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1998-12-01

A Theological Challenge: Coordinating Biological, Social, and Religious Visions of Humanity

A THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE: COORDINATING BIOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND RELIGIOUS VISIONS OF HUMANITY

by Wesley J. Wildman

Abstract.   This paper attempts two tasks. First, it sketches how the natural sciences (including especially the biological sciences), the social sciences, and the scientific study of religion can be understood to furnish complementary, consonant perspectives on human beings and human groups. This suggests that it is possible to speak of a *modern secular interpretation of humanity* (MSIH) to which these perspectives contribute (though not without tensions). MSIH is not a comprehensive interpretation of human beings, if only because it adopts a posture of neutrality with regard to the reality of religious objects and the truth of theological claims about them. MSIH is certainly an impressively forceful interpretation, however, and it needs to be reckoned with by any perspective on human life that seeks to insert its truth claims into the arena of public debate. Second, the paper considers two challenges that MSIH poses to specifically theological interpretations of human beings. On the one hand, in spite of its posture of religious neutrality, MSIH is a key element in a class of wider, seemingly antireligious interpretations of humanity, including especially projectionist and illusionist critiques of religion. It is consonance with MSIH that makes these critiques such formidable competitors for traditional theological interpretations of human beings. On the other hand, and taking the religiously neutral posture of MSIH at face value, theological accounts of humanity that seek to coordinate the insights of MSIH with positive religious visions of human life must find ways to overcome or manage such dissonance as arises. The goal of synthesis is defended as important, and strategies for managing these challenges, especially in light of the pluralism of extant philosophical and theological interpretations of human beings, are advocated.

Keywords: atheism; biological sciences; critiques of religion; evolutionary biology; evolutionary psychology; metaphysical ambiguity; metaphysics; neurosciences; pluralism; religious anthropology;

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religious studies; social sciences; sociobiology; theological anthropology; theology.

The natural sciences, from physics to evolutionary biology, the social sciences, and the scientific study of religion furnish perspectives on human beings and human groups that are more or less consonant. None of these disciplines is univocal, of course, so a brief presentation of their main results cannot be completely impartial. Nevertheless, their provisional conclusions collectively constitute the basis for a powerful interpretation of human life that is characteristically modern, secular, and interdisciplinary; I shall call it the *modern secular interpretation of humanity* (MSIH). It might well be called *modern secular anthropology* in accordance with an established philosophical use of *anthropology*, but that would be misleading in view of the existence of scientific disciplines clustered under the heading of *anthropology*. Similarly, it might be described in ways that indicate its connections with evolutionary biology, the social sciences, the neurosciences, or philosophy, but every such discipline-specific name misleads. MSIH is a large-scale interpretation of human beings that transcends any one scientific, social-scientific, or humanities discipline and yet is the shared currency of thought for most thinkers in all of these disciplines.

Although it is an interpretation of human beings, and thus somewhat philosophical in character, MSIH is a minimalist interpretation in the sense that it extends beyond the results of the scientific disciplines that furnish its major insights only by consistently coordinating those insights. It is a theory in the sense of a seeing together of scientific insights into human beings. Its force derives from the compatibility of those insights, notwithstanding a few tensions here and there. Its appeal derives both from that and from its modest posture with regard to other interpretations of human life: MSIH does not claim that it includes every worthwhile insight into human life, but it does demand that consistency with MSIH should be a goal of any more adventurous interpretation. For example, MSIH portrays human beings as ethically concerned but does not pass judgment on the reality of the values guiding ethical judgments. Likewise, MSIH presents human beings as religiously concerned in various ways but does not venture a position on the reality of gods or on the efficacy of paths of liberation that correspond to those human religious concerns. Other interpretations of human beings may well take up such normative or metaphysical questions; MSIH does not. This posture of neutrality and the fact that it stays close to virtually unanimously held and highly credible scientific results are the main reasons why MSIH is simply assumed as a minimalist starting point in much contemporary intellectual life. And why not, after all? MSIH covers a lot of territory in spite of its

minimalist approach and is a truly impressive cultural and intellectual achievement. These considerations are the basis for the argument that any wider interpretation of human beings that values consistency of knowledge or seeks a public forum for its claims ought to take consonance with MSIH as a criterion of adequacy. This essay is concerned with the relation between MSIH and one such wider interpretation, that of theologians.

Having broached the topic of theology, I will say a word about my terminology. First, I am using the word *theology* in what may be an unfamiliar way here. It denotes the activities of religious-intellectual world maintenance and exploration or truth-seeking inquiry about religious matters (both descriptions are needed to encompass contemporary theological self-understandings); roughly, it is the intellectual wing of religion. As such, theology is a meaningful activity for any religious tradition, regardless of whether that tradition affirms the reality of a *theos* or not. In fact, every major religion has traditions of theological reflection in this sense. This is actually the usage of ancient Greek philosophers, for whom god questions were lively issues but were not decisively settled along any particular confessional lines. Second, theological interpretations of humanity and the human condition have long been described as *theological anthropologies*. I shall use this term when I mean an explicit theological theory about human beings. I shall use the term *religious anthropology* more generally to include not only theological anthropologies but also interpretations of human beings that are implicit in religious traditions, texts, and practices and that *could* be made explicit as theological anthropologies. Obviously, this usage of *anthropology* should not be confused with its usage in the modern scientific discipline that takes the word for its name.

MSIH poses a double challenge to theological anthropology. On the one hand, in spite of its posture of religious neutrality, MSIH is a key element in a class of wider, seemingly antireligious interpretations of humanity, including especially projectionist and illusionist critiques of religion. It is consonance with MSIH that makes these critiques such formidable competitors for traditional theological interpretations of human beings. This connection between MSIH and antireligious critiques has been felt by some to be so strong that their own wider antireligious interpretations of human beings are assumed to follow immediately and trivially from acceptance of what I am calling MSIH. Richard Dawkins, for example, does not even bother to make such a distinction (see Dawkins 1986, 1989, 1996). The over-hastiness of such approaches has been demonstrated repeatedly by scholars who position MSIH in religiously positive theoretical contexts, even though such theoretical ventures are themselves extremely challenging (see, for example, Barbour 1966, 1997, Peacocke 1993, Whitehead 1925). But the close link between MSIH and anti-

religious interpretations of human beings presents a challenge to theological anthropology that should be noted and discussed.

On the other hand, theological anthropology that seeks to coordinate the insights of MSIH with religious visions of human life must find ways to overcome or manage such dissonance as arises. To appreciate what such dissonance might mean, consider whether MSIH can be consistently combined with the implications of such religious ideas as soul (or *jiva*), reincarnation, creation in the image of God, *anatta* (no-soul), spirit possession, exorcism, or the veneration of ancestors. This would be extremely difficult, at best. What about religious experience, sanctification, holiness, spiritual bliss, the dark night of the soul, prayer, spiritual gifts, prophecy, *wu-wei* (active nonaction), flowing with *ch'i* (energy), healing power, prophetic knowledge, or extrasensory perception? Is MSIH consonant with being under the command of God, receiving the law of God, being in harmony with the mandate of heaven, or encountering the Word of God? What about sin, salvation, *samsara* (the process of reincarnation), *moksha* (liberation), suffering, *nirvana*, atonement, or divine forgiveness? This list of religious ideas, in addition to being internally inconsistent, seems radically dissociated from MSIH. The dissonance problem is correspondingly severe.

Why, then, should we pay any attention to such religious ideas in the process of trying to formulate adequate interpretations of human beings? Why not solve the dissonance problem by simply discounting traditional religious anthropological ideas as nonsense or fantasy? Whereas some thinkers might well do that, theologians typically resist such an approach. One minor reason for this is that combining the results of scientific disciplines to produce MSIH is a nontrivial problem, because of tensions within and conflicts between the scientific theories. Rejecting religious ideas because of internal inconsistency alone would be a move in bad faith. A more important reason is that theologians are well acquainted with the way religious symbols function in the lives of people, and this typically leads them to an intriguing conclusion: Religious symbols express significant wisdom about human nature, although sometimes in arcane language. Moreover, the competent use of such symbolic resources transforms human lives in impressive ways.

Now, quite plainly, the fact that billions of people find various subsets of these religious ideas about human beings helpful, even indispensable, demands an explanation. Most analysts begin that explanation by agreeing that people and groups need and construct broader, even religious, interpretations of their nature and situation in order to make sense of their experience and to guide action. The theologian, however, typically leads the way in regarding the transformative and orienting power of such religious symbols as *prima facie* evidence that their claim to express wisdom

should be taken seriously. According to the theologian, we cannot simply dispense with large-scale theological interpretations of human beings, at least not without due care. This insistence has two consequences. On the one hand, at least some theology is compelled to embrace the challenge of seeking a critical synthesis of MSIH and traditional religious insight. On the other hand, because of its familiarity with the wisdom of religious traditions, theology throws its own challenge at anyone developing wider interpretations of human beings: can the virtues, including the efficacy, of traditional religious wisdom be registered, even if in dramatically translated and revalued terms?

In this essay I address the double challenge that MSIH poses to theological anthropology, and the challenge that theology issues in return. I begin with a review of MSIH to establish a baseline for further discussion. I cannot give the same kind of review for theological anthropology, however, because religious views of human beings are enormously diverse. In fact, the contemporary discipline of religious studies is on average inclined to doubt that there is even one religiously crucial characterization of human beings that is important to all major strands of every major religious tradition. I will be content with the vague characterization of religious anthropologies as expressive of profound, if preliminary and unsystematic, wisdom about human nature and the human situation.

THE MODERN SECULAR INTERPRETATION OF HUMANITY

MSIH can be sketched without too much distortion in spite of the complexities involved, such as theoretical disputes within each discipline and conceptual tensions between disciplines. I aim to show that a unified interdisciplinary interpretation of human beings exists and that it has a dynamic structure: a unanimously agreed-on center around which are clustered a number of contested issues, each of which is the focus of ongoing investigation. MSIH is defined primarily by the unanimous core and secondarily by contested issues in the sciences, together with a series of cautious postures toward those debates, each posture guided both by the probable outcome of scientific research programs and by habits of thinking proven effective in the sciences. The general policy is caution: MSIH does not run ahead of scientific consensus. Thus, it is content to register disagreements and adopt probabilistic stances where a more adventurous interpretation of human beings might leap decisively to a less well-grounded conclusion. Of course, because of this dynamic structure, to sketch MSIH is partly a matter of describing scientific consensus and partly a matter of constructing a framework within which scientific agreements and disagreements can be understood as contributing to a large-scale interpretation of human beings. I shall try to distinguish between the descriptive and constructive modes of sketching MSIH where necessary.

This review will be from the bottom up, as it were, beginning the story with evolutionary biology, which of course presupposes and is consistent with biochemistry and physics.

Evolutionary Biology.   Evolutionary biology presents a vision of human beings as the complex, provisional products of an ongoing process —a process regulated by natural laws and open to chance events. All evolutionary biologists agree that evolution is a process driven by chance variations in the genetic makeup of organisms, competition for resources within niches that make such variations relevant to the probability of reproducing healthy offspring, and then the natural selection of genetic variants that best succeed in reproducing. These basic insights constitute the pillars of the modern synthesis between Darwinian evolutionary theory and the theory of genetics: genetic variation, competition, differential reproductive advantage, natural selection, and genetic transmission. This is one of the greatest intellectual achievements of all time, regardless of culture, and its implications for human self-understanding constitute a striking advance with which every philosophical and religious tradition must come to terms.

The modern synthesis has proved correct in the general outline of what it affirms and has proved mistaken only in details or when it has claimed too much for itself, for there is much more to the evolutionary process than the modern synthesis has recognized. For example, the assumption of one-way influence from genes to proteins has collapsed with the discovery of situations in which proteins modify genetic structure. The ability of creatures to modify their environment in ways that alter the probability of successful reproduction has proved more widespread than formerly supposed (it is particularly obvious in builders such as beavers, hive insects, and human beings). Selection effects across multiple species simultaneously have been discovered, demonstrating the interconnectedness of animal and plant life. And cooperation and altruism have been demonstrated to be relevant factors in the evolutionary process, along with competition for limited resources, which suggests that natural selection could be profitably analyzed in terms of units of species or kin groups.

On this much there is general agreement. By contrast, directionality in the evolutionary process is a contested point. Although some biologists affirm that the evolutionary process has a kind of directionality without a specific goal—an impulse toward complexification, perhaps—virtually none affirm that the process is clearly directed, and the vast majority assume that the process is entirely undirected apart from limitations introduced by natural laws. The uncontested statistical reality is an ever-broadening, niche-filling process of speciation, although the rate of speciation, whether or not it occurs in brief bursts punctuating relatively stable periods of equilibrium, and the evolutionary side effects of mass

extinctions remain contested issues. Statistically, of course, this characteristic broadening entails a certain amount of increasing complexity on some evolutionary fronts. The question of whether there is some impulse toward complexity translates at this level to the question of whether the statistically predictable increase in complexity is enough to account for the complexity we see around us.

Among most scientists, there is an understandable methodological preference for minimalist theories, until a failure of explanatory power forces a change. But a number of evolutionary biologists have concluded that the modern synthesis indeed suffers from explanatory impotence. This dawning worry is driven by more than the question of directionality in evolution; there are also problems surrounding the adaptiveness of transitional forms, the relative absence of transitional forms in large tracts of the fossil record, the nonexistence of incontestable examples of new speciation (defined by the impossibility of interbreeding) in our own time, and the statistical improbability of the trillions of exceedingly unlikely events needed to make a complex organism regardless of how long the biosphere affords for that development. All of this has raised the question, therefore, of whether the modern synthesis leaves out a giant chunk of the story: regularities in the evolutionary process that would make less improbable the changes that have occurred, regularities that could be described only in terms of higher-level laws.

However the controversy unfolds, nothing about the modern synthesis is being abandoned except perhaps its overhasty claims to completeness of explanation. On this universally accepted mainstream view, regardless of what higher-level laws might eventually be discovered, the contingency of the human species is evident: Our appearance is the result of a combination of chance and law, our physical form might have been quite different, we might not have appeared at all, and we will be superseded by better-adapted species for as long as the biosphere remains habitable.

Neurosciences.   The studies conducted under the umbrella of the neurosciences—from neurophysiology to cognitive psychology—have led to spectacular advances in the understanding of animal development, movement, sensation, cognition, emotion, and communication. Though these studies are only in the early stages, there is a consensus among neuroscientists that the amazing capacities of animal brains are due at least in part to the amazing chemical properties of the brain, and especially to those properties arising within, and at the synaptic clefts between, neurons. This agreement on the necessity of neural processes for mentality marks an impressive advance over previous conceptions of human mental life, and also constitutes the guiding hypothesis for future neurophysiological research. But the mysteries of mental life are such that philosophers and neuroscientists find themselves asking an obvious question: Is

biochemistry sufficient to account for everything that brains are called upon to do, including serving as the basis for personality, for the qualia of self-conscious experience, and for every aspect of mental life?

Neuroscience makes a crucial contribution to MSIH by virtue of scientific agreement on the thesis that human brains are necessary for human minds. But MSIH is also disturbed by ancient questions—essentially metaphysical questions—about the nature of human consciousness. Neuroscience forces these questions into the open in a fresh way that some believe allows science to make a serious contribution to answering them. But everything in this area is contested: the probable scientific conclusions, viable methods by which neuroscience might contribute to such conclusions, and the ability of neuroscience to make any useful contribution at all. At this point MSIH is forced to proceed cautiously in relation to the various metaphysical and methodological possibilities, delaying final judgment until the evidence permits it. MSIH is not equally open to all hypotheses, because its policy of staying close to scientific results implies that it ought to be guided by the probable outcome of scientific research efforts. With this we move from the stable core of MSIH toward its dynamic periphery. To see what is meant by this, consider the following example of a contested issue with metaphysical implications.

Is there an explanatory gap between brain function and mental function, one that perhaps requires some version of the concept of an indivisible mind or soul that has been so familiar in the religious visions of humanity of many cultures? How would we settle such a question? At this early stage in the history of neuroscience, it seems to be a matter on which with some justification we might bet either way, notwithstanding the fact that many neuroscientists are skeptical about metaphysical souls. Consider the pros and cons. On the one hand, a real metaphysical soul, in the sense of a nonphysical yet individual locus of human personhood, permits one to speak straightforwardly of a seat for freedom and the moral life. It also has important religious significance for many traditions of religious thought (though not in some forms of Indian Buddhism), especially in regard to life after death, and arguably helps ease the problem of qualia (though this, I think, is dubious). On the other hand, to bet on souls is to bet that our scientific ignorance in this instance cannot be overcome. But theological betting on gaps has produced poor returns over the centuries, and the prospects are not much better this time, because the causal connections between both healthy and damaged brains and emotion, personality, and action are already well established. Furthermore, if we posit a gap between the physical and the mental that might be crossed by soul, then we would be hard pressed to make evolutionary sense of the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens* without invoking some evolutionarily

unrecognizable injection of this soul at some point into human beings, and then presumably at some point in the life of every embryo or infant. The returns on such a strategy (which is in essence the one defended in current Roman Catholic moral teaching; see Catholic Church 1987, §§ 1–5; 1995, §§ 60–61) rapidly diminish.

Although I emphasize that the core of MSIH is defined by scientific agreement, it remains important to ask whether MSIH leans one way or another in such a controversy, one that is peripheral relative to the unanimous core of MSIH. I think it does lean—with most neuroscientists (this is the descriptive part) and with solid justification (this is the constructive part)—cautiously in the direction of betting on gapless continuity from the lowest, least complex level of the organization of matter to the highest, most complex level. Most neuroscientists interpret the phenomenon of qualia as an unexpected but still biological characteristic of sufficiently complex central nervous systems. They take the effects of Prozac and other mood-altering drugs to indicate that personality is intimately dependent on brain structure and function. They view the causal connections between brain lesions and mental function (such as conception of the self or perception of objects) as strong evidence that a gap between the physical and the mental is explanatorily superfluous. They allow that some important concepts in our folk-psychological self-descriptions may emerge as natural kinds at the level of brain function, in the way that the concept of learning something until it becomes second nature neatly corresponds to the processes by which various kinds of nondeclarative, noncognitive memories are established. But they fully expect others to find no natural correlation with brain processes and functions, in the way that almost all emotion seems too diffuse in terms of brain function to be a meaningful natural kind at the neurophysiological level. How the folk-psychological category of soul will fare with time and more detailed knowledge of the brain is hard to say. But if its usefulness persists, then MSIH bets that it is more likely to be retained as a higher-level description of brain processes that can also be described in more detailed terms at a variety of lower levels.

This is a bet, of course, a probabilistic leaning of MSIH in the direction of a particular metaphysical point of view; perhaps it can be regarded even as a hypothetical stance in search of correction. It is certainly not the decisive result that hasty secular enthusiasts might want. Nor does this bet occur at the core of the interpretation of human beings that is MSIH. But it does show up on the periphery, because MSIH is influenced, and rightly so, by the methodological commitments of the sciences. The metaphysical question remains genuinely open, but especially because of the neurosciences, MSIH bets against explanatory gaps and in favor of a generic form of physicalism, one characterized by complexity of

organization at various levels of physical reality, within and between which levels causal relationships are active.

Social Sciences.   Sociology and psychology have yielded a vision of human beings as adaptable, anxious, and curious; led by powerful psychological drives and needs for communal identity; liable to violence, mental disease, and fantasy; and embodying ultimate and preliminary commitments in linguistic habits, symbolic systems, and social organizations. The sociology of knowledge has shown that human knowledge is always socially located, sometimes trivially so as not to interfere with the public standing of such knowledge, but sometimes in profound ways that make it extremely difficult to allow for socioeconomic factors and personal motivations in assessing knowledge claims. The details vary greatly among disciplines and between theories, but the general outlines are affirmed in common.

At the level of culture in particular, the needs for orientation in the world and for legitimation of social practices find in the human imagination and in our capacity for symbolic manipulation a perfect match. The result is the construction of complex, symbolically potent worldviews that permit many cultural activities to carry on undisturbed by questions about their legitimacy. The benefits of such automatic legitimation include greater stability of economic and social systems and psychologically calmer and better-adapted individual human beings. All of this promotes the uninterrupted advance of scientific inquiry and a wealth of creative expression, from art to Zen meditation and from architecture to zoology. Negative consequences take the form of an inhibited or perhaps repressed capacity for cultural self-criticism and sometimes intolerance of those beyond the boundaries of the cultural group or of those within the group who do not conform to the group's active structures of legitimation. (See, for example, Berger 1967.)

To arrive at such results, sociology needs to identify meaningful patterns within group life. It is only with such an interpretation in hand that sociologists may discern anything resembling lawlike connections. Likewise, psychological theories of the influence of social and family environment on the formation of human personality and propensities for action depend on interpretations that select out certain environmental factors as the most significant features for psychology. Such interpretation is important in every kind of science, whether it is interpretation of data or theories of instrumentation. But the dependence on a layer of interpretation is so much heavier in the social sciences than in most physical sciences that sociology and psychology have many more legitimate theoretical options and conflicts. Nevertheless, these conflicts always surround finding the causal connections among group life, family life, and personal life; the basic assumption that nothing more is needed to account for the patterns

we see in people and groups is not questioned in the same way, at least not by sociologists and psychologists. They rightly adopt a minimalist approach to explanation as a necessary component in the success of their work.

Sociobiology and Evolutionary Psychology.   The social and biological sciences have joined forces in evolutionary psychology and sociobiology. This has rendered social organization—including moral and religious traditions and practices—increasingly susceptible to forceful analyses in terms of drives toward genetic perpetuation. Whereas the sociology of knowledge drew our attention to the fact that the presuppositions of our world making were received from others and are usually not capable of decisive justification, evolutionary psychology provides a partial vision of the motivation for world making: It is a matter not merely of a need for existential orientation but also of a struggle to ensure genetic self-perpetuation. This drive to genetic self-perpetuation is expressed first psychologically, in the drives for personal survival and reproduction, and then socially, in the drive for kin group and species survival.

Evolutionary psychology and sociobiology have some trouble accounting for cultural variations in ethical and religious worldviews; we might expect more uniformity in moral convictions than we in fact seem to find. Since gene perpetuation is a specieswide interest, however, it makes sense to look more closely. It may well turn out that the variations in moral convictions are relatively minor when compared with the larger agreements, and it may also be discovered that serious variations can be rendered explicable with reference to peculiar contextual features of individual groups. This is research that mostly remains to be done. Nevertheless, it is already obvious that evolutionary psychology and sociobiology are useful tools for understanding aspects of many kinds of cultural and ethical practices, and especially those with some cross-cultural generality. Here again we see a distinction between a unanimous contribution to the core of MSIH and contested areas that are registered around its periphery.

Theories of Ethics and Religion.   Projective and illusionist theories of ethics and religion have been given impetus by these developments in MSIH. The interpretations of religion furnished in the early decades of what was to become the sociology and psychology of religion—theories associated with names such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and William James—all presupposed that human beings are bundles of drives and impulses grouped in dense relational networks with other such bundles, and that they need and have the means to construct interpretations of the world that are good for both orienting themselves within it and managing

group life. These early theorists and their heirs have to a considerable extent made good on this presupposition.

The projective impulse, though explained in widely varying ways by individual theorists, seems indispensable for understanding religious worldviews and the origins and functions of myth and ritual. Likewise, the psychological needs for orientation to the world and for social stability —arising in part from evolutionary drives and depending on the projective impulse for its satisfaction—are crucial components in any adequate account of ethical and religious systems. Such systems may have originated as codifications of the highest convictions of the groups in which they emerged. For example, a close analysis of ethical rules concerning marriage and violence according to evolutionary biology makes it clear how following those rules satisfies gene-perpetuation instincts at the personal and kin level. Game theory has proved useful for this purpose because it helps us to understand how such interests could be fostered more effectively by altruistic behavior than by outright selfishness under certain circumstances.

Similarly, religious concepts such as God and karma and Dao can have a profound regulative effect on social life: They legitimate religious-moral rules by weaving them into narratives that are broad enough to embrace ideas about nature and history at the same time. Moreover, such narratives can effectively furnish existential orientation and comfort as well as group purpose and identity. Such lines of analysis have been standard fare in the psychology and sociology of religion for over a century and have repeatedly made good on their promise of explanatory efficiency. For this reason, then, MSIH counts these social and psychological dynamics as indispensable components in any adequate account of ethics and religion.

Showing somehow that the concepts of God or karma or Dao correspond to reality would not affect this central conviction of MSIH. In fact, we may count it as MSIH's greatest gamble and greatest achievement that its account of ethics, religion, social groups, personality, and mental life remains neutral to nonphysical, transcendental realities. MSIH feels no need of hypotheses beyond those constructed from the raw materials of physicalism, toward which MSIH leans in accordance with what has proved to be the most effective method for advancing the natural sciences. Likewise, MSIH sees no justification for rejecting such hypotheses outright, as an enthusiastic and hasty wielder of Ockham's razor might. The simple fact is that not enough data are available to determine the matter, nor is there good reason to bet one way or the other as there was with the question of physicalism. This is a limited form of agnosticism at the level of ontology: MSIH is neutral with regard to religious realities.

This makes for an interesting contrast, one dictated by the shape of scientific consensus. On the one hand, MSIH adopts a hypothesis with

regard to explanatory efficacy in the sciences, betting that there are no explanatory gaps, that some form of physicalism that involves connected levels of complex organization obtains, and that the sciences and MSIH itself will continue to display their customary brilliance in facilitating human self-understanding at many levels. This is one of the great cultural-intellectual wagers of the twentieth century and one that appears increasingly shrewd with each passing year, though it will doubtless continue to have the status of a bet for many years to come. On the other hand, MSIH remains neutral to transcendent realities, because the evidence from nature or in human life, especially in light of the social and psychological sciences, remains intransigently out of focus with respect to permitting the clarity of vision needed to bet one way or the other. The fact that there are so many religious scientists suggests that this is at least as much description of MSIH as it is my own construction.

MSIH on the Relations between the Sciences. MSIH coordinates specific results concerning human beings from a large group of disciplines. Just as important, however, MSIH enshrines at its core assumptions about the relationships between those disciplines, each of which has its own characteristic data, theories, and forms of explanation. The usual model for these relationships is a hierarchy, with each level corresponding to a special science, and the space between each two levels corresponding to the relationships obtaining between the higher-level and the lower-level science. A more adequate model may prove to be less tidy, because the relationships between sciences sometimes jump levels, but that would be a mere adjustment. The great virtue of the hierarchy model is that it draws attention to the dependence of higher levels on lower levels. That is, it expresses the fact that ethics and religion depend on sociology and psychology, which in turn depend on the neurosciences, with cell biology, biochemistry, physical chemistry, atomic physics, and subatomic physics following in order. Each level depends on the one below it in the sense that organization, patterns, and regularities at the higher level occur on the substrate of the lower-level structures and functions.

The concept of supervenience offers a convenient way of speaking about the relationship between higher-level and lower-level properties. We may say roughly that higher-level properties supervene on lower-level properties if no two situations are identical with respect to lower-level properties without also being identical with respect to higher-level properties. Of course, speaking of supervenience adds nothing substantive to the conversation because it is merely a terminological shorthand. Predictably, therefore, the definitions of supervenience have proliferated as theorists have tried to capture the nuances of the dependence relation that obtains between higher and lower levels in MSIH's hierarchy of the sciences. This stands as a warning against trying to represent the concept of

supervenience as a solution to the problem of the relationship between levels of the hierarchy of sciences; a good definition of supervenience merely clears the ground for a more substantive discussion of how higher-level properties relate to lower-level ones. But none of the debates surrounding definitions of supervenience and their usefulness jeopardizes MSIH's central thesis that a hierarchical organization characterized by dependence of higher on lower levels applies between the various sciences with which it is concerned.

I have argued that MSIH bets that there is no real explanatory gap at any level of this hierarchy, neither in the dependence of cell function on biochemical processes, nor in the dependence of mental function on brain function, nor anywhere else. Of course, there is a great deal to be explained at each level that no lower level can manage. But the working hypothesis of MSIH, tentative though it may be, is that of its constituent sciences: the basic constituents of nature, the way they are organized, and the way they are contextualized are the most fundamental pieces of the puzzle. That is enough to explain higher-level functions in a loose sense of "explain" even though we ourselves can rarely provide detailed explanations of one level using categories at any lower level. In fact, we typically need to introduce concepts for characterizing the function of higher-level systems in order to simplify the explanatory story and reduce the impact of our relative ignorance of boundary conditions of complex systems. That is to say, we would need to know a ton of precise information about boundary conditions to explain how a protein opens the way it does when a phosphate group attaches to it, and it seems fairly clear that we could never give the explanation in those terms. But if we introduce the concepts of protein structure and types of folding that occur under various structural transformations, then we can get on with trying to understand the function of proteins without having to worry about the nightmare boundary conditions that would have to be invoked to explain in precise chemical terms the protein's folding and unfolding. Perhaps computer simulations will eventually duplicate the structural changes, but there is no need to wait for such confirmation before proceeding with analysis in terms of the higher-level concepts.

There is always a chance that a gap is silently passed over when explanation shifts to a higher level, because we can rarely show decisively in particular cases that lower-order properties together with specific boundary conditions produce the higher-order properties we seek to explain. Nevertheless, MSIH and science in general hypothesize that the higher-level explanation is really nothing more than a massively simplified version of a lower-level explanation. That is, there is nothing problematic about the explanatory gap because it is a gap merely in practice and not in principle—we jump to higher levels of explanation to overcome the

difficulties associated with ignorance of boundary conditions, chaotic interference with prediction, our need to understand in terms of images or manageable mathematics, and the impossibility of making sound calculations or in most cases even applicable computer simulations of the required complexity. Moreover, there are enough spectacular, explicit demonstrations of how higher-level properties really do result from lower-level properties that the assertion of no in-principle gaps (I'll call it the no-gaps hypothesis for short) is well attested. For example, neurophysiologists are learning how to reduce in detail the higher-level property of the apparently fortuitous turning of neurons as they grow backward from the eye toward the visual cortex to lower-level properties of chemical transactions between proteins on the retractable growth cone of the neuron and certain highly specific proteins in the path of the growing neuron. With so richly and intimately detailed an account almost in hand, the exhaustive explanation of higher-level properties of brain cells in terms of lower-level chemical properties of macromolecules seems the safest hypothesis. As a result, there seems no reason to assume that there might be in-principle gaps between these or any other levels.

Of course, some philosophers claim that there really is something else lurking in those explanatory gaps. For example, some of the more radical process metaphysicians (see Birch 1990) predict that causal explanations of biological processes cannot be complete unless explicit explanatory account is taken of the contributions of divine input and concrescent creativity in each occasion of the world's becoming. If this prediction were proved correct, then MSIH in its current no-gaps form would be overcome. Most process metaphysicians, however, hold the less aggressive view that the divine and concrescently creative components in the occasions of nature give rise to the natural laws and regularities as well as the chance occurrences and free choices that MSIH simply explains differently. The decision between such empirically equivalent views would then have to be settled on grounds other than those to which scientific experiments and theorizing could make contributions. In that case, the minimalist, no-gaps bet of MSIH could be defended without reservation. Moreover, the great strength of the no-gaps gamble is that it increases motivation for scientific discovery, because it is really only on the assumption of no in-principle gaps that scientists would conceive of the kinds of research programs that they do. Aristotle denied the no-gaps view of Democritus in brilliant, persuasive fashion (in his day; see Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* v. 8), and the rule of Aristotle's opinion arguably kept scientific advance at bay for two thousand years (though his brilliant observations set an impressive standard for some types of work taken up by subsequent scientists; see the zoological works of Aristotle, listed in the bibliography). From that point of view, at least, we are better off with the no-gaps view

for as long as we are unable to resolve the subtle metaphysical debates that would force a change of strategy.

The Significance of MSIH for Theological Anthropologies.   This has been a rapid survey of some of the main elements of MSIH, staying on the main roads common to theorists' various mappings of the wider territory and merely hinting at the numerous controversies on the side roads. Nevertheless, even if I do not say much in detail about any traditional religious anthropology in particular, it is clear that MSIH represents a challenge to traditional religious anthropologies of almost all kinds, in almost all traditions. MSIH is far more *specific* than traditional religious anthropologies, even at the level of abstraction I have described it; it is based on general principles that are *cross-culturally applicable*; it leads to subtle *models* for the origin and development of religious beliefs in individuals and groups; and it produces *predictions* for behavioral tendencies. Perhaps most important, it is a *progressive* theory and allows of apparently unlimited correction and *improvement* in broad forums of public discourse.

Although never beyond criticism or correction, therefore, MSIH is theoretically impressive and conceptually sturdy. Its formidable array of virtues entails that the burden of proof is on other insights into the nature of human beings to show themselves consistent with it, or well justified to dispute it. Because of this, MSIH must be given a central place in the evaluation of specific theological anthropologies. This of course supposes that theological anthropology aims to venture a vision of humanity that is intellectually illuminating, publicly debatable, and theoretically sophisticated; otherwise it can what it likes without regard to any other perspective. On my assumptions about the purpose of theological anthropology, however, traditional forms of it *must* engage MSIH. When they do, they have found themselves with a lot of work to do to render themselves consistent with mainstream biological and sociological commitments, or even to find intelligible ways to disagree with those commitments. This difficulty has two parts.

THE FIRST DIFFICULTY: THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND CRITIQUES OF RELIGION

The thorniness of MSIH for theological anthropology lies partly in the aid it gives reductionistic critiques of religion and central theological concepts. MSIH may be formally neutral to the question of the reality of religious objects, concerning itself only with the function, efficacy, and causal properties of religious feelings and ideas, languages, and activities. Yet precisely because of the relatively impressive way it handles what is in its domain, MSIH can be used in theoretical valuations of religion to

argue both that religion is *nothing other than* mental states, social dynamics, natural functions, and causes, and that people think differently only by mistake. Properly judicious scholarly contributions to MSIH can be distinguished from the reductionistic critiques of religion that make such effective use of it. The move from analyzing influences on religion or corporate religious structures to the valuational posture necessary for large-scale critiques of religion is readily apparent to most theorists; only a wild and woolly few would insist that this move is logically coerced—and I think they would err in so insisting.

So we might ask, where is the problem? Theological anthropology can grant as much ground as necessary to MSIH, and the final interpretative step still remains open for either religiously affirmative theological anthropology or reductionistic critiques of religion carried off (perhaps) in the name of fidelity to the goal of authentic human life. All that is needed, it appears, is to make sure that theological anthropology is consistent with the most strongly attested points in MSIH, and then the challenge will be overcome. This line of solution is, I think, the correct one. But it is easy for theologians to embrace it hastily, as if exhausted from worrying about the power of reductionistic critiques and thankful for a way out. To avoid the trivialization of properly reductionistic critiques of religion, it is important to examine patiently whether anything may or must be learned from these critiques before rushing on to secure theological anthropology from threat.

For this purpose, it is helpful to notice that MSIH is awkward because it offers a provisional account of every aspect of religion—from pious feelings to sacred doctrines, from personal conversion to corporate rituals, from ethical power to achieved sainthood. This leaves no *special* ground for traditional religious anthropologies to stand on, be they cognitive-metaphysical visions of souls and salvation or pragmatic-epistemic processes of transformation. Enlightenment critiques of religion tended to leave ground open for nineteenth-century religious romantics to build reactionary theological anthropologies on, say, feeling rather than thinking, or subjectivity rather than objectivity. But MSIH leaves no ground untilled. Neither the domains of emotion, will, or intellect nor the loci of individual or society are left as distinctive turf for specifically religious anthropology. Neither the radical subjectivity of Søren Kierkegaard ([1846] 1941) nor the objectivity of the human position in the great chain of being (Lovejoy 1936) is left untouched, so neither can be promulgated as the characteristic, nonsecular heart of theological anthropology. Neither Paul Tillich's (1951) ecstatic reception of revelation, nor Karl Rahner's (1976) apprehension of an infinitely mysterious horizon, nor Sankara's (1965) cultivation of discrimination, nor Bhavaviveka's (1989) process of liberation from the illusions of reality, nor the Qur'anic portrayal of

humanity under the command of God, nor the Jewish conception of a covenant expressed in the giving of the law to Jews, nor the Chinese ideal of harmonious existence in the ambit of the Dao of reality, nor the mystic's suprarational experiences—none of these ideas has proved impervious to analysis and explanation at the hands of MSIH. Its invasion has been spectacular and comprehensive, and there appears to be nothing to prevent this invasion from being exhaustive as well. Though it must be admitted that MSIH can handle objective features of human existence with more comfort than subjective ones, not even the most inward subjectivity is beyond its explanatory reach, at least in *some* respects.

It follows that there is no simple strategy for blocking or sidelining reductionistic critiques of religion, as there might be if religious anthropology could be given some distinctive locus in human nature, out of reach of MSIH. It also follows that the force of these critiques does not depend on contradictions between religious and modern secular readings of human nature—contradictions that might later be overcome. The purveyors of these critiques are happy enough (and usually right) to point out the respects in which traditional religious anthropologies express ignorance of, or mistaken judgments about, human nature (as perhaps in the case of traditional usage of the concepts of *soul* or *ecstasy* or *revelatory inspiration*). But the most viable critiques of religion are no longer parasitic upon religion, needing religion for their very self-definition, as atheistic or antireligious views tended at one time to be. Rather, these critiques derive from stable and independent interpretations of the world that can be turned to the criticism of religion or not, as desired. Ironically, then, reductionistic critiques of religion have outgrown their shrill antireligious origins to become mere components of large-scale interpretations of human life with enough self-confidence to be able to appreciate the wisdom of certain aspects of traditional religious anthropologies, and thereby to subsume what is deemed valuable within them. The core of MSIH in its neutrality toward religious realities is accepted by almost all contemporary large-scale interpretations of human life, whether religious or antireligious. Where a disagreement with something at the periphery of MSIH exists, as, for example, over the nature of the human soul in certain theological anthropologies, it can be acknowledged explicitly and stands as a prediction that MSIH's physicalist bet will eventually lose. Such an outcome would not affect the core of MSIH, but it would be an important development at its dynamic margins.

So exactly how should we assess the relative strength of traditional religious anthropologies and the antireligious extensions of religiously neutral MSIH? On the one hand, antireligious interpretations of humanity, being valuational, normative, recent extensions of MSIH, achieve consistency with that well-attested vision more easily, whereas theological

anthropology, being far older and thus bearing many concepts that are foreign to MSIH, must struggle painfully toward a new synthesis. Moreover, antireligious interpretations of human life are to a considerable extent able to subsume the traditional wisdom of their religious counterparts. And they can explain the existence of religious anthropologies as merely one more instance of projective wishing trying to rescue humanity from the stark truth about itself: that religion is just a by-product of the self-referential entanglement of humanity in its own confused need to secure protection from the horrors and boredom of life. These factors explain the marginalization of traditional theological anthropologies in contemporary intellectual life, to the point that asserting them appears arcane or reactionary—or even completely arbitrary, in the sense that there are no good reasons to affirm them when consistency with MSIH furnishes a criterion of adequacy. It is the comprehensiveness of MSIH in conjunction with the appeal of Ockham's metaphysically minimalistic razor that makes the critiques appealing to it so potent. No wonder so many contemporary religious anthropologies withdraw from the fray and depend heavily on a privatized language-game strategy or on the fundamentalist reversion to forms of external authority to justify their terminology and assertions.

On the other hand, religious anthropologies embody a tremendous amount of wisdom with regard to the spiritual life, the agonies of suffering and guilt, the cultivation of personal maturity, and the honing of human consciousness. Antireligious interpretations of human beings have not yet found ways to incorporate enough of this vast body of knowledge, because MSIH has not either; both are behind the curve in this respect. Moreover, if traditional religious anthropology could be rendered in terms compatible with those of MSIH—a virtue the recent antireligious interpretations possess in virtue of their being born in the era of MSIH—the first advantage of the antireligious visions mentioned above would be neutralized. So there is a lot riding on forging and testing syntheses of traditional theological anthropologies and MSIH. Before addressing this topic in the next section, however, we need to face squarely the charge of arbitrariness that antireligious views of human life lay at the feet of theological anthropologies.

The charge of arbitrariness is simple to state: If you don't have a good reason to affirm a theological anthropology, it is at best arbitrary to do so. We can leave unspoken what it is at worst. We might try to answer this charge by saying that "reductionistic critiques cannot coerce rational assent any more than theological anthropologies can," in a kind of you-too argument. The problem with this is that the theoretical advantage of antireligious interpretations of humanity, which I have just outlined, is significant: They are capable of subsuming many of the best insights of religious anthropologies while explaining the latter's mistakes as

understandable side effects of being in the grip of a powerful illusion. Theological anthropologies cannot do the same for their antireligious competitors, at least not as specifically, and not without a thoroughgoing synthesis with MSIH. The charge of arbitrariness is hard to shake with such a direct apologetic strategy.

How, then, can the charge of arbitrariness be met? I think we need not be creative here. It is enough to follow Tillich's indirect apologetic strategy of interpreting the category of the religious in terms of ultimate concern rather than ultimate reality. In this way, we can treat as religious (in this broad sense) certain of the so-called antireligious interpretations of humanity—the ones that register an ultimate concern. Indeed, I would say that this move reclassifies as "religious" all of the most interesting antireligious anthropologies, such as the atheistic-existentialist ones heavily invested in the concept of authenticity. The presupposed worldviews of the reconfigured class of religious anthropologies would then be more diverse and would include some that many traditionally religious people might find alarming or distasteful. They would range from profound atheism to Qur'anic monotheism, from Nietzschean perspectivalism in a meaningless world to traditional Buddhist accounts of suffering, no-self, and liberation. This richer scenario for theological anthropology is more realistic because it enables us to register the power and delicacy of the best of the so-called antireligious views. For example, we find in some atheist existentialists an impressive kind of authentic fury or resignation, directed toward or at least caused by a cosmos that condemns us to an unfulfillable desire for fulfillment (see Sartre 1948, for example). This is as profound a response to the environment of human life as can be found, and in the respects that count, it is as religious as the most spiritual worship.

It may seem to be Trojan-horse foolishness to speak of theological anthropology so generously, since it brings antireligious critiques into the theological city walls. But whereas direct apologetic approaches fail, this indirect approach neutralizes the charge of arbitrariness laid against traditional religious anthropologies by drawing attention to the religious commitments (in the broad sense of "religious") of so-called antireligious interpretations of human life. Avoiding arbitrariness then becomes merely one of several debatable criteria for the overall adequacy of theological anthropology that must be weighed against other possible criteria, such as doing justice to traditional religious insight into the human situation, or detailed consonance with MSIH.

THE SECOND DIFFICULTY: COORDINATING MSIH AND RELIGIOUS VISIONS OF HUMANITY

The problem of the antireligious critiques having been addressed, it remains to consider the tougher challenge: How are we to achieve critical

consistency between MSIH and traditional religious wisdom in theological anthropology? Of course, theological anthropology does not strive after this kind of synthesis by definition, but the question of how to achieve it is no less important for that. I shall not try to present a complete synthesis here, although that would be the best evidence for its possibility. That has been done with varying success by many during this century, from Ernest Troeltsch ([1911] 1991) to Tillich (1951–1963), from Bernard Lonergan (1957) to Rahner (1976), and among working scholars from Gordon Kaufman (1993), Peacocke (1993), Philip Hefner (1993), and Sallie McFague (1987, 1993) to the less well known attempts by younger writers. Here I will content myself first with arguing that such a synthesis is a good goal for theological anthropology and then with discussing a few guidelines for producing a critical consistency between MSIH and traditional religious wisdom in a theological interpretation of human beings. The virtue of these arguments is intended to be that they broach these themes in new ways.

It is clear from what has been said that I understand theological anthropology in pluralistic fashion, as including multiple approaches; this is required by the partly ineffable character of religious realities. However, I do insist that there must be room for a rational, public (i.e., maximally scientific, within the limits set by the topic) approach to theological anthropology in that mix of approaches; this is the approach that values synthesis with MSIH. That approach is to treat theological anthropology as an interpretation of human beings that results from *a process of inquiry* under the influence of a confessional heritage rather than an interpretation of human beings that is merely determined from the outset by a religious creed or tradition. Such theological anthropologies can be better or worse, and they can be improved through a process of inquiry that pays attention to all relevant information, including both MSIH and traditional religious wisdom about human beings.

In my view, the fundamental hypothesis of an inquiry-oriented theological interpretation of human beings and their condition is that human beings are oriented to primordial, ultimate mystery in their experiences, their social practices, their drives and projective impulses, their longings and failures, their malevolence and love. The process of inquiry associated with the production and justification of a theological anthropology must attempt to evaluate this hypothesis and not merely to articulate it. And evaluation involves attending to the insights of both religious wisdom and MSIH.

It is important to note that some theologians reject my assumption that theological anthropology can be oriented to inquiry in some cases. The reason this matters is that the goal of synthesis with MSIH is not necessarily desirable when theological anthropology as a form of inquiry is

rejected as impossible. The strongest argument I know against my view and in favor of the independence of theological anthropology from MSIH derives from an extreme version of the cultural-linguistic life world perspective. It runs as follows.

Is there not a danger in synthesizing theological anthropology and MSIH? The attempt at synthesis mistakenly presupposes that theological anthropology and MSIH are commensurable accounts of human nature, if only because they can be deemed to be consonant or dissonant with one another. Under this false assumption, seeking a synthesis may well induce even the most faithful religious people in ever-widening circles to regard religious anthropologies as arbitrary, even though the legitimacy of religious anthropologies should be established by their efficacy within the life worlds that support them. That is, seeking this synthesis would be both intellectually wrongheaded and needlessly destructive of sacred and vital religious life worlds. Preserving the integrity of the religious life world is the overriding value. It would be better in religious circles to ignore MSIH and the view of theology as inquiry that forces us to pay attention to MSIH if that is what preserving the integrity of the religious life world requires. And this is, in fact, required. Accordingly, we must reject the assumption that it is valuable to search for a synthesis between MSIH and theological anthropology. Instead of a synthesis, what is needed is the maintenance of an alternative life world, one not in thrall to the science-oriented, hegemonic worldview that is expressed in the minimalism and even the religious neutrality of MSIH—one in which religious wisdom can be spoken of freely and with conviction, regardless of what other interpretations of life are offered elsewhere. Both MSIH and religious anthropology have their place within cultural-linguistic life worlds, and the effectiveness of the orientation to life thereby achieved is the only criterion for adequacy of such life worlds.

I am skeptical about this argument. Such an approach to the preservation of religious wisdom about human life will have diminishing returns, because life worlds leak: they are never the secure, insulated bubbles of discourse that this argument requires. On the contrary, some degree of intersubjective debate and conversation is the only way to keep any particular bubble intact and viable for defining a life world for groups of people. Historical accounts of communities bear this out in the long term and often in the short term too. A critical consistency with MSIH is therefore a practical necessity. Moreover, this argument gives up on inquiry too quickly, supposing that it is pointless even to seek a critically consistent coordination of sometimes divergent worldviews. On the contrary, however, the possibility of a synthesis can be assessed only through extensive attempts to try to forge one. There are no good a priori arguments guaranteeing that inquiry will fail or succeed in achieving its limited goal; we have to find out by trying. Thus, the synthesis of religious

wisdom with MSIH is an important goal for theological anthropology understood as a form of inquiry. MSIH and theological anthropology are commensurable *enough* that anything less will not be intellectually or practically viable.

There is great diversity among theological anthropologies that attend to the problem of synthesis whose solution I have argued is so important. This diversity is all the greater because I have followed Tillich in enlarging the collection of theological anthropologies to include all those that register ultimate concern, regardless of their presupposed worldview. The typical weaknesses in extant syntheses fall into several categories:

1. The failure to register traditional religious wisdom about the human condition, as when the problems of human suffering and weakness are neglected

2. The failure to register the impact of the biological sciences, as when too much directionality in the evolutionary process is assumed in order to ease theological pressure for a purposeful natural order

3. The failure to register the insights of the social sciences, as when the demonstrated realities of projection, delusion, and social legitimation are minimized for the sake of uncomplicated theological access to the testimony of religious experience and tradition

4. The failure to come to terms with the diversity of competitive theological anthropologies

It is extremely difficult to tie all of this material together in a theological anthropology. There is an especially obvious division between the first three of these typical symptoms of failure and the last. This is partly because intellectual projects that blend comparative and constructive theology have only recently been attempted and partly because theological construction that is sensitive to philosophical and religious pluralism is typically not as well informed about the natural and social sciences, and vice versa. These are historical circumstances that can be changed, and thus it is on this fourth failure, the one that is most widespread by far, that I shall focus my attention.

We have seen that not everyone accepts my argument that synthesis of traditional religious wisdom and MSIH is an important goal, and this should not be forgotten. If this goal *is* accepted, however, then with regard to the pluralism of approaches to theological anthropology, there are two major ways in which the synthesis might be pursued. Each way involves provisional acceptance of one of the following two theses. Much of the diversity of extant theological anthropology conforms to one of these theses, and I shall try to make that clear by categorizing the major alternatives in terms of the subtheses that follow each thesis.

Thesis 1.   *The essence of humanity is expressed in its world environment and relations, so MSIH gives accurate and indispensable insights into human life and human nature*. This approach appears in at least these two forms:
  a. All nature including humanity is oriented to mystery (divinization approaches, philosophical Daoism, process versions of panentheism).
  b. All mystery is limited to nature and its ground—there is no supernature (secular humanism, religious naturalism).

Thesis 2.   *The essence of humanity is not expressed in its world environment and relations, so MSIH gives a misleading account of human life and human nature*. Synthesis in this case consists in accounting for MSIH in the process of laying out a more complete interpretation of human beings. Again, there are at least two forms of approach here:
  a. Proper discrimination discloses a higher purpose for humanity to which theological anthropology should testify (perennial philosophy, supernaturalistic salvation/liberation schemes, most tribal traditions).
  b. Proper discrimination discloses that humanity has no essence, is nothing finally nameable, and nothing in particular; simply to realize this fully is to free oneself, to be happy and at peace (especially Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta).

These theses and the classes of major worldviews they configure draw fresh attention to a problem of arbitrariness in theological anthropology —this time in relation not to antireligious anthropologies but to competitive alternatives among the theological anthropologies themselves. It is genuinely difficult to justify one approach decisively over the others. Scant attention has been paid to this problem. I would hazard the guess that each of these ways of interpreting human life has good prospects of rendering itself consonant with MSIH and with traditional religious wisdom, at least from the point of view of the tradition it represents. More research needs to be done to determine how good those prospects are in any given case. I suspect that each would find some parts of MSIH easier to absorb than others, and that the harder-to-digest parts would make some parts of familiar religious wisdom less plausible but not others. But advocates of theological anthropology-as-inquiry are interested not merely in lists of the effects of striving for consonance between MSIH and hordes of theological anthropologies but also in resolving disputes among theological anthropologies and using the insights of alternative theological anthropologies to improve their own constructive projects. How might this be achieved?

With this we come to a practical contention: The public and cross-cultural character of MSIH, together with its religiously neutral posture, make it a potentially useful tool for resolving at least some disputes among theological anthropologies that have seemed unresolvable in the past. MSIH establishes a criterion for plausibility that permits rational discriminations among various aspects of theological anthropologies. For example, the joint message of cosmology and biology is that theological anthropologies electing to centralize the human species in a cosmo-historico-theological narrative (such as some forms of Christianity and Islam) will have a harder time with MSIH than those that do not (such as some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism). Obviously, using MSIH as a criterion will not help in every situation. Nor is it the only available tool for discriminating otherwise indiscriminable views, as the growing technologies of comparison and the long-standing effectiveness of criteria such as internal consistency and theoretical economy demonstrate. Nevertheless, it does promise to be useful. Because it selects out aspects of theological anthropologies as preferable regardless of tradition, and because any one tradition is unlikely to be decisively favored in this process of discrimination (though that remains to be seen), the problem remains of how to coordinate the MSIH-preferred insights into a coherent theological anthropology. That, I think, has never been tried.

The appeal to the plausibility structures of MSIH, even as prudently minimal as they are, can be contested. That is the point of Thesis 2 above. But even in that case, the core insights of MSIH have to be taken account of, if only to say in detail how they are misleading or how they disguise some other, truer reality. For example, theological anthropologies that assume a nonphysical basis for human personhood under the aegis of concepts such as soul or *jiva* will have a hard time with MSIH's bet on physicalism. This leaning of MSIH, however, especially because it is at the dynamic margins of MSIH, allows intelligible dissent in the form of a counterbet that physicalism is mistaken. But dissenters need to show how MSIH's reasons for its physicalist propensities can be taken account of while still resisting physicalism itself.

Organizing these major interpretations into categories highlights some of the choices that need to be made—or that are made unawares—when a theological anthropology is defended. The main choice is between Thesis 1 and Thesis 2. The key to understanding this decision is the fact that the two options are in dispute not over the truth of MSIH but over its status as knowledge. Thesis 1 holds that MSIH is accurate and straightforwardly true and demands nothing less than consistency from any theological anthropology. Thesis 2, by contrast, argues that the most discriminating account of human nature takes MSIH to be merely a preliminary insight for which one must account without being misled into according it

definitive status. On Thesis 2, therefore, it would be enough to explain why the world *appears* such as to make MSIH so persuasive. In practice, many who hold views consistent with Thesis 2 display little interest in questions of the consistency of their theological anthropologies with MSIH, for the obvious reason, as the Buddha himself might have put it, that when the house is burning and you realize that you need to flee, you don't pause on the way out in a fit of scientific curiosity to analyze the intricate pattern on the wallpaper. Nevertheless, these views would be much strengthened if a persuasive account could be given of why the world appears for us humans in the way that MSIH recounts, an account that does more than simply appeal to *suchness* (as in some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism) or similar inquiry-stopping concepts. The omission of any treatment of so powerful a view of human beings as MSIH seems deeply suspect, though in reality—for now, at least—it seems to be at least partly the result of mere lack of interest. (This has begun to change in some Buddhist circles, including the descendents of the Kyoto School and Msao Abe; and the Abrahamic traditions have a long history of tangling with the sciences.)

The apparently intractable problem of choosing between Thesis 1 and Thesis 2 can only be resolved, I think, by hypothetically adopting one or the other in order to test the feasibility of each. In a situation such as this, the energy of personal perspective is necessary for driving the process by which horizons are fused and thereby (in this case) the character of humanity disclosed. For my part, when working specifically on theological anthropology, I seek a synthesis of traditional religious anthropology and MSIH in provisional conformity with Thesis 1. In other research, I try to develop a more fundamental theory of human knowledge and reality that is capable of explaining how the dispute between the two theses can continue to seem intractable. My heart is with the latter approach. But everyone, surely, no matter which approach is to bear the effects of their energies, should carefully consider the arguments for the importance of striving for some detailed synthesis of traditional religious and modern secular wisdom about humanity. We may decide that the retrieval of a few scraps of traditional religious anthropology is finally the best we can do, because MSIH sets so demanding a standard. Or we may try to relativize MSIH as merely a limited vision of human beings. We could then, with Roman Catholic moral teaching, reintroduce souls perhaps as supervenient or emergent or even supernatural characteristics of sufficiently complex organisms, after which we might be able retrieve a good deal of traditional religious anthropology.

In any event, my aim in this paper has been to argue that MSIH is important and must be dealt with by theological anthropology; that religious wisdom about human beings is valuable, even if it seems self-

contradictory and out of harmony with MSIH; that these facts confirm that striving for a synthesis is a vital goal; and that we have a choice about the kind of synthesis we try to construct.

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