

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 12 | Issue 3

Article 6

7-1-1995

The Religious Significance of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder

Huston Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Smith, Huston (1995) "The Religious Significance of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol12/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF POSTMODERNISM: A REJOINDER

Huston Smith

Accepting Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" as its definition of postmodernism, and Derrida's "openness to the other" as deconstruction's contribution to it, this essay distinguishes three species of postmodernism: *minimal* (we have no believable metanarratives), *mainline* (they are unavailable in principle), and *polemical* ("good riddance!"). It then argues that the religious impulse challenges all three of these contentions. Contra polemical postmodernism, metanarratives/worldviews are needed. Contra mainline postmodernism, reliable ones are possible. And contra minimal postmodernism, they already exist — in the world's great, enduring religious traditions.

My decision to submit this essay was prompted by the recent issue of this journal on "The Religious Significance of Contemporary Continental Philosophy" (*FP*, Vol. 10, No. 4, October 1993) which neglected the downside of that significance. The essay originated as an address titled "Postmodernism and the World's Religions" that was delivered at the International Institute for Islamic Thought and Civilization's inaugural symposium on "Islam and the Challenge of Modernity," Kuala Lumpur, August 1994. In that form it appears — reprinted from the proceedings of that symposium — in Walter Truett Anderson (ed.), *The Truth about Truth* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1995). Here I have omitted the references to Islam that were specific to its original occasion. I have also aligned it closer to the interests of this journal, and given it a new title.

•••

In the wake of its traditional and modern periods, the Western world is now generally regarded as having become postmodern. And as the entire world is still (at this stage) westernizing, I propose in this essay to think about postmodernism's bearing, not exclusively on the religions of the West but on religion generally. From the innumerable ways in which the word postmodern has been and is being used, I select the one that I think says most. It will occupy me exclusively.

Postmodernism as the Collapse of Inclusive Outlooks

Contrasts tend to throw things into relief, so I shall define the postmodernism I shall be working with by contrasting it with the traditional and



modern outlooks that preceded it, using epistemology as my point of access.

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

This much is straightforward, but it doesn't explain why Westerners aren't still modern rather than postmodern, for science continues to be the main support of the Western mind. By headcount, most Westerners probably *are* still modern, but I am thinking of frontier thinkers who chart the course for decades to come. Those thinkers have ceased to be modern because they have seen through the so-called scientific worldview, recognizing it to be not scientific but scientific. They continue to honor science for what it tells us about nature, but as that is not all there is, science cannot provide us with a worldview — not a valid one. The most it can show us is half of the world, the half where normative and intrinsic values, existential and ultimate meanings, teleologies, qualities, immaterial realities, and beings that are superior to us do not appear.¹

Where, then, do we now turn for an inclusive worldview? Postmodernism hasn't a clue. And this is its deepest definition. A decade ago Jean-François Lyotard targeted "incredulity toward metanarratives" as the essence of *The Postmodern Condition*, and his definition has proved durable.² Having deserted revelation for science, the West has now abandoned the scientific worldview as well, leaving it without replacement. In this it mirrors the current stage of Western science which leaves *nature* unimaged. Before modern science, westerners accepted Aristotle's model of the earth as surrounded by concentric, crystalline spheres. Newton replaced that model with his image of a clockwork universe, but postmodern, quantum-and-relativity science gives us not a third model of nature but no model at all. Nature has become counter-intuitive. Alan Wallace's *Choosing Reality* delineates eight different interpretations of quantum physics, all of which can claim the support of physics' proven facts.³

An analogy can pull all this together. If we think of traditional peoples as looking out upon the world through the window of revelation (their received myths and sacred texts), the window people turned to in the modern period (science) turns out to be stunted. It cuts off at the level of the human nose, which (epistemologically speaking) means that when we look through science's window our gaze slants downward and we see only things that are inferior to us.⁴ As for the postmodern window, it is boarded over and allows no inclusive view whatsoever. A recent issue of *The University of Chicago Magazine* featured on its cover a photograph of Richard Rorty announcing that "There is no Big Picture."

This conclusion admits of three versions that grow increasingly shrill. *Minimal*, descriptive postmodernism rests its case with the fact that today no accepted worldview exists. *Mainline*, doctrinal postmodernism goes on to argue for the permanence of this condition.⁵ Never again will we have a worldview of which we can be confident — we know too well how little the human mind can know. Members of this camp disagree as to whether reality has a deep structure to be known, but they agree that if it has, the human mind is incapable of knowing it. *Hardcore*, polemical postmodernism goes a step further by adding, “Good riddance!” Worldviews oppress. They totalize, and in doing so marginalize minorities. Terry Eagleton goes so far as to charge them with exercising “a secretly terroristic function.”⁶

These three postmodern stances set the agenda for the rest of my paper, for I want to argue that the world’s religions question the last two, and qualify importantly the first.⁷ Negatively, they deny that inclusive views preponderantly oppress. Positively, they affirm that the human mind is made for such views, and that reliable ones already exist. Before I enter upon these constructive points, however, I want to take a quick look at recent French philosophy. For though it was mostly the unbridled historicism of German philosophers — Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger — that paved the way for postmodernism, as our century closes it is the French who have taken the lead. There is time to mention only one of them, and Jacques Derrida is the obvious candidate for being postmodernism’s most redoubtable spokesman. His deconstruction is said already to be a mummy in Europe, but in America no one has succeeded in toppling it from its pedestal where it continues to preside, more or less, over the postmodern scene.

The French Connection: Derrida and Deconstruction

Richard Rorty is a shining exception, but postmodernists in general are not given to plain and simple language and deconstructionists read like caricatures of that assertion. Derrida calls “stupid” the view that deconstruction “amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language,”⁸ but whose fault is this when he ensconces “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (there is nothing outside the text) as the virtual motto for his movement.⁹ Even sympathetic interpreters have trouble explaining that slogan. John Caputo assures us that Derrida does not “trap us inside the ‘chain of signifiers,’ in linguistic-subjective idealism, unable to do anything but play vainly with linguistic strings”; but a page or two later he reverts to the original shibboleth: “there are no things themselves outside textual and contextual limits....” The balance of his sentence doesn’t qualify that assertion; it shifts to a different issue, the issue of “presence” as he continues, “[there is] no naked contact with being which somehow shakes loose of the coded system which makes notions like the ‘things in themselves’ possible to begin with and which enables speakers to refer to them.”¹⁰ Small wonder satirists have a field day. “Deconstruction goes well beyond right-you-are-if-you-think-you-are,” Walt Anderson reports. “Its message is closer to wrong you are whatever you think, unless you think you’re wrong, in which case you may be right — but you don’t really mean what you think you do anyway.”¹¹

I mention this because the costiveness of Derrida's prose makes one wonder whether it serves, if not to camouflage a leaky theory, then to make it pretentious — where there is so much obscurity, can profundity be far behind?¹² Schroedinger told us that if you cannot in the end tell everybody what you are doing your work has been in vain. Let's see how deconstruction measures up to that test.

Derrida insists that contrary to its public image, deconstruction is an affirmative project,¹³ for at heart it is "openness to the other."¹⁴ One immediately wonders why (if the project is open and affirmative) Derrida faults negative theology for "still making a positive point"?¹⁵ It looks like he is open to "others" that he agrees with and not the rest, but let that pass. John Caputo (whose exposition of Derrida I am relying on primarily in this essay) glosses deconstructive openness as follows:

Derrida's thought is through and through a philosophy of "alterity," ...a relentless attentiveness and sensitivity to the 'other.' [It] stands for a kind of hyper-sensitivity to many "others"; the other person, other species, "man's" other, the other of the West, of Europe, of Being, of the "classic," of philosophy, of reason, etc. (The list goes on.)¹⁶

Putting this foot forward makes deconstruction attractive, immensely so, for if God is included among "others," deconstruction (by this reading) looks a lot like religion; surely religion's object is to deliver us from narcissistic self-centeredness into the otherness of God and (through God) other people.¹⁷ Deconstructionist prose swells with virtue, which is not surprising, given that it uses virtues — openness, and alternatively justice; Derrida: "deconstruction is justice"¹⁸ — for its self-definitions. This makes things awkward for its critics, for their criticisms put them in the position of seeming to be against things that everybody wants; but the question is whether deconstruction's hermeneutical awe of the Other does more than preach the empathy we all aspire to? Do its claimed "skills" help us develop and deploy that virtue? Are its practitioners more open to positions they disagree with than are other theorists? Its theological enthusiasts see in it "a rich and vigorous catalyst for religious thought [for being] an open ended call to let something new come;...an approach that lets faith function with an enhanced sense of advent, gladdened by the good news of alterity by which we are summoned."¹⁹ But this sounds like using Christian connotations of Advent to bless modern enthusiasms for quantity, novelty, and progress — the more new arrivals the better. What if the newly welcomed guest turns out to be the Devil in disguise? Exactly how solicitous are we supposed to be when the "others" are skinhead Neo-Nazis and the Klu Klux Klan? Our hearts invariably go out to the downtrodden others that deconstructionists name, but have they discovered techniques to help us winnow hard cases? Obviously an infinite number of contrasts to, or negations of, any particular given are conceivable. Which warrant our attention, and which only distract us from our appointed course?

This is no small question, but the deeper point is this. Deconstruction is above all a theory of language. This should temper our expectations right

off, for those theories come and go — structuralism, poststructuralism, generative grammar; what will be next? Two things, though, remain stable in the incessant parade. First, the deeper theorists dive into language, the bigger their problems become. A review of Randy Harris's recent book, *The Linguistic Wars*, concludes by quoting a linguist as saying, "You know, language has got us licked. The score is language, one billion, linguists, zero."²⁰

The second constant in the ongoing procession is that theories of language have little effect on the ideas that people use words to shape.²¹ Caputo grants this, at least in part.

To the age old dispute between belief and unbelief, deconstruction comes equipped with a kind of armed neutrality. [It] neither includes nor excludes existence of any positive entity.... There is nothing about deconstruction...that affirms or falsifies the claims of faith; nothing that confirms or denies the claims of physiological reductionists who see there only the marvelous promptings not of the Spirit, but of certain neurotransmitters.²²

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

the value of literature lies in "true impressions." A novel moves back and forth between the world of objects, of actions, of appearances, and that other world, from which these "true impressions" come and which moves us to believe that the good we hang on to so tenaciously — in the face of evil, so obstinately — is no illusion,²³

— when (as I say) an artist expresses such views, religionists take him at his word but Derrida will not. His "heightened sense of suspicion" will not allow "presences" — his word for Bellow's "true impressions" — to be accepted at face value.²⁴

Some things need to be deconstructed. Scientism needs all the deconstructing it can get, and the Buddha's deconstruction of the empirical ego by showing it to be a composite of *skandas* that derive from *pratitya-samutpada* (co-dependent origination) is a marvel of psychological analysis. But the Buddha tore down in order to rebuild; specifically to show that "utter [phenomenal] groundlessness (nonbeing) is equivalent to full groundedness (being)."²⁵ Likewise Pseudo-Dionysius. No one saw more clearly than he that

the intelligence must interpret, correct, straighten out, "reduce," and deny the images, forms, and schemes in which are materially represented the divine realities they are unable to contain. [But this] radical critique and rejection by the intelligence of each of the [Divine] names that are more or less accessible to it indicate defi-

nite steps *forward* of this same intelligence *in the direction of its own divinization.*"²⁶

One looks in vain for anything approaching such exalted issues from Derrida's dismantlings. They look like one more instance of our century-long hermeneutics of suspicion, mounted this time linguistically.

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

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

This is what we are up against; *this* is what postmodernity is: the balkanization of life and thought. Perpetual becoming is preying on us like a deadly sickness, and (deaf to E. M. Forster's counsel, "only connect") postmoderns think that more disconnections, more dismantlings and differences (and the increased fragmentation, distractions, and dispersions these produce) is what we need. If we could replay at fast speed a videotape of our century's social and conceptual earthquakes, we would see the deconstructionists scurrying around like madmen in hardhats, frantically looking for places where a little more demolition and destabilization might prove useful.²⁷

Religion's Response to Postmodernism: I. Worldviews Are Needed

In turning now to postmodernism's religious alternative, I shall speak of it in the singular and simply assume what I argued in *Forgotten Truth*; namely, that a common metaphysical "spine" underlies the differences in the theologies of the classical languages of the human soul, the world's great religions.²⁸ Tackling in reverse order the three modes of postmodernism that I earlier delineated, I shall report as straightforwardly as I can — there won't be much space to argue what I say — the religious claims that people need worldviews, that reliable ones are possible, and that they already exist.

As religions on their conceptual sides *are* worldviews or metanarratives — inclusive posits concerning the ultimate nature of things — its custodians

cannot accept polemical postmodernism's contention that on balance they oppress. George Will has observed that "the magic word of modernity is 'society'"; and the present case bears him out, for it is primarily for their social consequences that polemical postmoderns find worldviews harmful.²⁹ In applying that yardstick they simply assume (they do not argue) that religion does more harm than good. That this runs counter to social science functionalism, which holds that institutions don't survive unless they serve social needs, is conveniently overlooked,³⁰ but the deeper point is that the vertical dimension — the way religion feeds the human soul in its inwardness and solitariness — receives little attention. When the personal and private dimension of life (which intersects the vertical) is validated, it is not difficult to see the function that worldviews serve. Minds require eco-niches as much as organisms do, and the mind's eco-niche is its worldview, its sense of the whole of things, however much or little that sense is articulated. Short of madness, there is *some* fit between the two, and we constantly try to improve the fit. Signs of a poor fit are the sense of meaninglessness, alienation, and in acute cases anxiety, which postmodernity knows so well. The proof of a good fit is that life and the world make sense. When the fit feels perfect, the energies of the cosmos pour into the believer and empower her to startling degree. She knows that she belongs, and this produces an inner wholeness that is strong for being consonant with the wholeness of the All.³¹ The very notion of an All is a red flag to deconstructionists for seeming to disallow alterity; and in a sense it does disallow it, for, being whole, God cannot be exclusive. But as God's inclusiveness is unique in including all the "otherness" there is — God's infinity is all-possibility — alterity is allowed as much room as it can conceivably have.

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

II. Worldviews Are Possible

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

Mainline postmodernism takes its stand on human finitude, arguing that as finite minds are no match for the infinite, there can be no fit between the two. What gets overlooked in this disjunction is the subtleties

that finitude admits of: its degrees, modes, and paradoxes. With its *fana*, *anatta*, and *maya*, religion in its highest registers denies that finitude, as such, fully exists. Postmodernism cannot comprehend that, any more than it can comprehend the other side of the paradox: that finitude hosts the *imago dei*, Atman, Buddha-nature, Uncreated Intellect, and Universal Man. God alone exists, and everything that exists is God.

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

To be valid, an overview need not be complete. A photograph of the Himalayas can accurately portray their contours without including every crevasse, and it is only the contours of reality — more specifically, those that we need to discern in order to live wisely — that metanarratives seek to portray.

The features of postmodern epistemology that most challenge their project are two: perspectivalism carried to the point of absurdity, and a stunted reading of Kant.

Perspectivalism becomes absurd when the obvious fact that we look at the world from different places, hence different angles, is transformed into the dogma that we therefore cannot know things as they actually are. For Kant, it was our human angle (the categories of the mind) that prevents us from knowing things in themselves; and when psychological, cultural, temporal, and linguistic filters are added to this generic one, we get constructivism, cultural relativism, historicism, and cultural-linguistic holism respectively. What dogmatic perspectivalism in all these modes overlooks is that to recognize that perspectives are such requires knowing in some way and to some extent the wholes that demote them to that status. Without such knowledge, each "take" (as they say in movie making) would be accepted as the thing itself. Visually, we need only move around the room to get a sense of the whole that shows our perspectives to be no more than that; but the mind is a dexterous instrument and can put itself "in other peoples' shoes," as we say.³² When the shoes belong to strangers,

we transcend cultural relativism; when they are removed in time we transcend all-or-nothing historicism. When this is pointed out to postmoderns they again burlesque, charging their informants with claiming to be able to climb out of their skins, or (in the case of time) hop a helicopter for past epochs. Both images are self-serving by pointing their spatial referents in the wrong direction. The alternative to perspectivalism is not to get out of oneself but to delve into oneself until one reaches things that are timeless and elude space altogether. Postmodernism isn't interested in delving, however. To the question Jonathan Rabin poses for postmodern urban dwellers in *Soft City* — how can they get beneath surfaces to identify essential meanings? — David Harvey responds: "Postmodernism, with its resignation to bottomless fragmentation and ephemerality, generally refuses to contemplate that question."³³

As for stunted Kantianism, it omits Kant's notion of ideas, of which there are three: I, God, and the world.³⁴ Ideas differ from concepts in having no ostensive, denotable referents, but this precludes neither (a) their having referents that elude the senses, nor (b) our getting somewhere in thinking about them. In the case of world in its inclusive meaning — the concern of metanarratives — "getting somewhere" means using kataphatic language as fingers to point to the moon which stands for the supraformal Ultimate: call it Godhead, *sunyata*, *Nirguna Brahman*, the unspeakable Tao, whatever. If postmoderns know things about the ineffability of this Ultimate that escaped apophatic metaphysicians like Dionysius, Shankara, and Nagarjuna, that is too important a discovery to remain an in-house secret; they owe it to the rest of us to tell us plainly what it is. If, on the other hand, their critiques apply only to theologies that stop at the kataphatic level, two points must be made. First, the critiques are redundant in being aimed at targets that all the classical traditions in their fullness have relativized. Second, they fall short of the wisdom of those traditions in not giving the kataphatic its due — Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Derrida all fall under this charge. Without established first order religious discourse, the complex set of theological variations that constitute negative theology are impossible. The ascent of the spiritual intellect that apophatic theology is designed to launch cannot begin without a fairly well-grounded conception of the divine, for without that there is nothing to invite the religious imagination to exceed and surpass. An established kataphatic theology is the prerequisite of *apophasis*.

To return for a moment to the photograph of the Himalayas: From the traditional apophatic vantage point, worldviews are not so much replicas of, as guides to, the Ultimate. As such they can be true in the way a compass can point to true north without — what would postmoderns have the compass do? Describe north? But postmoderns won't let us say such things, having put truth itself "on warning," or "called it into question."³⁵ (Ah, those arch, precious, supercilious, "in" locutions.) Wittgenstein prefigured the entire shift from modernity to postmodernity when he characterized his turn from his early to his late period as a shift from truth to meaning. Here again the postmodern preoccupation with the social obtrudes, for the fanatical impulse to cram truth down other persons' throats leads postmoderns to back off from the notion generally, especially

if Truth is capitalized. In doing so they overlook the fact that truth is fallibilism's prerequisite, not its alternative. Where there is no *via* (way, truth) to *deviate* from, mistakes have no meaning.³⁶

III. Valid Worldviews Exist

Working my way backwards through postmodernism's three versions, I come lastly to its minimal claim which simply reports that we have no believable worldviews today. "We have no maps, and we don't know how to make them," is the way one of the authors of *The Good Society* puts the point.³⁷

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

We saw that polemical postmoderns (prone to assume that maps must be believed fanatically if they are believed at all) charge revelations with fomenting disharmony. Fundamentalism is their prime target; what they do not see is the extent to which they, as postmoderns, have engendered it. For political conservatism is not fundamentalism's deepest telos. Its deepest concern, which conservative politicians use to their advantage, is the threat of relativism and nihilism that postmodernism harbors. Here again the liberals' prioritizing of social consequences over religion's inward deliverances skews their perception of things.

If mainline and polemical postmodernism were to recede, the obsession with life's social fabric that they saddle us with would relax and we would find ourselves able to think ontologically again. An important consequence of this would be that we would then see how much religious outlooks have in common. For one thing, they all situate the manifest, visible world within a whole that is largely invisible. Current cosmology provides a nice analogy for this, for dark matter doesn't impact any of science's detectors, and the current recipe for the universe is, "70 parts cold dark matter, about 30 parts hot dark matter, and just a pinch for all the rest — the matter detectable to scientific instruments."³⁸ The further unanimous claim of religious cosmologies, though, finds no echo in science, for (being a value judgment) it is beyond science's reach. Not only is the invisible real. Regions of it are more real and of greater worth than is the visible world that echoes them.

The inclusive, presiding paradigm for traditional cosmologies is a loose version of the Great Chain of Being, composed of links ranging in hierarchical order from meager existents up to the *ens perfectissimum*; and the foremost student of that concept, Arthur Lovejoy, reported that "most educated persons everywhere accepted [it] without question down to late in the eighteenth century" when scientism unhorsed it.³⁹ To that endorsement, Ken Wilber has recently added that the Great Chain of Being is "so overwhelmingly widespread...that it is either the single greatest intellectual

error ever to appear in humankind's history — an error so colossally widespread as to literally stagger the mind — or it is the single most accurate reflection of reality yet to appear."⁴⁰

Conclusion

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

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

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

Syracuse University

NOTES

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

a. Values. Science can deal with descriptive and instrumental values, but not with intrinsic and normative ones.

b. Meanings. Science can work with cognitive meanings, but not with existential meanings (is *X* meaningful?), or ultimate ones (what is the meaning of life?).

c. Purposes. Science can handle teleonomy — purposiveness in organisms — but not teleology, final causes.

d. Qualities. Quantities science is good at, but not qualities.

e. The invisible and immaterial. It can work with invisibles that are strictly entailed by matter's behavior (the movements of iron filings that require magnetic fields to account for them, e.g.), but not with others.

f. Our superiors, if such exist. This limitation does not prove that beings greater than ourselves exist, but it does leave the question open, for "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

2. Ernest Gellner's alternative definition — postmodernism is "*relativismus uber Alles*," page 40 in his *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (New York:

Routledge, 1992) — converges with Lyotard's in the end, but relativism is not an easy position to defend, so postmoderns do everything they can to avoid that label; Clifford Geertz's "anti-antirelativism" is a case in point. The T-shirts that blossomed on the final day of the 1987 NEH Institute in Berkeley tell the story. Superimposed on a slashed circle, their logo read, "No Cheap Relativism." By squirming, postmoderns can parry crude relativisms, but if meaning is contextual and there is no metacontext, alternatives are ultimately unjudicable. Postmoderns resist that conclusion, however, so I shall not press Gellner's definition of their position but stay with their own: Lyotard's.

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

4. No science textbook includes things that are greater than human beings. Bigger, of course, and wielding more physical power; but not superior in the full sense of that word which includes virtues, such as intelligence, compassion, and bliss.

5. David Harvey speaks for this mainline position when he writes: "Postmodernists insist [that] we cannot aspire to any unified representation of the world, or picture it as a totality rather than as perpetually shifting fragments" (*The Condition of Postmodernity* [Cambridge MA & Oxford UK: Blackwell, 1990], p. 52).

6. Terry Eagleton, "Awakening from Modernity," *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1987.

7. To highlight the opposition between postmodernism and religion, I am intentionally tabling in this statement the differences among religions that I explore in Darrol Byrant (ed.), *Huston Smith: Essays on World Religions* (New York: Paragon House, 1992).

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

9. One has to read quite a ways to learn that this doesn't mean what it says. It means — per Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 281 — that "nothing outside the text can, like a last reason, assume a *fulfilling function*"; which itself is not the plainest way of saying that there is nothing outside a text that determines that it has only one plausible meaning.

10. John Caputo, "Good News about Alterity: Derrida and Theology," *Faith and Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

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

12. Otherwise stated: "What I find so galling is the poststructuralists' conscious championing of style over substance" (Edward Slingerland, "Notes on the Poststructuralist Code," *The American Scholar*, Autumn 1994, p. 632).

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

14. In Richard Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

15. "However negative negative theology intends to be, it is still making a positive point." John Caputo, speaking for Derrida, in *op. cit.*, p. 458.

16. John Caputo, *ibid.*

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

18. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,"

in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson [New York: Routledge, 1992], pp 14-15).

19. John Caputo, *ibid.*, p. 454, 457.

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

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

22. John Caputo, *op. cit.*, p. 463.

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

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

25. David Loy, "Avoiding the Void: The Lack of Self in Psychotherapy and Buddhism," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1992), p. 153.

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

27. "The point of deconstruction is to loosen and unlock structures...to allow [things] to function more freely and...open-endedly. It warns against letting [things] close over or shut down, for this would imprison something in systems which struggles to twist free" (Caputo, *op. cit.*, pp. 456-57). What — to echo an earlier point — if it is racism that is trying to twist free from civil rights legislation that struggles to contain it?

28. Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1976/1992).

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

Parenthetically but importantly: that knowledge, to the degree that it is such, is objective; and that objectivity is not fully such if the context that insures it is less than inclusive, are momentous points, but in this essay I must simply assume their truth. There isn't space to defend them.

30. On survival, we have Clifford Geertz's report that "though it is not logically impossible for a people to have [no] metaphysics, we do not seem to have found such a people" ("Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred

Symbols," *Antioch Review* [1957], p. 338.)

31. Wittgenstein's definition of the mystical: the sense that we are completely safe.

32. This, of course, is precisely what postmodern anthropologists deny. The discipline that began as the effort to learn about other peoples and cultures now obsesses over the impossibility of that project. Currently, anthropologists evince their seriousness by recognizing that "facts" about other peoples are only superficially such. When the ever-shifting, culture-bound, contradictory, and deserving-of-deconstruction meanings of the natives interface with the anthropologists' equally slippery meanings, what hope is there that minds can meet? Those who set out aspiring to understand, return to soliloquize on the anguish of field experiences in which they and their subjects try to break out of their respective cocoons, with failure built into the project from its start.

33. David Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

34. I am indebted to Robert Scharlemann for pointing out the relevance of this for my argument.

35. Truth is objective, and "the attack on objectivity is the most visible intellectual current of our age," (Paul Robinson, *Freud and His Critics* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993]).

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

37. Richard Madsen, one of the authors of *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah *et al.* (New York: Knopf, 1991) in an unpublished lecture.

38. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 October 1992, A16.

39. Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 59. Ernst Cassirer corroborates Lovejoy on this point: "The most important legacy of ancient speculation was the concept and general picture of a graduated cosmos" (*The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* [New York: Harper and Row, 1964], p. 9).

40. Ken Wilber, "The Great Chain of Being," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Summer 1993), p. 53.