundane point of view should be taken into account in the language of transcendence, in the ways we speak of divine presence. Transcendence should not interfere with the intramundane, nor vice versa.

As an application of the principle of Chalcedon, we may collect into a genre many modern "refutations" of the divinity of Christ, the origins of Christianity, and the like. They depend on presupposing a monophysite theology to criticize: that is to say, they oppose a theology that compromises (or just deflects attention from) the intramundane dynamics of some aspect of the events of Jesus or early Christianity. The "refutation" consists of exhibiting a plausible intramundane explanation for the phenomena in question and then claiming that this or that part of the origins of Christianity was "nothing but" the proposed intramundane reality. Sometimes they are right about the claimed intramundane reality; sometimes the claims are dubious. The logical sleight-of-hand turns on deflecting attention from the question of transcendence: whether there is another, and transcendent, reality present in this one phenomenon (two *phuseis* in one *hypostasis*). Deflecting attention is the trick of a stage-magician (or the pivot of self-deception[49]). Transcendence turns on dealing with unanswerable questions, as we shall see in section 6.2. The "rebuttal" then challenges, "if you are claiming such-and-such transcendence, *demonstrate* it, *exhibit* it": but that conceals in its presuppositions a demand for something intramun-

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[48] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* p. 84–85/62/44 (1st, 2nd, and 3rd editions).

[49] See Herbert Fingarette, *Self Deception* (1967; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), chapter 3.

dane as an answer. It wants something that is logically coercive, but transcendence, when it is candid, is always a confessional commitment.

To reiterate and emphasize, the language of transcendence should not be misunderstood in ways that make impossible simultaneous description of an immanent phenomenon's intramundane aspects. Scientists put nature to the question (Francis Bacon); but philosophers and theologians do not put God to the question (though many clearly think they can). Sometimes the only way transcendence can protect itself from this sort of logical rape by the pious is by speaking the language of irony. Irony ought to put it well beyond the reach of science-envious philosophers or any who would subject it to the kind of criticism whose goal is proof (or disproof) of its transcendent character. Nevertheless, as Martin Heidegger remarked, nothing can withstand bullying by logical analysis (subject and predicate, reduction to propositions; Aristotelian, in his case). But that language (p. 64, the Principle of Sufficient Reason) is metaphysically unchaste.

Chapter 5

Language, Logic, and Reason

5.1 Tradition-Bound Rationality

Alasdair MacIntyre asked, about competing traditions in ethics, "whose justice? which rationality?" Others saw the phenomenon before MacIntyre did, in the history and philosophy of science, when Thomas Kuhn dismantled comfortable myths about the so-called "scientific method" that were supposed to resolve all disputes between theories in the sciences. Instead all that was left was what we have seen, the discretionary authority of the scientific community. As with the sciences, so with ethics, MacIntyre's interest, and so with competing traditions in religion, our interest.

The phenomenon has a general shape. A community has an interest in some problem, be it science, ethics, or something else. Its interest — its discussion, in effect — has a history. Along the way, problems have been posed, sometimes solved, and new problems have grown out of old ones. It may come to pass that the community is stymied and (for a while, at least) can make no progress.

Call the received perspective on the phenomenon paradigm *A*. If a new perspective, call it *B*, is proposed, the community has to decide between *A* and *B*. If *B* can explain *A*'s successes and failures better than *A* itself can, then there is rational reason to choose *B* over *A*. What goes for paradigms in a theoretical tradition of inquiry goes for whole traditions themselves.

MacIntyre laid out some of the features of a crisis by which a disciplinary community comes to a paradigm shift. (1) The new paradigm must solve the problem that the old one could not. (2) The new paradigm must

explain how the old paradigm got into trouble. (3) The new paradigm must in some sense make the same tradition viable again. (4) Often the crisis is seen *as* a crisis only after it has been resolved in the new paradigm.[1] This has come to be called "tradition-bound rationality."

This is by now so familiar in the history of science that it occasions little anxiety. The history of biblical religion is different: One can identify crises in the past and see how they were solved, advancing the growth of biblical religion. But there is still great anxiety, perhaps because when biblical religion moved into the Greek world, it took over from Greek philosophy a craving for a-historical absolutes (as in platonisms), and that is odd in the perspective of a historical religion.

Platonisms and craving for a-historical absolutes defend themselves by accusing historically knowledgeable critics of nihilistic relativism. Indeed, those who have given up on a-historical absolutes sometimes plunge into nihilistic relativism as a form of licence and self-indulgence. But in tradition-bound rationality, we are not betrayed into nihilistic relativism. Nihilistic "relativism" is marked by an inability to judge, an inability to articulate standards in morals — or anything else, for that matter. Historical and cultural relativity entail, by contrast, precisely that you *do* have, relative to your own time and place, some sort of cosmic and social order. That is enough.

Relativ*ity* is an empirical, or better, historical fact: relativity to time and culture is available even within the Bible. We live, as Thomas Kuhn and Alasdair MacIntyre said, in conversations that have lasted centuries. We live in communities that have faced changing problems and challenges, and dealt with them in their own best judgement — with a discretionary authority, a liberty of choice, sometimes seen even within the Bible.[2]

This is what it means for the covenant community to travel through history in company with a transcendent Other: Their problems can be solved one at a time, and the Other will be with them on their journey, and it's okay that they do not have answers to all questions for all peoples for all time.

One of the consequences for theology is that philosophy is to be done

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[1] *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 362–363.

[2] It is in many places in the Common Documents, the New Testament, and the Talmud. See section 3.6 above.

within the larger context of history, rather than history within a larger context of philosophy. History comes first, because philosophy has a history.[3]

5.2   Narrative and Human Action

History is the larger context for human actions, and yet philosophers have traditionally approached them quite differently. History is clearly a product of narrative, even if also about real events. We will approach human action in the same way, though philosophers have traditionally conceived human acts in a very different way. The mainstream philosophical tradition thinks of an act as a kind of motion, motion that is caused by intention or will, rather than more usual natural causes. In effect, will and intention are treated as efficient causes on a par with other natural causes. But if one were able to inquire into the natural causes of bodily motions (for only the most obvious example), we would only find neurons stimulating other neurons. The question then arises, of which neural activity is this intention composed?[4] There are many things happening at all times in a human brain, so why are some of them part of this "intention" and others just necessary background parts of being alive (autonomic functions, e. g.)? Such questions can only be answered by resort to some sort of narrative, and that narrative has to come *before* the questions can be asked or answered. Yet we persist in thinking like physicists, for whom the world can be arbitrarily subdivided into small parts, ignoring the rest. But we are not in the land of physics; we are in the land of narrative, and we don't know it.

All narratives have to face the question what to include, what can be left out (as background or as irrelevant), and how to characterize what gets included.[5] Until we know which motions we are talking about, we do not know what action we are looking at. Until we know the action of interest, we don't know which motions are relevant. The relation between narrative and action is circular.[6] The circle is not vicious or arbitrary; it is hermeneutical. For we test it by starting with some narrative of immediate interest, and, in the background, presupposing some vision of human life

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[3] See R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (1939), *The Idea of Nature* (1945), and *The Idea of History* (1946), all published by Oxford University Press.

[4] For the general problem, see *Living in Spin*, section 3.3.1, "Yes, but which ones?"

[5] *Living in Spin*, passim, especially section 5.1, p. 126.

[6] *Living in Spin*, passim (see index, s. v. circularity).

to be achieved or enjoyed.[7] That vision of human life and success is one shared with other people, and they present one form of testing its applications. We think we know what success (sometimes called "flourishing") is, and we can tell whether a narrative fits the relevant facts. Another kind of testing comes in living: what happens when the people in a narrative have to face disappointment? The answers to that, however, depend on shared commitments about how to handle the pains of life. People do not agree about that.

Whenever some contingency affects someone's interests, the events are narratable, and there is an implied actor in the narrative. That is a way of approaching human acts in the small that can be integrated into human lives and the larger context of history. And with that perspective in hand, we can begin to understand what it means to be a historical being. That is one important feature of a historical basic life orientation.[8]

There are significant differences between this conception of action and the ways we think of phenomena in nature. In nature, a physical system has one and only one trajectory through its phase space. By contrast, an act is ontologically constituted, in part, by the narratives that can be told of it. This is both like and unlike practice in the mathematical sciences. The phenomenon appears already in the number system. A real number is given as the limit of many series: when a series x_n (taken from the rational numbers) converges to a limit,

$$\lim_{m \to \infty} x_m,$$

such that

$$\lim_{m,n \to \infty} |x_m - x_n| = 0,$$

that limit *is* the real number in question, even though it is not itself to be found among the rational numbers. It is constituted by all the series that have that same limit.

The differences between the number system and hermeneutics of action should stand out immediately: The number system has a metric, but

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[7] The initial narrative can be corrected. Vicious circularity occurs when the initial narrative is *not* tested or corrected. Gadamer's phenomenon (hermeneutical circularity) would better have been described by analogy to mathematical iterative processes. Timothy Axelrod, private communication.

[8] For a little more detail, see *Living in Spin*.

hermeneutics does not. It makes no *metric* sense to say that two narratives of one act are close to one another. ("Close" here has only a metaphorical meaning, and that meaning is out of control.) Moreover, the items on the way to the mathematical limit are all alike: they are all rational numbers, and that collection is conceptually denumerable, even in the sense of Cantor. Narratives are not like that. There is no limit to how narratives can be crafted other than human imagination — which is to say there is no limit. One may not posit that an act is the common "limit" of all possible narratives of it. Many narratives are possible, some are not mutually consistent, and inconsistent narratives may simultaneously be true. What truth means in the context of human action is evidently different from its mathematical meanings. The ambiguity of human action is radical. Nevertheless, what in human action is like the number system is that an act is the product of many possible narratives, rather than just one. It would be perverse to accept that kind of reasoning in mathematics and deny it in narrative.

Some consequences:

An act happens, in its widest sense, when some contingency affects someone's interests.[9] The telling of that contingency gives us an actor, whether named or just implied. Contingency and interest are the elements of *meaning*: what difference, what consequences, does some contingency have, and for whom? Human interests are what meaning is all about: meaning is always meaning for someone, because it tells what sort of place the world is for that person. Meaning answers all kinds of *why* questions; it places human beings within the world (cf. sec. 5.7).

It would be difficult to overemphasize the radicalness of the shift from an Aristotelian conception of action as a species of will- or intention-caused motion to a conception of action in which an act is the ontological result of a hermeneutically circular relationship between narrative (selecting which motions are of interest) and the existential demands those motions themselves make on narrators, actors, and bystanders alike. It is not just that an act is an instance of causation, though some are. Causes and causation are afterthoughts; they come *after* all the critical decisions about an action have been made, and those decisions are all a matter of editing narratives. When the tradition tries to understand action, it *starts* with

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[9] *Living in Spin*, sec. 5.2.6, p. 147. See also pp. xv, 5, 122, and passim.

causation, albeit with considerable subtlety in the meaning of causation.[10] *Living in Spin* was an extended exploration of the alternative here assumed: action and narrative stand in a hermeneutically circular relationship. Narrative comes before causation, and causation in any common sense may not be present at all.[11]

Narratives can be told in many ways, and so human action has a kind of ambiguity[12] that is rare or unknown in phenomena viewed under the aspect of nature.

When human lives and human acts are viewed naturalistically, what results are archetypes: there are only a few stock narratives, and they get recycled as needed.[13]

What happens in a narrative is often determined by the presence or absence of *other* events, which *Living in Spin* called ontological foils.[14] In this sense, an act cannot be contained within the confines of the "states" of a few "systems" and their changes. That's why we call this a *distributed* ontology of human action.

Since acts are determined in part by the narratives told of them and by their context, they can to some extent be changed after the fact, as narratives get retold or context changes as the future unfolds.[15]

Since action presupposes narrative, action also presupposes *language*.[16] In animals, we see only animal behavior, which is to be understood naturalistically.[17] True action presupposes (in principle, at least) the ability to spell out in narrative what one intends, to answer the question, "just what did you think you were doing?"

The ability to ask for and to produce on demand narratives of actions, one's own and others', is *response*-ability. With language and narrative comes responsibility, and responsibility is an activity that one may or may

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[10] A fine example of the Aristotelian (and Thomistic) conception of action can be found in Michael J. Dodds, OP, *Unlocking Divine Action; Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2012).

[11] The move to disentangle causation from intention and will is an instance of the maxim proposed by Paul Ricoeur and Charles E. Reagan, as we saw on p. 44 above.

[12] *Spin*, sec. 5.2.5

[13] This was the thesis of Mircea Eliade's *Cosmos and History*.

[14] *Spin*, sec. 5.2.4.

[15] *Spin*, p. 127 and sec. 5.2.5.

[16] *Spin*, sec. 5.2.2, 7.1.2.

[17] *Spin*, sec. 7.1.1.

not choose to participate in; it is not originally a property that actors may or may not have.[18]

Language and narrative bring a degree of ambiguity to action that is not available to non-linguistic animals. That ambiguity extends to the moral characterization of acts. At this point, we can say that the origin of both action and sin was in the acquisition of language.[19] Language introduces ambiguity into what it talks about, especially in narratives. That ambiguity is ontological, as I argued in *Living in Spin*. It won't go away. Some of it can be disambiguated — and disambiguation, like ambiguity, can happen only in language.

We are in a position to rephrase a question implicit in thinking about any basic life orientation. In its instinctive form, it runs, "What do I have to do to be a success in life?" I take "success" to be a place-holder, for it can mean quite different things in different BLOs. In Christianity, it is often called "salvation." (South Asian traditions have quite different notions of success in life.) Instead of "What do I have to do," the question should be posed as, "What has to happen for me to get or be given success in life?" That opens the logic to what Christian theology has always known: My life can be a success only because of events far from it in time and place; namely, the Work of Christ, which is part of a larger salvation history. My life makes sense only because it can be fitted into that larger history.

At this point, we have enlarged our conceptual repertoire so that it can accommodate some of the more basic features of historical-covenantal religion. Narrative takes us to two next topics, (1) revelation and history, and (2) language itself, in which narratives and history are expressed. Consider revelation and history first.

5.3   Revelation and History

The first application of narrative can be found in a historical conception of revelation. The source is H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1940).[20] In effect, revelation is that part of history that makes sense of the rest of history: Revelation is "that part of our inner history which il-

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[18] *Spin*, sec. 5.4.4 and see the index under responsibility as an activity.

[19] *Living in Spin*, section 7.1.

[20] Third edition: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

luminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible."[21] This is a direct application of the distributed ontology that we saw in section 5.2. Revelation is the events that constitute our actions as what they are[22] in the larger context of history — and, incidentally, as redeemable and redeemed. Later in *The Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr makes it clear that history by itself doesn't do this. It has to be interpreted, and the interpretation is done by a community in history — a covenantal community, with its own tradition-bound rationality, as we saw in section 5.1.

The Meaning of Revelation is a long and somewhat complicated argument, so no attempt will be made here to summarize it, but a sample may help show how revelatory history does its work.[23] Revelatory history enables a community of faith to make sense of its life, its past, and its future.

> First of all, the revelatory moment is one which makes our
> past intelligible. Through it we understand what we remem-
> ber, remember what we have forgotten and appropriate as our
> own past much that seemed alien to us.... It is the ability of
> revelation to save all the past from senselessness that is one of
> the marks of its revelatory character.[24]

In other words, revelation enables our lives, individual and communal, to assume a coherent shape. This is the work of Limitation. Revelatory history also "resurrects" our "buried past:" Niebuhr names this function second, but it is the work of Exposure. It

> "demands and permits that we bring into the light of attention
> our betrayals and denials, our follies and sins."[25]

He continues with the work of revelation that enables fellowship and community, the work that we saw in Need:

> The third function of revelation with respect to the past we
> may call appropriation. When men enter a new community

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[21] *The Meaning of Revelation*, 1st ed., p. 98; 2nd ed., p. 63; 3rd ed., p. 50.

[22] Here we differ from the tradition of Liberal Theology, for which philosophy, transcendence, and ontological constitutions are often of little interest. *Living in Spin* contained some remarks on how past events transform present events.

[23] These examples are taken from section III.ii, "Interpretation Through Revelation." In the 3rd edition, p. 58 ff.

[24] Niebuhr, pp. 58–60.

[25] Niebuhr, p. 60.

they not only share the present life of their new companions
but also adopt as their own the past history of their fellows.[26]

These are a few features of meaning in history. One more is its in-
completeness. Reinhold Niebuhr lays out contrasts in the first pages of the
second volume of his Gifford Lectures, and the term he uses for meaning
in history is a "christ" — I lower-case the word, because for the moment
it is generic, and it means no more than the revelatory events H. Richard
Niebuhr spoke of in *The Meaning of Revelation*. Indeed, the term "christ"
originally, in its Hebrew origins, "meshiach," just meant oiled or anointed
one, the person appointed to set things right, or the person appointed just to
disclose the truth about where we are. The events that do that are broader
than just persons, as the reader can easily see from Reinhold Niebuhr's
text, though he is laying preparations for Jesus as the Christ.

In some cultures or communities, a christ is not expected: history is
the wrong place to look for meaning. Nothing could be more absurd than
to offer history as a source of meaning to those who look elsewhere for
meaning. Such cultures look for meaning in nature or beyond this world,
but without any interest in history. History is too ambiguous, too dan-
gerous, too unpredictable, too unfair. Ultimate meaning is given only at
the eschaton, when revelation is fulfilled. Proximately, history discloses
enough to deal with the present and its tasks.

The feature of historical revelation that will carry us further is part of
internal history, history as it is experienced by human selves. In external
history, the historian as an outsider (or bracketing his insider status) may
see human beings as individuals already constituted as selves and related to
other selves afterward. Whatever external history may say, internal history
is different. For insiders, people are always already related to other people.
"Here we do not only live among other selves but they live in us and we in
them. . . . we are our relations and cannot be selves save as we are members
of each other.[27] (This is why to join a community is to adopt its history as
one's own.)

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[26] Niebuhr, p. 61.

[27] *The Meaning of Revelation*, 3rd ed., p. 37.

5.4   Living in Language

The second topic touched by narrative is language. Language is not a
tool or suite of tools, though it is often taken to be only that. We live in
language. It is much richer and more subtle than just a means of referring
and denoting, which seems to be the intuitive default theory of language.

Interest in language in its intense present form is I think fairly recent,
dating to about the beginning of the twentieth century. Before that, and
apart from rhetoric, language usually appeared only in philosophy of mind,
not for its own sake. The issue, however, is much older: the nature of
categories, or in scholastic philosophy, universals. For Wittgenstein (and
Aquinas long before him), the mind is active in the production of knowl-
edge, not just a passive recipient of knowledge through sensation. We
know particular things not directly but through the categories by which we
make sense of them. Those categories are analogical, not univocal, and
sometimes they may not be analyzed into parts (e. g., form and matter)
without loss.[28]

This much was scholastic but was lost and replaced by a nominalist
theory of language that takes language as merely a collection of words that
denote concepts and refer to things in the manner of tools. Those tools
are used for communication, which presupposes that the minds communi-
cating know the things they are talking about apart from and before lan-
guage. My source for the campaign against taking language as just tools of
reference and denotation is the work of John Ellis. Aquinas was system-
atic, but in the twentieth century, we don't have a system; we have only
a conversation, and none of the voices have left us complete theories. So
parts of a better theory of language must be pieced together from multi-
ple sources. To the twentieth-century philosophers of language, I would
add the early Heidegger, despite the fact that his remarks on language in
Being and Time are fragmentary and not very helpful. He is helpful with
"being in the world," and that is what language enables us to do. The
early Heidegger fits well with the later Wittgenstein. Peter Berger some-
place said that "language, self, and a world are a package, and language is
the carrier of the package."[29] That means that the relations between them

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[28] Anthony Kenny, "Aquinas and Wittgenstein," *Downside Review* 77 (1959) 217.

[29] I don't remember where he said it, and neither does he, alas. The idea can be found
in *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 133.

are somewhat circular: each presupposes the others. In section 5.6 we shall see an application of this to the problem of knowing ultimate reality. There we shall also see hermeneutical circularity, a concept elaborated by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. Making sense of things is impossible without a pre-understanding of them, but that pre-understanding is not vicious: it can be corrected.

Against the theory that the original function of language is communication, Ellis contends that the primary role of language is categorization. More to the point, we don't put *like* things together in categories; we put *unlike* things together into categories, in order to deal with them in like ways.[30] That means that all categories are essentially analogical. They often cannot be modeled as well-behaved sets in set theory.[31] The result is a faculty of analogy: Ellis doesn't say it, but that means that analogy and categorization presuppose *dealing* with things in the world. Dealing with things in the world presupposes Being-in-the-World (Heidegger), which comes before the features of language that Ellis is rightly interested in.

Analogy begins as a way of categorizing things in experience of the world. A category invokes what Charles Fillmore and George Lakoff called a *frame*: a suite of related ideas or other categories that have an integrated structure and work together. A frame is a cluster of related concepts and skills of usage (elements of the world) that one must know in order to use a word correctly. What is easily overlooked is that the frame cannot be specified *exhaustively*, even though its core features can usually be found. Indirectly, it touches the entire world. A category and its framework of usage are open-ended; the parts are impossible to enumerate exhaustively. They are also ambiguous, for what can be told in language can be told many ways, sometimes with many meanings. Part of categorization is the ability to recall things, events, and experiences from the past, and to invoke them in making sense of the present and the possible future. Recall is the pivot of narrative (sec. 5.2).[32]

Language gives us a lot more than just categories, more than just

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[30] John M. Ellis, *Language, Thought, and Logic* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 15–16, 24, 27, and passim. His remarks were in reflection on Wittgenstein's work.

[31] Cf. George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chapters 3–6.

[32] Heidegger spoke of *Wiederholung*, what we have denominated "recall."

propositions about categories and things in them. Meaning goes far beyond mere propositions. It provides irony, innuendo, context, metaphor, ambiguity, and background: all parts of a world. It is worth recovering some of the functions of language other than mere expression of propositions. Propositions would seem to need nothing more than the indicative mood, but language has also the subjunctive (things contrary to fact, or of indefinite factuality) and the optative (things wished but not factual). Where mood is expressed by auxiliary verbs (as in English), there are many kinds and degrees of subtlety and nuance beyond merely the subjunctive and the optative. But that barely touches the phenomena.

With language comes context, sometimes by presupposition, sometimes by innuendo and insinuation. Context is world, the stuff frames are made of. Ambiguity opens the way to irony, humor, play, metaphor, parody, sarcasm, and with them, typology in literature and the Bible. Simpler examples than the ambiguity of narrative are utterances that can be heard more than one way, often making sense in more than one way at the same time. Puns, in general, are the original example. A license plate "URYY4ME" makes sense also as "you are too wise for me." Misspellings belong here also.

Metaphor gives us metonymy and synecdoche, part for whole (and whole for part, I suppose, too). With them come abstraction and generalization. The syntactic transformation of nominalization — making a noun-phrase out of a concept not originally nominal — supplies prominent examples: "Death be not proud," or just fate, and destiny, and even "life," as in "life doesn't work that way," or "life has been good to her." Fate and destiny are examples of abstract concepts of surpassing subtlety. To them, we could add answers to questions that begin, "what is it about such-and-such … ?" A nominalist instinct (distrust of language),[33] inclined to dismiss the more uncontrollable and disorderly kinds of speech, would say that life, fate, death, destiny, good, evil, being, time, and the like are not real substantives. A richer ontology (one capable of some trust in language) is not so prudish.

Haiku concentrate the features of poetry: The challenge in a haiku is to pack as much world into as few words as possible.[34] Haiku show off the

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[33] Doris T. Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994), p. 1.

[34] I am indebted to Jerry Ball for many examples.

power of frames, they demonstrate that a frame extends far beyond the few features that get listed in a dictionary entry for a word or concept. What rhyme and meter in other poetic forms contribute to meaning strikes me as essential but beyond my limited powers of explanation. It is certainly not reducible to propositional claims.

Language can be used to affiliate with or disaffiliate from other people. In disaffiliation we find abuse, imprecation, execration, excoriation, cursing, ill-will, ridicule. In affiliation we find praise, thanks, blessing, encouragement. The vulgar transitive verbs for sex are commonly used to express taking advantage of someone else while supposedly acting to benefit the other. To be human is to have an interest in one's own being, but humans also have interests in others' being. Those interests may be positive or negative — or both, at once.[35] We can cooperate or compete, support other people or take advantage of them, and do *both at the same time*. Used in the imperative voice, such verbs indicate not just disaffiliation but disavowal of shared interests. In more polite language, and often by indirection, we can undertake commitment to shared interests. This means, in effect, giving oneself or withholding oneself in relationship to the other, a way of interpersonal relating that is more important and more basic than it might appear. Human beings are a part of one another, whether we like it or not. We are part of one another no matter how we construe that interpersonal relatedness.[36]

We come last to silence, and to speaking in what's left out. Nominalism can make sense only of what's said. Broader ontologies might find sense in what's not said, left unsaid out of reticence, compunction, metaphysical modesty, or reverence. The problem with spelling out some ideas in propositions is that they can then be taken (merely on syntactical grounds) as *referring* to phenomena that are either in *this* world or in some *other* world. Phenomena "beyond" this world can always be interpreted as part of an invisible extension of this world. This world can always be extended to include anything outside of it.[37] The strategy against this abuse is just silence. And this is an ancient concept: For the Greek word μύω, meaning keep silent, is also the root of *mystery*. Without silence, there is no

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[35] People (and philosophers) tend to see one or the other, but seldom both.

[36] See *The Screwtape Letters*, No. 18, for brief notice of this feature of human existence.

[37] That is elementary in formal set theory, and I think informal language follows the logic of axiomatic set theory well enough.

mystery.

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) can be invoked to safeguard the control bequeathed by logic ancient and modern. But mystery, silence, and the sacred do not survive the PSR. The threshold of transcendence lies in questions about things in the world that do not have (and are not intended to have) answers in terms of other things in this world: unanswerable questions, to which we come in section 6.2. Trying to reason beyond that threshold in the same way as we reason this side of that threshold inevitably leads to trouble.

The other principle often invoked to govern logical reasoning in Western philosophy is the "law" of non-contradiction. I don't know of any examples that would qualify as genuine contradictions, but other people apparently do. The first point to observe is that non-contradiction applies only to *propositions*, in answer to *questions* (R. G. Collingwood), and two answers to the *same* question may not contradict. Outside those limits, the "law" of non-contradiction does not apply because it does not make sense. Many modes of speech transcend those limits utterly and nevertheless say a great deal about how things are with the world. To impose the "law" of non-contradiction restricts discourse to propositions, which also restricts it to what is under conceptual control. But many very real features of human life and the world — arguably the most important ones — are not under conceptual control. To pretend that they are goes hand-in-hand with the PSR.[38]

Stephen Mulhall, contrasting the Anglophone Analytic and the Continental traditions in philosophy, notes that for Analytic philosophy, a contradiction is a dead-end, but for Continental philosophy, it may disclose essential features of human existence.[39]

The parables of Jesus and, famously, Zen sayings are obvious examples of language beyond non-contradiction. Irony and paradox do not survive the law of non-contradiction, but irony is pivotal in radical monotheism, affirmation of this world as good in full view of its pains: see section 2.1 above, page 122 of *Radical Monotheism*. Experience of the sacred is known for paradox,[40] and I lump them together. There is a fundamental

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[38] See section 6.1 below.

[39] Stephen Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 12–13.

[40] See e. g., Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapter 2, "Ambivalence and the

irony in turning "the causes for which we live all die" into the focus of a basic life orientation, in effect a cause. It would be a tempting logical move to construe the last phrase, "into a cause," as a "into a meta-cause," but I think that loses the ironic meaning. Better to savor the contradiction in all its atrocious pain.

We live in language; there is no getting around it or out of it, no non-linguistic place from which to criticize it.

5.5   Truth as Troth

The nature of truth has occupied philosophers from the beginning, and the principal conceptions of truth have been correspondence and coherence. In correspondence, what is true is an idea or a proposition, and if true, it corresponds to some reality in the world. The trouble is that this seems to presuppose knowledge of the thing in the world apart from our ways of knowing it, in order to compare them and see whether they "correspond."[41] Truth as correspondence can perhaps be restated to get around that fallacy, but it's not clear that can be done and still keep correspondence as the primordial or root form of truth.

Coherence is nice, if it is available, but sometimes it isn't. Then we wait, with questions unresolved and postponed until better information becomes available. That does not mean we have no truth.

Martin Heidegger saw truth as disclosure, that is, as a kind of un-hiddenness of things that emerges in the course of human dealings with the world. Truth as disclosure certainly comes before truth as correspondence, as he explained in *Being and Time*.[42] As section 44 progresses, truth emerges in the end as something Dasein-relative. In *Basic Problems*, he moves truth from subjects and objects: It thus will emerge that "truth neither is present among things [objects] nor does it occur in a subject but lies — taken almost literally — 'between' things and the Dasein."[43] In other

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Sacred."

[41] See remarks above, p. 41, and Alasdair MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy."

[42] See section 44, "Dasein, Disclosedness, and Truth," at p. 261, H-218. Heidegger there explains how "correspondence" works.

[43] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems in Phenomenology*. 1975; trans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, by Albert Hofstadter. See section 18(a), p. 214, German 304–306.

words, truth lies in relationships between Daseins (plural) and things in the world. It is part of the worlding of the world itself.

I would accordingly look before disclosure and start with truth as *troth*, originally a variant spelling of *truth*, one and the same word. The two spellings have diverged in meaning. Truth as troth is not an idea that I know where to find in the literature (other than dictionaries, which know it well), so the present remarks are highly conjectural, little more than a suggestion of where to look for more insight.

To start with troth is to start with interpersonal relations, personal commitments, and the world as a place that supports human life and human flourishing *together*. To plight one's troth is to promise — at some cost and risk — to be there *for* other people. This is to put being true to other people before the truth of propositions and to ground truth of logic and language in that being-true of people. It is also a way of making patent in Heidegger's truth as disclosure the involvement of other people in Dasein's constitution. Disclosure is an instance of meaning, and meaning always presupposes the existential presence of other people. Other people are implicitly present in human encounters with anything in the world.[44] That troth is at the root of truth.

The question in regard to the truth of propositions is whether I can rely upon them. But propositions are always proposed to me by some person, so other people are present before propositions are. Knowledge of the world is always shareable, and usually shared. Personhood and *other*-personhood are present and presupposed in any understanding of anything, anything at all, and they are there at the beginning.

The problem is that other people have a rather spotty track record. Relying on them is risky and often leads to trouble. The potential for disappointment is never far away. And so always we come back to Exposure, Limitation, and Need, and page 122 of *Radical Monotheism*: confidence that when we face disappointment, it will be our salvation and not our ultimate confounding. This is to locate the troth of particular human neighbors in the larger troth of ultimate reality itself. Lastly (in regard to troth), we

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[44] Even Heidegger saw this, in Section 26 of *Being and Time*, Macquarrie and Robinson p. 154, German p. 118. Encountering things in the world, in them we also encounter others who are present in the being of things in the world, not added onto beings that exist without them. Heidegger has in mind the Zuhanden, but his thesis could be traced also to the Vorhanden and to other Daseins.

trust in analogies with the past to come in the future. That is, we trust that the future will bestow worth and abundant life as the past has. What "as" means here is a matter of analogy, and that is a matter of judgement — creative interpretation on the part of human beings.

5.6   Hermeneutical Circularity

Philosophers have long asked how we know God or how we know which religion is correct; related, but not quite the same question. The traditional problematic assumes that some things can be *known* by reason, and some things just have to be *believed* by faith.[45] The proportions vary, depending on whom you read. Positions thought to be extreme by their opponents are often called fideism or rationalism, and official statements tend to seek a position in between, though rationalism has dominated the tradition. That tradition forces phenomena into subjective and objective categories.

I would prefer another problematic, one in which the pertinent virtue is *responsibility*, not objectivity, and the problem is basic life orientation (cf. section 1.2). Here, basic life orientation is not reduced to "belief" in the propositions of a creed, and the problem should not be oversimplified from the start by taking for granted as understood what is to be believed. It is not at all obvious what is to be believed, and it is not at all obvious how to come to a conception of "basic life orientation."

When people try to understand something, they presuppose the larger world into which the thing is to be fitted. But what happens when one tries to understand the largest or top level?[46] Hence the question of basic life orientation.

The need for a revised problematic can be seen by noticing that when people argue about proofs for the correctness of Christianity or the so-called "existence" of God, they don't agree about starting points, though that feature of the debates is often obscured. We can argue, but we always

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[45] See e. g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.46.2. Much of the tradition also thinks that things believed and things known are of the same order. What is believed *could* be known, but is not. It would make logical sense, it would not be a category error, to know what has to be believed.

[46] There may not *be* a "top" level in a mathematical sense, but there is in the sense that sooner or later, people have to end questioning and come to at least a provisional understanding of life and the world — not as a whole, but as far as we can see it.

presuppose some starting point, and so the arguments, when clarified (if they ever are), amount to a clash of warring starting points. How can one judge, if there is no neutral standpoint from which to judge? The lack of a neutral starting point is the problem that tradition-bound rationality was invented to solve. But to see this much dismantles only part of the received problematic.

There is a further or deeper problem. Edward Hobbs called basic life orientation "understanding."[47] Basic life orientation is implicit in acts, it is present even when not spelled out, and it is not at all obvious how to spell it out, how to say what someone's BLO is. To make things worse, BLO is often ambiguous, because one and the same act can be fitted into many BLOs.[48] Recognizing a BLO can be even harder than intending one. We can easily enough say what we want to do with our lives, or intend to do; whether we actually carry out that intention is much harder to criticize. BLO can be put another way: What gives a human life some narrative coherence? That involves a great deal of interpretation and selection of what to include as important in that human life.

Historically, the problem of interpretation arose in a restricted form, the puzzle of how we make sense of texts. The term "hermeneutical circle" came to describe that process. We start with a pre-understanding of the text, usually an assumption of what kind of text it is (what genre), and then examine its parts. One can then iterate back and forth, correcting the initial assumption as necessary. This much was in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.[49] But in literature, its original home, the hermeneutical circle presupposed a world beyond the text. Here we are talking about the largest context, which is no longer to be taken for granted. The question is precisely what that larger context is. This is a question about ultimate reality (u-r).

The hermeneutical circle (and its analogs in mathematics) assume that a faulty initial assumption can be corrected. That is not entirely wrong about how a declared and professed BLO gets tested in living, but the anal-

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[47] Quoted on p. 5 above.

[48] See *Living in Spin*.

[49] *Truth and Method* (1989: Weinsheimer and Marshall translation), pp. 190–192, 291. I choose the word "iterative" with some caution. There is an analogy, but only a limited one, to iterative approximation processes in mathematics. But at least the analogy can serve to dispel misconceptions about fallacious logical circularity. Cf. p. 54 above.

ogy has great potential to mislead. Whatever we assume about ultimate reality is likely to be confirmed in our experience. That may be implicit in the choice about u-r: there is an enormous investment in that choice, and that investment will not be surrendered or amended lightly. Among the choices are taking human life in this world as a matter of nature, without looking for meaning in history; taking human life as essentially historical (which presupposes nature as prologue to, but not model for, history); taking human life in this world as defective and to be escaped from in some way.[50] It should be emphasized that in a historical BLO, not only is life essentially historical, but the meaning of life is to be found in history. History is not just a contingent fact of life; history is the source of meaning and success in life, however success is defined.

This presents a problem. As just noted, there is no standpoint independent of possible basic life orientations from which one could survey them all and then pick one, with some detachment even if not certain knowledge. In dealing with the world and human life in it, we always already have some pre-understanding.[51] That pre-understanding inevitably embodies commitments about the best way to live. It looks as if we are stuck, as if we have no control over our choices, as if we have to choose without really knowing what we are choosing or choosing from.

Yes and no. In a sense, we are thrown into a world we did not get to choose, and we are challenged to trust ultimate reality, for we don't have much control over it. There is help, however, in the form of the disappointments in life: we all meet Exposure, Limitation, and Need, whether we like them or not. What to do about them is a question we all answer, implicitly if not explicitly, in our actions and our lives.

People do disagree about BLO, but when they argue, they have to presuppose something about "the way things are." *A*'s response to and crit-

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[50] These are only the most obvious choices, and they are explored in Merold Westphal's *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapters 9–11. We return to these choices in section 6.7.

[51] The term (*Vorverständnis*) comes from Gadamer's and Bultmann's readings of Heidegger's notion of understanding in *Being and Time*. See *Being and Time*, Sections 31 ("Being-there as Understanding") and 32 ("Understanding and Interpretation"), and p. 191 (German 150), "fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception." Gadamer and Bultmann collected these three in one as a *Vorverständnis*. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 315 ff., and Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics" (1950), in *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (London: Collins, 1987), p. 141 ff.

icism of *B*'s BLO will then presuppose *A*'s "the way things are," but that may not be candid. Again, we are in a kind of tradition-bound rationality. To *B*, the error will appear as a fallacy of begging the question. And the situation is symmetrical. Only with utmost care in dissecting presuppositions can one even approach the logical clarity and integrity of a choice as tradition-bound rationality sees it.

Obviously, this sort of argument is not a quest for the falsifiability that was for some the holy grail of the philosophy of religious knowledge in the 1950s. Falsifiability presupposes a test of some recipe for finding success in life: if the recipe doesn't bring success, it is falsified.[52] That's not what radical monotheism is about. Niebuhr's remarks on his p. 122 are beyond all recipes: they are about what to do after the failure of all recipes, when the soul has surrendered and acknowledged defeat in any quest for success. Our projects collapse, and as Edward Hobbs said in his Texas lectures, there is nothing left to believe in except the collapse itself. What could falsify that? How could that BLO be framed as a falsifiable proposition? It is not an inference, either deductive or inductive. It is a choice. It is also a response to unanswerable questions, or to situations in life that give rise to unanswerable questions.

This might seem like a blind leap of faith (and so incur a charge of irresponsibility as fideism), but it is not. You can see what other people are doing with their lives, and if you can't say of people in Christianity, "I want what they have," then you shouldn't be getting mixed up in (or messed up by) Christianity.[53] In biblical language, this BLO is identified with "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."[54] That's a start, but we would like more. In any case, nobody is asked or invited to pledge his life to something that is not disclosed to him. Everybody can see.

Choice of BLO ought to elicit a certain degree of fear and trembling.

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[52] It silently presupposes a lot more: a quest for control in the sense that the human inquirer is master of questioning. In reality, the human is more like the one who is questioned than the one who puts questions.

[53] This presupposes that the particular Christians in view are well-behaved enough so one can see what they are *trying* to do with their lives, even if they fail. But it's not always possible to see. Sometimes the disfigurement in their lives is so bad that one can hardly tell what they are trying to do. Still, it is surprising when enough faith can show through the disfigurement of sin that anti-Christians find even bad Christians obnoxious — obnoxious for their virtues, though the vices are the excuse for condemnation.

[54] Jacob is only the beginning; the God in question is the Lord of History in the Exodus and Former Prophets.

It is impossible to know *apart* from a chosen BLO what is the right BLO. All choices have a circular logic, simply because they presuppose some experience of the world, but knowing the world always already embodies some BLO. Experience of the world means some sort of knowledge of "the way things are," but that is one of the colloquial names of God, as in "that's just the way things are." The circularity of BLO is hermeneutical in the sense that it can be corrected,[55] but there is no way out of starting with an already-chosen BLO. Hermeneutical circularity cannot be escaped. It is a risk and a commitment, not a choice between options that are well understood objectively, that is, put before one in ways that do not involve the one who chooses. (That's the pertinent meaning of "objective").

Put it another way. I think it sounds more paradoxical than it is. Ultimate reality is what we are talking about, and reality is not objective, it is a matter of hermeneutics, which inevitably means responsible choice (sec. 3.6). Reality is voluntary. This does not leave us without reality contact, we are not abandoned, reality has still plighted its troth for us. Though our knowledge of reality is not objective, reality will nevertheless object to us. In that objecting to us lies our only hope.

5.7   The Meanings of Why

What appears in Aquinas's Five Ways to be simply an argument for the existence of God begins with something more basic: the meanings of "why?" There are many problems here, and the exposition in Question 2, article 3 is too hasty. In the first place, the Five Ways are usually mistaken for proofs; they are not, though they do qualify as probings.[56] In the second place, and more importantly, they are about the meanings of "why?" and how asking why leads an inquiry eventually to some ultimate answer — one of which it can be said, "and this all men call God." Leaving aside proofs as a distraction, the meaning of why is more interesting.

Aquinas takes the meanings of why from Aristotle's four Becauses,

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[55] That's what Exposure, Limitation, and Need do.

[56] See for example David B. Burrell, "The Performative Character of the 'proofs' for the existence of God." *Listening* 13 (1978/Winter) 20. Anthony Kenny, in *The Five Ways: Saint Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence* (RKP, 1969; University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), throws much light and a good deal of doubt on the soundness of the Five Ways if they are construed as proofs.

counting efficient cause twice (once for change, once for motion). In all five cases, to seek a cause (and ask for a because) opens a line of questioning, in a series of "causes," and that series terminates eventually, in something he calls God.

Some observations, which we will then unpack: (0) There are problems in Aquinas's argument. People often take it to prove more than it does. (1) Aristotle's four becauses are quite abstract, and they are not the why-questions we ask when life hurts and the question matters most. (2) One why question leads to others, and a series can result. (3) Such series of questions come to an end, not because they are ended by terminal causes but because the questioner has to get on with life. Question*ing* cannot go on for ever, and so the meaning of the questioning changes, in order to terminate the series. (4) To ask why is to ask for connections between phenomena in the world; and (5) the world is always a world *for humans*. World is itself an existential phenomenon that grows out of the structure of human existence.[57] (6) Human existence — 'Dasein' in Heidegger — is about *understanding* the world and things in it, and understanding leads to interpretation, explanation, and articulation (all linguistic phenomena). (7) Dasein is engaged in *coping*, which is to say finding possibilities for living in the world. (8) That is, Dasein looks for what Bestows Life Or Imposes Death (the bloids). For biblical religion (though not outside of it), the bloids will open the way back to page 122 again. (9) Dasein is always existentially in company with other people, whether or not they are physically present. They are an essential part of understanding, which is to say, of *meaning*. Meaning is about the possibilities for living. (10) Some questions are unanswerable, and they will be the entry into transcendence. (11) At this point, we will be in a position to return to Aquinas's logic, to how termination of why-questions leads to the gods and possibly to the God of biblical religion.

(0) There are problems in Aquinas's Five Ways. In the first place, the translator has to make a choice about articles, since Latin has none, and English forces a distinction. In the conclusion of each Way, "quod omnes dicunt Deum," is *Deum* to be given an article, whether definite or indefinite? (And should it even be capitalized?) Fortunately, Aquinas provides an answer in Question 11, article 3. Since he there finds it necessary

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[57] This is sense three of Heidegger's meanings of 'world' in *Being and Time*, Macquarrie and Robinson, p. 93; German p. 65.

to argue that God is one, we may safely read the Five Ways as arguing merely that there is at least one God; in Question 2, article 3, there could be many.[58] So in the Five Ways, "Deus" does not yet refer to the one God. *Deus* is not yet the God of the Bible. What we have arrived at is more like "ultimate reality" than God. It would be unfair to fault Thomas for not knowing Paul Tillich, but it is quite fair to fault Thomas's readers today. People don't agree on what ultimate reality is, or even whether it is personal. Aquinas's arguments get to that later. In the meantime, unless one is content to remain within an Aristotelian framework, we need to re-understand what it means to ask why.

(1) Aristotle's four kinds of why don't tell much about asking why when things are difficult or painful. To be sure, his classification seems sound (at its own level, his list seems indeed to be exhaustive). They all ask for connections between some phenomenon of interest and the rest of the world: temporally (efficient and final causes); logically (formal causes); or in terms of what the phenomenon of interest is made of (material causes). As stated, this classification is ideal for a certain kind of naturalism, but often we are interested in more than just nature when we ask why of phenomena in our lives. Typically, to ask why of some phenomenon is to request its connections with the rest of the world. Answers don't take the simple form of citing one of Aristotle's causes. The question in effect asks, "give me a narrative, a narrative that I can live in." Show me how I can live in the world — and make sense of the pains of life, because that's where the hard part of living comes. A narrative explains a contingency that affects someone's interests, and explanation usually goes well beyond just naturalistic efficient causes.

(2) One question leads to others: A preliminary simple answer supplies some relevant connection between the phenomena asked about, but there are always more connections beyond the first. Questioning can be pursued, resulting in a series of "causes" — or *becauses*, a better translation of αἰτία.

(3) Eventually, the questioner has to get on with living, or at least with some immediate task. This is the reason why a series of answers has to come to some terminus, not, as in the Five Ways because all series of

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[58] My source is John P. O'Callaghan, in a paper read at the Dominicans' conference, Oakland, California, July 2014, "What Has Athens to do With Jerusalem?"

causes terminate.[59] That is the *practical* reason why questioning termi-
nates. There are several different *logical* ways in which it gets terminated.
In one, further questioning is simply postponed, possibly indefinitely. In
another, the line of questioning is about some puzzle, and the answers may
simply not be available. In a third, the meaning of the questioning can be
changed in order to bring the inquiry to a stopping point. Thus questioning
turns from items in a series of causes to the series itself (which thereby as-
sumes an ontological status it did not have before). In a fourth, the motive
or spirit in which the question is asked is unanswerable; unanswerable at
least in terms of intra-mundane connections. "Why did this have to happen
to me?" is the prototype of unanswerable questions. The question can be
left explicitly unanswered, or the meaning of the question can be changed
to an inquiry for some proximate efficient cause. Such change of meaning
fends off the original existential question. For more about unanswerable
questions, see (10) below, and section 6.2.

(4) Continuing from the series of causes in (2), the world is a web of
connections, and the questioner wants to see more of that web than just an
immediate link. The questioner wants to connect a phenomenon of interest
to the known or taken-for-granted world. This incidentally presupposes
that the conversation partners have (or can come to) a shared understanding
of how the world works.

The meaning of causation is more a quest for connectedness between
things than it is about particular connections. That is, it is about the web of
connections in the world itself; it is not to be kept at the low level of items
in a series of answers, without asking about the series themselves. The
worlding of the world is more than just the aggregate sum of all beings
(or causes). Such an aggregate sum would move toward taking efficient
causes as the prototype, and the naturalistic efficient causes of physics
as the prototype of the prototype, on the assumption that all other causes
could be derived from these. That would limit causation to the propagation
of Riemann invariants along characteristics in systems of hyperbolic partial
differential equations. It would effectively hide all other kinds of causes,
all other becauses, and all human existential questions.

(5) The reasons why one phenomenon is connected to another are orig-

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[59] There are infinite series of causes, as anyone familiar with the world of physics (the
world under the aspect of the differential calculus) well knows. Even Aquinas waffles on
the possibility of infinite series of causes, in the *Summa*, 1.46.2.

inally existential; they don't come from physics. That is, the world is a world for humans. Worlding is something the world does, and it does it *for humans*. Worldhood is human-relative. The world worlds by backgrounding things in the world, that is, by enabling humans to discriminate between one thing and another, between figure and background, and so on.[60]

(6) Human existence is about understanding the world and things in it. This was Heidegger's structure of Being-in-the-World. Understanding is pre-verbal, or perhaps better, tacit and instinctive, a matter of skills rather than explanations.[61] When we don't understand something (and know we don't understand it), we resort to explanation and interpretation, by asking someone else how to understand that something. For Heidegger, interpretation and articulation in language come after understanding. Whether that is a genuine order relation or whether understanding and explanation exist in a circular relationship is an open question. We probably don't need to answer it.

(7) Dasein's Being-in-the-World is about coping, finding ways to live in the world. Asking *why* always has overtones of "show me how to live with such-and-such a phenomenon." Sometimes possibilities for living are implicit in the world simply as context. Thus astrophysics supplies context for human living today. More often, questioning is not about distant context on the horizon. Someone wants to know how to cope with some proximate challenge or task, or someone asks about coping itself, about its own Being-in-the-World. That sort of questioning is on the edge of unanswerable questions.

(8) To ask for possibilities for living is to ask what Bestows Life Or Imposes Death: the Bloids. That is a functional definition of the gods. One can stop with the bloids, especially in informal colloquial language, and many do. When doubts arise about them, the way is opened to the Void that lies after the failure of all the gods, as we saw it on page 122 of *Radical Monotheism*. In effect, to ask why, to ask about the possibilities for living,

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[60] This appeared in *Being and Time*, Section 14, "The Idea of the Worldhood of the World in General," especially p. 91 (German p. 65), sense (3): "'World' can be understood in another ontical sense — not, however, as those entities which Dasein essentially is not and which can be encountered within-the-world, but rather as that '*wherein*' a factical Dasein as such can be said to 'live'. Here again there are different possibilities: 'world' may stand for the 'public' we-world, or one's 'own' closest (domestic) environment."

[61] See *Being and Time*, section 31 ff.

is to ask about the gods, whether or not they are called gods. To ask why always has theological overtones. Edward Hobbs's definition of theology was "the use of language to make a home for man in the cosmos." That doesn't say which religion; it's just a functional definition that is religion-neutral.

(9) Other people are always in the existential vicinity, and this Heidegger bumped into but never really explored very well. (See section 4.1 above.) It is missing from his definition of Dasein in the beginning of *Being and Time*. Yet in Section 26 on Being-with, he noticed that when I encounter something so simple as a spoon, I encounter other people for whom also it is a spoon. Neither spoon-hood nor the meaning of any other thing in the world is simply inherent in the bearer of that meaning.[62] Things get their meaning from their shared experience by humans. This does not rule out disagreements; quite the contrary, disagreements are themselves possible only where there are multiple people with whom to disagree. The meaning of Being is inherently sharable by many people. That much is in sociology (see Berger and Luckmann); grounding it in ontology is more subtle. The *being* of beings involves other people, as Heidegger saw, though none too clearly.

(10) Questioning generally begins by seeking intramundane connections between things in the world. Sometimes there are no answers. Why do I have to die? Why did this happen to me (for ill *or* for good)? Why do people have to suffer? Why pain?

The last is ambiguous. Pain is a legacy of biology; the evolution of animals would have been impossible without pain or its functional equivalent.[63] But in humans, mere physical pain has been elevated into something existential. To call it a cry from the heart is true but not very helpful. One could ask, "a cry to whom?", and that question is legitimate. We come to it below. In any case, this sort of why-questioning can always be turned back (or turned away from) by giving it intra-mundane answers, as in efficient causes of the suffering immediately in view. But that is to miss the point.

(11) Aquinas's pattern, and his final step in each of the five ways, is the

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[62] This is contrary to most of the Western tradition, in which the what-it-is of a thing is inherent in the thing itself.

[63] One could reasonably complain about biology, why didn't we evolve the ability to turn off pain at will when it doesn't do any more good? Why don't we have natural anti-inflammatories? There are, of course, naturalistic answers from within biology, but the questioner wants something more.

move from intra-mundane questioning to transcendence. When Aquinas terminates each of the five series of causes, he does so in a way that changes the meaning of the questioning and turns it toward something no longer intramundane: toward something transcendent. That alone, by itself, is not sufficient to characterize the transcendent sought, and I don't think there is a common answer in all five cases. Getting to a common answer takes more work, which Aquinas doesn't do in that article. He just takes them all to be "what everybody calls God," though calling it "God" is a little more specific than is justified at this early stage.

We have shown that when someone terminates a sequence of intra-mundane why-questions, what the questioner shifts to is asking about ultimate reality or some aspect of it. And people disagree about what ultimate reality is. The history of religions shows many possible conceptions of ultimate reality.

Chapter 6

A Little About God

6.1   On Not Understanding God

It is commonly observed that we can know some things about God, but
there are other things we cannot know about God. Different voices in the
tradition apportion knowing and unknowing differently. The philosophical
possibilities are fairly well explored and well documented. I would like to
bypass most of it for reasons of caution that will become apparent quickly.
(Bypassing it does not mean disagreement with all of it.) It does seem to
me that the traditional posing of the *problem* insidiously moves in direc-
tions that make it hard to treat well. I don't think it is a problem that can
be "solved," and part of the problem itself is to see why that is so.

   The need for a different approach can be seen by imagining what would
happen if philosophers came up against an inquirer who is new to their
conversation and who says, "God? God?! I don't know that word; how
do you spell it? What does it mean?" In effect, he replies to Aquinas's
"quod omnes dicunt Deum" with "No, actually, *not* everybody calls this
'God'." There is not much the philosophers can do with such an inquirer
except begin from basics in human life in more detail than Aquinas does in
the Five Ways. It is time to look at how questioning about ultimate reality
arises in life.

   Let me try to state the caution in more technical language. As the
tradition has it, we can say some *positive* things about God, but we must
also deny those claims (in a *via negativa*), and in the end, our language
is analogical, and *analogy* will bridge the gap between our unknowing

and such knowing as we are capable of. But the move to inquire about "God" — already by invoking that word — imports more about God that is positive than the via negativa and a careful treatment of analogy will allow, and so the cautions that appear later in the traditional method are subverted at the beginning. Positive conceptions of God at the beginning never quite get to the cautions of a via negativa or the qualifications of a doctrine of analogy.[1] Rather than begin with positive affirmations about God while never quite getting to the negative qualifications, it might be better to approach ultimate reality slowly and cautiously, with respect for the unknown built in from the beginning.[2]

We have some preparation in asking what it means to ask "why" in section 5.7 above. The issue is unanswerable questions (UAQs). In the end, even sequences of answerable questions about intramundane phenomena have to be truncated for practical reasons, and at that point they lead to unanswerable questions. We deal with them differently. Or better, we deal with aspects of life that raise unanswerable questions differently from those that raise only answerable questions. UAQs point to their roots in life, and those roots ought to be open to description and criticism.

That is why we start with unknowing, before we can say much about ultimate reality. A friend nervous about the via negativa (our unknowing of God) once insisted that the via negativa comes only after prior and larger positive affirmations about God. That may or may not be true, but for what it is worth, we have already made quite strong positive affirmations about ultimate reality when we stipulated that, for historical-covenantal religion, life in history is to be affirmed as good in full view of its pains: Exposure, Limitation, and Need. That characterization of historical religion didn't tell much of what it is about ultimate reality that makes it right to put a positive construction on the pains of life. That question is unanswerable, which leaves us confronting a mystery.[3] To say that we deal with unan-

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[1] Neglecting the via negativa and misunderstanding analogy are followed by many category errors, among them anthropomorphism, nominalism, and taking acts of God as like naturalistic causes of motion.

[2] See e. g. D. Z. Phillips, "On Not Understanding God," in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993). That approach animates all of his *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). See in particular, p. 134, where it is spelled out.

[3] Michael Foster observed that there is a difference between a puzzle and a mystery. See his *Mystery and Philosophy*. SCM Press, 1957. Reprinted by Greenwood Press, Westport,

swerable questions in ways other than by answering them is an attempt to respect the mystery of ultimate reality. Unfortunately, traditional language appears to answer UAQs, even though the usage of the faithful (outside of philosophy) has never been consistent with treating UAQs as answerable. Philosophers have resolutely managed not to notice that.

6.2   Unanswerable Questions

I would hazard a conjecture that there are two kinds of UAQs that lead to God: questions about acts of God and questions about the presence of God. Both are difficult enough, but the presence of God, for philosophy, is probably the harder. It is easier to begin with acts of God, and they will lead eventually to the presence of God.

In *Living in Spin*,[4] I took action to be what results from narratability of certain kinds of things: things that are contingent and affect someone's interests. The acts we are interested in have no intramundane actor. The actor is implicit in our language in other ways, as when we take offense at something or have thanks for something and our thanks are not appropriately directed to any human actor. Both thanks and offense imply that there is an actor to thank or blame. That is part of their semantics and grammar; without it, they don't make sense. We are asking about situations in which the implied actor is missing or at least not present as an intramundane actor (usually meaning one or more humans). These situations, well within the life of this world, raise questions that are not answerable in terms of phenomena or actors within this world.

Call these occasions *boundary situations*. We have choices about how to *interpret* them, and choices about how to *deal* with them, how to relate to them. In practice, we deal with them before we interpret them, that is, before we bring them to language.

Consider first the problem of interpreting boundary situations and the transcendence that lies beyond them. People don't agree about how to do that or even about whether it can be done at all. This disagreement is more radical than most in philosophy of religion. As D. Z. Phillips has it,

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CT, 1980. A puzzle can be solved, a mystery cannot. The more one knows about a puzzle, the less puzzling it is. The more one knows about a mystery, the *more* mysterious it is.

[4] *Living in Spin*, section 5.2.6, p. 147 ff. See also section 5.2 above.

> [W]hether one is reacting to the vicissitudes of human life re-
> ligiously or non-religiously, one is reacting to something that
> is beyond human understanding.
>
> The great divide in contemporary philosophy of religion is be-
> tween those who accept and those who reject this conclusion.
> It has certainly been rejected by religious and secular apolo-
> gists alike. When a sense of the limits of human existence has
> led to bewilderment and to the natural cry, 'Why is this hap-
> pening to me?', 'Why are things like this?', it is essential to
> note that these questions are asked, not for want of explana-
> tions, but *after* explanations have provided all they can offer.
> The questions seem to seek for something that explanations
> cannot give. This is what theodicies and secular attempts at
> explanation fail to realize.[5]

To ask *why* in a boundary situation means something different from ask-
ing *why* in an intramundane context, as we saw in section 5.7. As should
be clear by now, this book explores the path in which boundary situations
raise unanswerable questions; those who want the principle of sufficient
reason and all that follows from it can get what they want from many mod-
ern traditional sources. But not here.

   If we cannot understand boundary situations in the sense of explaining
them, then consider the possibilities for dealing with them. In a sense,
this is backwards, because we deal with them before we try to explain
them (or not). One can meet them with trust or distrust, among other
possibilities. Trust is not how we usually begin, as Niebuhr remarked in
Radical Monotheism (pp. 122–123), for the Void is first indifferent or an
enemy. In *Faith on Earth*, he said more about that initial distrust than he
did in his brief remarks in *Radical Monotheism*. Distrust can take various
forms: defiance, appeasement, indifference and turning away, hostility,
fear, isolation, disillusionment, and a sense of being betrayed by broken
promises.[6] At one point, he lapsed into technical language in a way that is
actually quite helpful:

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[5] D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, pp. 133–134. Some
italics in the original removed.

[6] H. Richard Niebuhr, in *Faith on Earth*, chapter 5, gives a tour of the ways we can
respond with distrust that is both rich and concise. See pp. 66–69.

> To begin with it [our attitude toward life] does not turn to
> questions about the Transcendent, whether it is personal or
> not. That comes later and at another level of our conscious-
> ness. Our fundamental attitude, however, is personal; it is
> directed toward the Transcendent as personal; and it is ordi-
> narily or naturally the attitude of distrust toward a being which
> in that act of distrust is acknowledged as being that ought to
> be loyal, yet is not.[7]

To respond to life with bitterness and blame is already to respond as a
person responds to another person. What we respond to is an abstraction
that we all understand but also one that is very hard to interpret or capture
in a definition.

Is it possible to blame an actor that doesn't exist? People do it all the
time. We do it instinctively if we take offense at some pain (and thereby
call it evil, cf. sec. 2.3), directing the offense not at human actors (if there
are any) but at a transcendent Other to whom we complain, even though
no such Other exists. That is to begin the road that leads from confronting
the Void/Other as an enemy to trusting it as God. Many never get very far
down that road. It is not logically necessary to travel it at all, for it is cer-
tainly possible to turn away from the pains of life and seek to eliminate the
desires that are disappointed in them, thereby eliminating the disappoint-
ments themselves.[8] So traveling the road to "though it slay us, yet will we
trust it"[9] is voluntary, a confessional and covenantal commitment, not the
result of some inference.

We trust that ultimate reality shows itself in this world, enters into
our human and socially constructed realities, on both its terms and ours,
respecting both, truncating neither (the principle of Chalcedon). How it
does that is not entirely within our grasp. It cannot be pinned down or
proven to be the actor. Contingencies just happen; tracing them to u-r is
impossible and the attempt is a category error. If you try, u-r will just slip
through your fingers.[10] To try to pin God down is also a way of "putting

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[7] *Faith on Earth*, p. 67.

[8] That would appear to be the way of Buddhism and more generally, of exilic religion.
It is also the path of twentieth-century Logical Positivism, which limits language in ways
that make biblical religion simply unthinkable.

[9] *Radical Monotheism*, p. 122, and Job 13.25.

[10] Or it will slip through your concepts. But u-r is wiley with the wiley, and it may not

God to the test," something the Bible frowns on, even though in its complex many-voiced history, some of its heroes (Gideon) do just that.

If trying to pin God down in events is a category error, there is another approach that doesn't do that and still gets to the heart of the matter. It asks what u-r does when it shows itself in this world. It shows us what really matters, what really living really is. It Exposes us to other people, it Limits us, both in nature and other people, and it gives us other people's Needs. It provides. These are judgements, not empirical results, and ideally they can't be mistaken for something empirical.

In summary, then, the term 'God' and its variants (such as 'ultimate reality') are places in language where we deal with unanswerable questions.[11]   One could say they are *placeholders* or *placemarkers* in language for where we deal with UAQs.[12] 'God' and its synonyms enable us, as if through a grammatical transformation, to deal on a personal basis with these situations — call them boundary situations — and the UAQs they raise. The semantics of the word 'God' is often surprising and non-intuitive, as D. Z. Phillips and other Wittgensteinians have shown.

6.3   From Language to God

There are two steps in the logic that gets us from the world to God. The first step begins in the amended Dasein: humans (human Daseins) are ontologically constituted not just by their stake in their own existence but also by the interests of other Daseins in their existence and their interests in others. Humans have many interests in other beings in the world, both animate and inanimate, but their interests in other humans, beings like themselves, are peculiarly their own. Humans be human by being oriented

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tell you that it has eluded your grasp, leaving you under the illusion that you have captured the deity in a bottle.

[11] They are *one* place in language where we deal with UAQs. Others are usually not recognized, and because not recognized, are harder to abuse or misuse.

[12] By no means always do UAQs appear in language with such neat and explicit labels, as we shall see in section 6.5. Ordinary language has rich ways of respecting the elusiveness and holiness of u-r without naming it. I would not want to attribute to Gregory Rocca's title more than it says, but in its words, "Speaking the incomprehensible God," it does turn to language to deal with what is incomprehensible. In other words, his reading of Aquinas is at least superficially consistent with taking the word 'God' as a placemarker for UAQs, though I doubt he would put it that way.

to other persons, starting with other human beings. This is the mode of being of human-being.

The second step is a logical transition analogous to what we have seen with regard to why-questions. In why-questions, we move from particular and finite intramundane causes and explanations to something transcendent. As D. Z. Phillips said, even after intramundane explanations have done all they can, we still ask *why* (cf. p. 81). Why, here, is not a request for efficient causes (which is its usual meaning in the natural sciences), it asks for an inhabitable narrative, it asks for a *world* that I can live in, it asks for help in Being-in-the-World (to invoke Heidegger's description of this level of human being). The analogue in regard to persons grows out of the human ontological orientation to other persons: After all other available human persons have done for us what they can (or not, if they have betrayed us), we still exist by relating as to other persons or, in this case, to an Other beyond all intramundane persons.

Just as one can refuse to continue to ask *why* after intramundane questions have been answered, one can refuse to continue to relate personally after all intramundane persons have been related to.[13] Such questions and such relating are voluntary. It is quite possible to limit oneself to intramundane questions and deny the meaningfulness of any further questions and to deny the meaningfulness of any Other beyond intramundane others. Transcendence is voluntary — though those who would deny it need to be extremely careful to be thorough; otherwise, it will creep back in, as H. Richard Niebuhr observed, in our complaints about an unnamed The Way Things Are when we feel betrayed. Efficient causes (if available) would make a good cover story for a self-deception that has a policy of evading UAQs in order not to face them.[14] To persist in asking *why* is to ask unanswerable questions. To persist in relating as to an other, and so to an Other, is to find oneself in a boundary situation.

The two sorts of transcendence are related. To ask *why* is — as with all

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[13] It should be observed that it is impossible to enumerate all the other particular human persons one is related to, and that alone raises the possibility of an Other. Generalized others (there are many of them, too) are still intramundane, still social constructions. But they also raise the possibility of a transcendent Other.

[14] See Herbert Fingarette, *Self Deception* (1969; and University of California Press, 2000), chapter 3. The more common way of evading UAQs is idle talk, etc.; cf. *Being and Time*, chapter I-5, section 35, "Idle Talk," p. 212, H-168. Idle talk, unauthentic everydayness, etc., don't ask, don't probe, don't ask *why* where there are no answers.

asking — to ask some *other* for an answer. (It is an instance of Dasein's Being as being-for-others, an instance of Dasein's being always already related to other Daseins.) And in the step to transcendence, when others have given all they can, we still ask, and so ask an Other who does not exist.[15] We complain, that such-and-such *should* not have happened, and the complaint persists, even after all others have been indicted or cleared. We are in the land of UAQs, not rationalism, the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the law of non-contradiction, etc.[16]

The step to God can be understood in another perspective, from the logic of action. An act happens when some contingency affects someone's interests.[17] Such a scenario is narratable, and in the narrative, the *actor* is usually the subject of the principal verbs. But what about contingencies whose causes are not available as intramundane actors? There is no actor and no cause. This is the context for the move to transcendence. It should be emphasized that narratives can be told in many ways, especially narratives in which God acts. How to narrate acts of God *responsibly* is a question that I do not know how to answer very well, and it is in any case beyond the scope of this little book. Clearly, we do have ways of criticizing narratives of acts of God. Some narratives may work well. Some are horrible. Transcendence, as usual, plays its cards pretty close to its chest and lets us get away with saying appalling things about it. But all such narratives express a way of dealing with boundary situations and unanswerable questions at a personal level, whether well or badly.

What is the situation of Dasein (i. e., the amended Dasein) when it faces unanswerable questions? Dasein is up against its situation and its possibilities, not having the ways to cope that it might wish (Limitation); not having a happy narrative of its life (Exposure); abandoned and alone, or overwhelmed by the needs of others (Need). In short, not having answers (hence a situation of UAQs).

In an unanswerable question, a boundary situation, one is at risk, one's being is at stake, one is in a plight. Where there is risk and plight, we find also commitment and troth (or their lack, whether real or apparent). Dasein here finds itself in one side of a troth relationship, wanting an other who will plight its troth for me, be there for me, be there to support me.

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[15] Cf. texts in the Prologue, in Aquinas, Gregory Rocca, and John Courtney Murray.

[16] Cf. section 5.4 above.

[17] This was the presupposition of an argument at length in *Living in Spin*.

And there is no such other, or none that is adequate. All the intramundane others die (because they are themselves mortal humans who cannot see me through my own dying), or because they are causes for which we live (and those die, too, cf. p. 122 of *Radical Monotheism*). So, as with Phillips's threshold of UAQs (i. e., transcendence), we seek an Other, after all others have done what they can.

6.4   Prayer

The term 'God' and its synonyms enable us to deal with boundary situations and to do so on a personal basis. These terms appear originally in the second person, as a reality *to* whom we speak, and only later in the third person, as a reality *of* whom we speak. Often the voice cries out for the presence of God, as in many psalms, unable to see God. This is rooted in the ontological constitution of human persons. It is not just that we depend on each other, cooperate, compete, and have uncountable involvements with other people. We are made for other persons. That is the prototype of how we relate in all engagements with life (as in section 4.1).

Biblical monotheism begins by affirming the goodness of the world in full view of its pains. This was in section 2.2, but without developing the implications noted here. This affirms that "all human existence including the unknown and not-quite-manipulable future, is trustworthy, rewarding our trust with worth."[18] If ultimate reality rewards our trust with worth, it does something that only persons relating to other persons can do. That is implicit in the meanings of *reward*, *trust*, and *worth*. And so this basic life orientation is then radicalized in the act of speaking *to* ultimate reality as to another person. Prayer commits us. After page 122, God is, if anything, a certain kind of Nothing, the Nothing from which we came and with which we struggle. Do you want to talk to it or not? To talk to that Nothing is an act of total surrender, an act of commitment, and also a struggle (as with Jacob at the Jabbok). What do you want to do with your life?

Sometimes we howl at the dark, sometimes we offer up the parts of our lives as blessings, in the words, "Lord, would you accept a little thanks?" There is a common refrain in liturgical settings, "Lord, hear our prayer." It

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[18] Edward C. Hobbs, "An Alternate Model From a Theological Perspective," in H. A. Otto, ed., *The Family in Search of a Future*, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), p. 33.

is usually said with complacent confidence, but it is seriously precarious. Ultimate reality is under no obligation to hear our prayers or accept our thanks.

I know that I am making promises and commitments that I am in no position to keep — on my own. But my own acts are transformed by other events in history. They get their constitution and being from the larger covenantal history that they are fitted into, and that is enough. That, after all, is the purpose of the Catholic sacramental system:[19] to integrate the lives of believers into the larger life of the covenant community in history, and to do so ontologically, not just as an ornamental narrative placement.

We trust that ultimate reality enters into our human social constructions (included in which are the conception of God as personal and our activity of prayer), respecting both its reality and ours (as in Chalcedon) — though it is holy and beyond our grasp. It interprets our social constructions of reality by its lights and not by ours. It is not a matter of reasons or explanations. (That would pretend to answer unanswerable questions.) Indeed, it is not just that rationalism has the wrong answers to its questions but that its questions are themselves misunderstandings of incarnational religion. Incarnational religion (*all* of biblical religion, not just its Christian variety) is different from other basic life orientations when it thinks ultimate reality gives itself to its human covenantal partners, in a personal relationship. The idea has been attributed to Karl Rahner:

> From a letter from Bill Spohn to friends who had lost their son:
>
> Karl Rahner was here last week and he said something I wanted to pass along. People were asking him about suffering and the providence of God and he said that there is a particular way that the Christian is called to give over himself to the mystery of God at times like that. It isn't that there is any answer, either for us to seek or for the Lord to give.
>
> The answer seems to be in the very surrender to the God who seems so incomprehensible in his ways, and in that very silent giving over there comes a sense of acceptance that is the be-

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[19] FWIW, pace the Reformers, it is also the purpose and function of kashrut, keeping a kosher kitchen.

> ginning of the Resurrection. The Lord can't give us any an-
> swer at those times, but he can and does give himself.[20]

By the same token, Peter Berger's insight was right on the money.[21] Ultimate reality has to come into the world and bear the pains of the world, both as ultimate reality and as participant in the world's suffering. In response, we offer ourselves, in our own pains, as a reasonable and holy and living sacrifice, in and through the immanent presence of ultimate reality that showed itself in this world in sharing in our pains, to bless us in a good world, not to get us out of an evil world.

The middle of the twentieth century was a time of turmoil for the concept of God. Since then, the doctrine of God has lapsed into exhaustion, unable to make much progress beyond retracing old, well-trodden paths. But John Courtney Murray, in *The Problem of God*, left us observations on the concept of God that offer a way forward and enable us to re-ground the problem in its biblical form. He offered four questions, the third and fourth of which repeat Aquinas (how do we know God; how do we name God?). The first and second were new (or newly recovered), biblical in origin and with us again in the postmodern period: Where is God when I need him (or are we alone)? And if God is here with us, what is he doing for us?

The first two questions are existential and biblical, not (in the medieval and modern sense) philosophical. They run through the Psalms but quickly desiccate in philosophers' hands. We have a natural desire for reassurance and then security, but God's presence eludes all attempts to verify it, to test it, even to conceptualize it. Much theology for the last seven or eight hundred years has been an attempt to do just that, to domesticate transcendence, and it has failed.[22] At first, people were left feeling somewhat alone in the cosmos, but many now feel just fine without God. Whether

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[20] That giving (and so presence) of God is part of the central action of the Mass. The text quoted above is from the program for William Spohn's memorial mass at St. Ignatius Church at the University of San Francisco, 2005 August 8. Rahner expands this at length in chapter IV of *The Foundations of Christian Faith*.

[21] *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 76–77. Berger repeats in brief the argument of Chalcedon: both realities must be present in the incarnate Word in order for the Incarnation to be effective.

[22] William V. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence; How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

they know it or not, they have drifted back into nature religion or exilic religion, or the world of Hellenistic pluralism. People who want to continue biblical religion can try to recover the sense of logical certainty that Christianity had in the modern world, or they can deal candidly with the returned biblical (and postmodern) problematic, in which biblical religion is a choice and is experienced as a choice.

6.5   Secular Language

The Christian tradition of God-language has often tended to make things seem more knowable and more orderly than they are, as in the pitfalls we come to in section 6.6. The result compromises the holiness of God. Secular language has compensated, in some ways very deftly. It has long been known that secular ("ordinary") language has theological implications, but I would like to make a special point here. "Secular" language is capable of respect for God that "religious" language often compromises.[23] Among the secular names for God:

> Acts of God in insurance policies
> because that's "the way things are"
> he has "the right stuff"
> for him, "that's where it's at"
> if "something should happen to me"
> because, that's why
> the passive voice
> a Higher Power
> what really living really is
> the uses of "should" and "should not"

These phrases respect at least two features of God: (1) Most of them do not pronounce the divine name, and so, in their colloquial reticence, protect it from abuse. (2) They respect the ineffability of divine presence and divine actions. The two considerations are related. The prohibition on

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[23] One account of the religious implications in secular language, argued in some detail, is Wayne Booth's "Systematic Wonder: The Rhetoric of Secular Religions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985) 677–702.

pronouncing the divine name is a way to respect the simultaneous otherness and non-objectivity of God. Ultimate reality (u-r) "objects" to us (cf. page 122), but it is not "objective." What life more abundantly really is is both elusive and ultimately beyond control. Colloquial secular language respects that. It knows that ultimate reality won't come when we call it and may well come when we don't call it. It knows that though we struggle and bargain, in the end we don't have much control. It knows that names have no claim on ultimate reality, though u-r easily makes claims on us. Colloquial language knows we have some choice about whether to assign a contingency to u-r or just to proximate causes. Indeed, we can do either or both, for different purposes. Above all, colloquial language does not attempt to capture ultimate reality in a logical or linguistic net. It knows that u-r eludes any such attempt. Secular language is ambiguous and reticent about what the bloids really are, about whether we are dealing with nature or history, about whether it deals with proximate goals and causes or ultimate ones. It doesn't spell out how things fit into larger contexts. Self-consciously reflective language has to speak of larger contexts and of "ultimate reality," even though such talk always risks appearing to know more than we can know — a danger that colloquial language avoids.

Consider the examples above in turn.

In insurance contracts, "acts of God" have nothing to do with God, assume no theory of divine intervention or intention, and everybody knows that. This usage would be better than much of what passes for philosophy of religion in the Analytic literature.

"The way things are" is one way to terminate why-inquiries or to indicate that something simply has to be accepted and dealt with. It may or may not be an ultimate limit, and so is ambiguous. It may or may not be a name of God. You can only tell by context and sometimes not even then. In any case, it avoids the theological hazards of thinking God intervenes or intends events — that God has the power of a fiction writer to rearrange what happens. D. Z. Phillips worked for years to dismantle that Analytic notion of God, yet it still thrives.[24]

"The right stuff" is a colloquialism reported among test pilots and astronauts in Thomas Wolfe's book of that name. Its counterparts in the Common Documents are phrases like the "fear of the Lord," or in later us-

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[24] See his *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*.

age, just "grace." It avoids the dangers of pious language and cannot (yet) be turned into propositional language that philosophers haggle over.

"That's where it's at": Once as I was watering plants on my back porch, I listened to two people, call them *C* and *D*, working on the roof of a house across the fence, but invisible to me through the trees. *C* reported a conversation between two others not present, *A* and *B*. *A* had been going on for some time about football. Finally, in rapt amazement, *B* asked *A*, "Don't you have a life other than football?" To which the answer was, "Football *is* my life." In the same vein, we say of someone, "that's where it's at — for him." It's a way of pointing out someone's gods.

"If something should happen to me" — a way of talking about death without the hazards of shooting one's mouth off.

"Because, that's why": this works like "the way things are."

The passive voice can be used to construe an event as an act without naming the actor, thereby respecting the ambiguity in whether to take the actor as intramundane or as ultimate reality itself.

"A Higher Power": twelve-step groups' way of keeping the nature of God open and respecting his ineffability. The phrase also avoids the category errors of taking God in anthropomorphic terms as able to intervene in the sense of efficient-causal interference with natural processes.

"What really living really is": talking about success in life without either taking it as conventional, material success, or importing all the philosophical impedimenta of a doctrine of "salvation."

"Should": in section 2.3, I defined evil as pain that one takes offense at. When someone says that some atrocity *should* not have happened, and intends a meaning beyond merely condemning its human perpetrators (if any), he is talking about ultimate reality. People disagree about what u-r is, but language like this concedes that it is talking about something *transcendent* to merely intramundane considerations. Disagreements about u-r can be unpacked at leisure, but as soon as someone treats the events and misfortunes of life and happenstance as a betrayal or unjust, he has stepped from intramundane questioning onto the soil of transcendence.[25] Ordinary language has a capacity for transcendence built into it.

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[25] This was much of the argument of chapter 5 of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Faith on Earth* (Yale University Press, 1989). Cf. p. 83 above.

6.6 Some Pitfalls to Avoid

Clearly it is risky to speak of transcendence; one can too easily fall into nonsense or worse. Here are some of the possible mistakes to avoid, category errors that fundamentally misunderstand what God is about.[26]

The most common we have already seen, and of those the first is to violate the principle implicit in the Definition of Chalcedon. The error is to think that either one of the transcendent and intramundane realities has to be truncated to make room for the other. To do that is to mistake one for the same sort of reality as the other, usually to mistake transcendence for just more of intramundane reality, an invisible extension of this world, but effectively just like this world. Naturalizing divine action is one way to make this mistake: that would require violating laws of nature. Out of respect for science, the mistake can instead take the form of trying to fit divine acts into the interstices of natural causation. Behind this lies the metaphysical grand strategy since the fourteenth century: The way to naturalizing God is to reduce divine action to causation, then to efficient causes, and efficient cause to its naturalistic forms. Naturalistic intramundane causation does not need any transcendence, and so God becomes unnecessary. (Is it then any surprise that secular culture has drifted into forms of naturalism?)

This is one of the chief sources of modern category errors about God. Louis Dupré diagnosed it.[27] Acts of God are commonly taken to be about, or to presuppose, will- or intention-caused motions. An act of God makes something happen differently from how it would have otherwise happened in nature. This grows out of a reading of Aristotle, for Aristotle seems to be the father of taking action as a species of intention-caused motion.

Naturalizing acts of God opened the way to a cluster of other errors. What is natural is objective, and so we are betrayed into the dilemma of objectivity and subjectivism. In this sort of naturalism, life has to be explained in terms that come from physics, not biology. What is natural can be demonstrated, and so the way is opened to "proofs" of God or the superiority of Christianity, thereby gratifying a craving for certitude. The

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[26] This list can hardly be exhaustive, and it may not even have the most important category errors. But for what it is worth, these have appeared prominently in the tradition.

[27] Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity; An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (Yale University Press, 1993), and *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

so-called "existence" of God then gets construed as like the existence of other natural causes. This current takes us toward an understanding of language about God as univocal rather than analogical.   Consider these in turn.

The first error is to mistake organisms for artifacts.[28] We do not make that mistake in so-called "real life," but it has been seductive and irresistibly tempting in philosophy for half a millennium. This mistake is impossible after the early Heidegger, but how many have read *Being and Time*? In any case, this is one form of the argument from design. It is also the way to Creationism. (The same mistake entered from its other side would be to try to construct artifacts that work as organisms, as in "artificial intelligence.")

Another error objectivates God, and this has been remarked some in mid-twentieth century theology. Before that, it escaped notice.

It is equally an error to construe God as simply subjective, or as *just* a projection. (There may be ways in which God is a projection, but he is not *just* a projection.) Another word for projection is socially constructed reality; to say that God is *just* a projection is to say that ultimate reality does *not* enter into this human social construction. That move is gratuitous, and it trades on a tacit assumption that human social constructions can't really deal with reality. It is also a move of despair. *How* ultimate reality enters into this sort of social construction is both a puzzle and a mystery.

A category error endemic to medieval and later philosophy is the attempt to "prove" the so-called "existence" of God or the correctness of Christianity. Those who believe proofs of God believe *in* proofs before they believe in God. Or put another way, they believe in the chosen premises of their proofs, not in God. One place where this category error appears is in mistaking the Five Ways for proofs, but there are many more "proofs" than just the Five Ways. Those who demand proofs, who refuse to believe in God until he can be proven to them, in fact already demand control (and think control is possible) in a situation in which control (and even understanding) ultimately are not possible. If you are arguing about the existence of God, what you are arguing about the existence of is not God. God (and biblical religion) are choices, not the result of arguments. They are answers to the question, "What do you want to do with

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[28] See my *Where, Now, O Biologists, Is Your Theory? Intelligent Design as Naturalism by Other Means* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), section 5.4.

your life?"

It would be a mistake, I think, to take the term 'God' as a term that refers: there is no something, a something (or someone) that is real but invisible, that it *refers* to. Language gives us capacities much richer than just reference, as we saw in section 5.4. We don't *use* the term 'God,' we *live* in that term, and live by it, and in it relate to an Other beyond all others.

It is an error to say that God "exists" in the way that beings exist. Only beings (i. e., creatures) can exist. If God existed, he would not be God but a creature. Fortunately for us, God does not have to exist to act or to be present with us.

The same error takes God as one being among other beings, albeit "supreme." What then about the larger context in which all "beings" (including God) exist? That would be a world of some sort, and one more ultimate than the allegedly "supreme" being, simply because the supreme being would be one more being *within* that larger world. In other words, the concept of a supreme being is incoherent. Interestingly, God doesn't seem to mind very much. Category errors don't begin to do real damage until they interfere with faith or prayer, the believer's relation to God. Category errors do the most damage when they make God incredible and so drive people away. On the other hand, it is possible to use — or inhabit — problematic religious language in ways that don't inhibit faith. Clearly, we are not in the realm of propositions or the correspondence theory of truth (cf. sec. 5.4).

To say that God "exists" equivocates on the meanings of *exist*. Oddly enough, it effectively renders the word univocal: the existence of God gets taken as like the existence of things in the world. Warnings that "exists" when spoken of God means something different from the existence of things in the world inevitably get ignored, and God's "existence" gets assimilated to that of worldly beings.

A combination of several of these errors appears in the "God" of Analytic theism: That "God" is an undetectable entity that interferes with the natural course of events to the advantage of those who think it exists and the disadvantage of those who don't. That so-called "God" is arguably a narcissistic brat. Perhaps a nice brat (if it likes you), but still a brat.[29]

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[29] An account of these and other category errors in Analytic philosophy of religion can be found in Brian Davies, O.P., "Letter from America," *New Blackfriars* 84 no. 989–990 (2003 July and August) 371–384.

About God-language: David Burrell distinguishes three ways of construing language about God, treating it as univocal, radically equivocal, or analogical.[30] My teachers treated analogy as a species of equivocation, though not *simply* equivocation.[31] My instinct is to agree with that position. All three positions are well represented in the tradition, so none can be condemned as a theological crime. Nevertheless, from the perspective of any one of them, the others appear to be misunderstandings of both God and God-language.

All this doubtless leads to a feeling of loneliness before God or a feeling of loneliness unable to see God. Back up and remember that ultimate reality comes into human social constructions (this is simply an act of faith), one of which is our personal relationship to it. That social construction is based in our constitution as persons built for relating to other persons. This is something we inherit from evolution.

Recognizing and eliminating the above category errors must lead to a cry of loneliness, "but I can't see God!" So? This is news? Biblical religion has known this from the beginning and said it for at least two thousand years. Philosophers try to weasel out of this, concocting metaphysical paraphernalia by which the "mechanisms" of acts of God objectively "exist" but are invisible to us; the sort of thing that is knowable, but safely unknown *to us*.

This fails to recognize something not just ancient in radical monotheism but important in the life and progress of believers today. C. S. Lewis saw it when Screwtape explains to Wormwood that the desolation and loneliness his patient laments and Wormwood hoped to exploit is not something bad; it was *intended* by God. The last page of Letter 8 is too long to quote here, but it can be found online (and of course in print).[32]

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[30]   David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 17.

[31] The relevant text in Aquinas seems to be *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.5.

[32] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter no. 8. It was published circa 1942, and different editions have different paginations. The passage of interest can occasionally be found online, but perhaps the best way to find it is to google some of the text in the crescendo of that letter: "Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

I take as the last category error one that we have seen already, the erection of a sacred canopy, under which its inhabitants can be protected from encounter with the radical holiness and otherness of God, and protected from the anxiety of knowing their own responsibility in covenantal religion, as we saw in section 4.3 above. This is not originally a mistaken concept of God but an error in relating to God, though it inevitably is accompanied by some of the mistaken conceptions of God noted above. It is a way of living that tacitly moves to insulate the believer from contact with the radical otherness of God. It also induces a defensiveness, to protect the sacred canopy from Exposure. That defensiveness, when given power, easily resorts to liquidation of unbelievers.

The unfinished logic here is akin to Alasdair MacIntyre's account noted above.[33] How did we go wrong? How can reshaping our story enable us to see our mistakes and then correct them? I don't think we are in a position to solve the failed problems of our tradition — not yet — but solutions can perhaps be seen "in the distance."

We saw above, in section 4.3, p. 38, how anti-Jewish theology reflects a desire to protect a sacred canopy, to hide the human origins of Christianity as a socially constructed covenant with ultimate reality. This is why I named critical history, historical and cultural relativity, and religious pluralism as the principal challenges to theology today, not science. To focus on science is a snare and a delusion. The challenge to theology (and to faith) is to see history, relativity, and pluralism not as enemies but as the essential conditions for recovering the covenant in historical-covenantal religion.

The tendency to protect a sacred canopy occurs in more than just anti-Jewish theology; it appears in the scholastic and modern craving for justification of Christian commitments, for philosophical proof. This leads to sacred canopies, desire to cover up covenantal human responsibility: to evade Exposure. This is a desire for comfort and security. It is also an instance of "spin," ambiguity of language that has metastasized to human action, which is an ontological artifact of language. For it is possible to construe mere explanations of covenant as justifications of covenant. In the same way, it is possible to place immediate activities of coping in quite different larger narrative contexts: openness to p. 122, or desire to achieve

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[33] P. 52 above, summarizing *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 362–363.

ultimate and conclusive control.

With a sacred canopy has come also, and inevitably, a loss of the center of radical monotheism: Trying to get saved *from* the pains of life, rather than *in* the pains of life. We would of course like to be excused from the pains of life, and sometimes we are, and we give thanks when that happens. But in the end, it is in our pain and suffering (and mortality) that we come to God.

A symptom of this is keeping one conceptuality for "sacred" things, for religion, a conceptuality in which "miracles" occur, but living in another, that of the modern world. This means that the "religious" conceptuality is being used to get out of Limitation in the everyday conceptuality. Such a BLO well fits a desire to be saved from rather than in the pains of life. The loss was noticed (but not diagnosed) when some thinkers a century ago (e. g., Ernst Troeltsch) wondered if Christianity amounted to nothing more than "Europeanism," Kulturprotestantismus, the affirmation of modern Western civilization. There is an enduring preference for the covenant with the Monarchy over the covenant at the Burning Bush. We would rather have a covenant in which God gives us what we want than a covenant in which God is present with us but invisible and beyond our control.

These mistakes and category errors about God all work in one way or another to get the believer out of Exposure, Limitation, and Need, rather than to face them. When believers, the orthodox, are dabbling in Marcionite and monophysite theology, materialism, naturalism, nominalism, anthropomorphism, and a sacred canopy, is it any surprise that so many turn elsewhere? Regardless of whether one wants to evade or embrace Exposure, Limitation, and Need, there are more effective ways to do both than what the Church offers. The Church does not appear to be the most promising strategy for any but those capable of resolutely not spelling out what they are doing. When a sacred canopy is exposed and no longer plausible, we are left feeling like there are no traces of God in our world. It is as if we are thrown into Letter 8, but without Wormwood's patient's determination to persevere. Many turn to nature religions or exilic religions — or just informalism, aka secularism — as ways to evade Exposure, Limitation, and Need, to get the most one can out of life, leaving the pains as barren and meaningless. It is a struggle with ultimate reality that leaves u-r hostile and invisible, implicit in events and actions but never named or rec-

ognized. Twentieth-century art and literature have well mirrored this guilty human plight for any who will look or listen. Yet ultimate reality eludes every attempt to grasp it. We do not even rise to the level of Letter 8.

6.7 Epilogue: a Typology of Religions

I have maintained all along that covenantal religion is a choice, and that claim can be reinforced simply by citing some of the other possible choices.[34] The most frequent contrast has been nature religion.

Some version of nature religion is the aboriginal religion everywhere. In a nature religion, one's job as a participant is to fit into nature as naturally as possible, disturbing nature as little as possible, and remedying disturbances when they do happen. The world (as nature) is affirmed as good, and history is not seen or is seen as a source of disturbance of nature and thus evil.[35] Modern examples include revived ancient nature religions (Wicca, among others), Darwinism as religion (something more than just evolutionary biology as science), environmentalism, global warming, and other kinds of scientism. In a nature religion, humans do not, properly speaking, *act*. It is nature that acts within them. On the other hand, despite my disagreements with nature religions on principle, I think there are occasions when it is possible to learn from them. Taoism, one of the most beautiful, is gentle, sophisticated, and wise in ways that the biblical wisdom literature could well envy.

Merold Westphal called "exilic religion" a BLO in which this world is unredeemably defective, and the soul's best course is to get out of it.[36] There are many ways to do that. Among ancient examples in the West, one finds Gnosticisms. South Asian religions are often candid in appraising this world as irredeemably painful, a realm of illusion.

Whether the meditative traditions (again, South Asian religions and Yoga) are to be classified as exilic simply or as something overlapping exilic religion is not a question we need answer here. Inasmuch as Buddhism candidly appraises the human problem as one of *pain*, and as much can

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[34] Another place where these choices appear is in my *Where Now, O Biologists, Is Your Theory?* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), chapter 4.

[35] See Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapter 10, for examples from the Ancient Near East.

[36] Westphal, chapter 9.

be said of some strands in the biblical tradition (Qoheleth, Job, deutero-Isaiah, the Gospels), Buddhism would make an interesting conversation partner. The two kinds of religion appear to have quite different solutions to the problem of pain.

Mircea Eliade, in *Cosmos and History*, laid out the character of nature religions and a little of the contrast with historical religion.[37] The present book is about historical religion, in a little detail.

Probably more important in American culture today than Westphal's three is informalism, or what goes by the name of "secularism." This is numerically the most significant alternative to biblical religion in the West. Informalism often does not even count as a "religion," though it encompasses many basic life orientations.

Luther Martin, in *Hellenistic Religion*,[38] followed the sequence from informalism to mystery religions to Gnosticism in the Greco-Roman world. Hellenistic pluralism is much like our own. The mystery religions have reappeared in so-called "New Age mysticism."

An option not in most structural typologies would be a BLO animated by social structure, as in common Western accounts of Confucian religion. I cite this as merely one more example to the effect that the possible BLOs cannot be exhaustively enumerated.

There may be more than these; we are, after all, talking about human imagination and human creativity.

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[37] More detail can be found in Westphal's *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapter 11.

[38] Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

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