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## Rediscovering the West: An Inquiry into Nothingness and Relatedness: A Review

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**Stephen C. Rowe, *Rediscovering the West: An Inquiry into Nothingness and Relatedness*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.**

*Reviewed by Louis A. Olivier*

*Discovery* removes that most opaque of covers, ignorance; the word's connotations are positive: what is newly known offers possibility and vitality. *Rediscovery* adds a poignant element, because loss necessarily precedes rediscovery. Some form of forgetting, something perhaps as gradual as a thickening patina of familiarity, has turned the known opaque again, not necessarily by hiding it from view completely, but through an even more poignant kind of loss, by depriving it of its vitality.

So it is for the West, according to Stephen Rowe's new book. Its vitality lost, the West desperately needs rediscovery, and Rowe's "Inquiry into Nothingness and Relatedness" offers both provocative analyses and practical suggestions for the recovery of that lost vitality.

The title makes it clear that the work of rediscovery is yet to be done: it's not *The West Rediscovered*. To be sure we haven't literally forgotten our tradition, at least not intellectually, but its spiritual power seems no longer available to us; instead, we only vaguely sense what it might once have been, while we drift in a "post-traditional" period characterized by "inner dullness," and an absence of vision.

It is "as though we have forgotten how to live a human life" (1). Our culture is in a state of "disarray and paralysis (4)." We live in a climate of "egocentrism, displacement, entertainment" (71). And the voices that speak for this culture alternate "between self-deprecation and shrillness" (163). Western life in this post-traditional period is devoted to the pursuit of "self-interest and individual survival," while above this grim landscape two concepts compete for our attention and adherence: relativism and absolutism. These two "describe the dilemma . . . of the West" and "we are forced to choose between them as the only available options. (4-5)

It was in a condition of painful awareness of this state of affairs that the author began the personal search that has led to this book. Although unwilling to give up his intuitive sense that some form of greatness persisted in the West, he felt a need to look elsewhere for wisdom, and that need turned him Eastward. His search brought him to the wisdom of Zen, though not to an all-too-common uncritical infatuation with "otherness" for its own sake. On the contrary, it was the Eastern emphasis on "sitting," on lucid meditation, that led him gradually to a deeper self-awareness, freed from the meddlesome ego, and to the conviction that wisdom must always lead us back to "the ordinary, the wholeness of the actual life we are living . . . the present. (181) In other words, his encounter with otherness convinced him to accept himself as a Westerner and, literary clichés notwithstanding, to believe that one *must* go home again: to rediscover and to revitalize.

The book is, consequently, much more than a personal chronicle. It is just what the title says it is, an *inquiry*, albeit an inquiry conducted in a voice of the most personal kind: earnest and committed, but unpretentious; not magisterial, but dialogical.

Dialogue—“words among”—is not an easy thing to achieve between text and reader: an interlocutor in print can make for a decidedly one-sided exchange. This kind of communication becomes dialogue only when the author’s ideas “take on a life of their own.” When this occurs it can take a long time to finish the book; instead of keeping our eyes glued to the page by the fascinations of style or suspense, such a book provokes us to stop reading often and to engage the issues in a private, but clearly dialogical way. Judging from my own thick pile of written thoughts and imaginary discussions inspired by *Rediscovering the West*, Stephen Rowe is obviously a man after Socrates’ own heart.

The allusion is made advisedly: the very “genius of the West” Rowe insists, is in “the dynamics of encounter . . . in dialogue. (2) (His academic colleagues will be relieved to know that he finds in dialogue the key to that still-salvageable subtradition of the West: liberal education.) Integration and inclusion are nothing less than “the solution to our post-traditional confusion,” and dialogue, or “participation” as a way of integration is “distinctively Western,” therefore, an indispensable element within the larger practice of *relatedness*, the second of the two elements of rediscovery to which his inquiry is devoted (153).

Those who are looking for a polemical championing of Western superiority, however, will not find it here. Rowe candidly concedes the deficiencies of the West, including its historical penchant for exclusion, even as he reclaims it as his heritage. He argues persuasively against false binary systems like “pro-canon/anti-canon,” and warns of the dangers of a wholesale rejection of our collective past, even as he notes that this very rejection may arise from what is best about that past.

It is through an understanding and a proper blending of the respective strengths of West and East—under the headings of *relatedness* and *nothingness*—that the groundwork for the rediscovery of the West is laid, and through it, the *discovery* of “a new universality” that transcends such geo-cultural distinctions without denying them.

There’s no room here to analyze either of the two elements of Rowe’s inquiry in detail. Even his own discussion of one of them—nothingness—seems to me less elaborated than his ideas about dialogue and relatedness. However that may be, the encounter with nothingness is as essential to Rowe’s synthesis as our encounters with each other. Access to what the Buddhists call *sunyata* (nothingness) logically precedes true relatedness, and is reached primarily through “just sitting”—the meditative self-examination that gets us past the blandishments of ego, past that numbing fear of lucidity so vividly described by Pascal, to a true contemplation of a fundamental nothingness at the heart of all things human.

To the Westerner who has not engaged this process, it sounds suspiciously like a look into oblivion, which Rowe and the Buddhists insist it is not. Quite to the contrary, the return from *sunyata*, like Rowe’s own return to the West, takes on the form of a

“Great Affirmation” (34). Without this prior experience of nothingness the encounter of individuals is likely to be tainted by the ego’s delusions of grandeur, as our abundant experience of failed dialogues should have taught us by now.

If there is an element of wishful thinking in Rowe’s program, however, it may well be in his hope—one that many of us share, despite our failures—that participants in dialogue will have reached the spiritual maturity it demands. Our Western eagerness for encounter, for action with others is, as Rowe observes, both a strength and a weakness. Compared to the East we tend to underestimate gravely the discipline and rigor needed to “understand personhood” (52). The infusion of a greater ontological awareness, Rowe argues, is precisely what the East can help us acquire and combine with our traditional urge for dialogue.

Without this kind of synthesis, we face serious dangers on either side of the geo-cultural divide: if the West alone is reappropriated, we will have “absolutistic neoconservative rigidity and fundamentalist parochialism”; and if the East, then “relativistic deconstructionist dispersion and false universalism” (186). The daunting prospect of either of these alternatives should be enough to earn *Rediscovering the West* not only an ample supply of readers, but also a willingness on their part to attend to the practical measures it so eloquently proposes.

Finally, and at the risk of anti-climax, I want to mention two things about this splendid book that left me a bit uneasy. Neither can properly be called a criticism; both concern aspects that the author certainly must see as vital to the work—its more specifically historical and theological dimensions. I’m uneasy about the book’s attempts to delimit and sketch the stages of the so-called traditional period. Admittedly, the brush strokes must be very broad when one attempts in a few pages to capture the high points of almost three millennia, and Rowe does admit that this is at best a kind of “cultural aerial photography.” Nonetheless, his camera seems to have been focused primarily on philosophical monuments, to the detriment of the social landscape around and between them. His critique of Cartesianism as a philosophical system, for instance, is undeniably astute, but he clearly overstates its role as a social determinant in the early modern period. I happily concede, however, that the metaphorical impact of his “photography” enhances his quite accurate description of post-traditional disarray.

Secondly, passages which reflect the author’s Christian faith seem rather highly contextualized. While a convinced Christian might follow Rowe confidently through the stages of his “theological” passages, non-believers are likely to see these passages as leaps across obscure expanses.

There is no doubt, however, that all can read the book profitably: most of its conclusions remain meaningful and provocative even to those of us whose tendency to look down in the midst of one of those occasional leaps may bring us to an unsteady landing on the next piece of solid ground, which, fortunately, in *Rediscovering the West*, is in good supply.