

From Myth to Modernity

It is not easy...to see realities that one's cultural world-view is not calibrated to perceive. It is one of the presuppositions of thought that a revision is requisite, if we are to think more truly about the world and our life together.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith

1:1 Mythology

We begin our story with the traditional cultures of ancient Greece and the Near East. Surprisingly, what was until very recently the common, modern view that mythology is nonscientific fable, invention, and fantasy directly contradicts the attitude of the traditional cultures that myth is not only significant but true. As Mircea Eliade has put it, mythology "is considered to be absolutely true" in its original cultural context "because it is concerned with realities."¹ Mythology, then, constitutes the first and most fundamental form of religious knowledge, a form which emerged at the traditional or archaic beginnings of our religious and cultural tradition.

Mythology comes from the Greek word *muthos*, which means a story or something said. As opposed to legends and other forms of folktale, myths are stories about the sacred and the relationship of the world and human beings to it.² Mythology, then, bifurcates reality into two levels—a transcendent or deep level of meaning (heaven, the abode of the gods, etc.), and the fallen, dependent, and ordinary world of nature and the tribe—what Eliade calls the "sacred" and the "profane."

In short, myths reveal that the World, man, and life have a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious, and exemplary.³

The deep level is considered real, whereas the ordinary level is thought of as a less real and dependent reflection of it:

The man of archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred . . . because for primitives . . . the sacred is equivalent to a power, and, in the last analysis, to reality. The sacred is saturated with being.⁴

Furthermore, the sacred is construed to be perfect, ideal, eternal, unchanging, and holy, whereas the ordinary world of nature and human experience is, as it were, fallen—a lesser, changing, and temporal reality, which is dependent upon the sacred for its existence as well as for any meaning, unity (or order), and success achieved within it. Mythology (especially creation mythology), then, discloses a human awareness of a transcendental reality beyond this world but reflected within it:

Primitive man might be said to view the encounter with "otherness" as a mode of access to what Emerson called "a world elsewhere" which, though revealing itself within the sphere of the profane, is nevertheless assumed to originate from beyond it. Just because of its stability and perdurance, this "other world" is assumed to be the "real" one and thus serves as model and norm for all that transpires in the unreal haphazard realm of historical time.⁵

Avery Dulles associates this transcendental reality known by myth with metaphysics into which (as we shall soon see) it will be translated through the allegorical method.

In every civilization there have been thinkers concerned with the ultimate basis of reality, meaning, and value. In some traditions this basis has been viewed as an invisible and transcendent order in which our empirical world is somehow rooted. This view, which may be called metaphysical or religious, is held in common by many of the Greek philosophical systems, the Eastern religions, and the Western religions.⁶

Jean Seznec expresses this sense of two worlds very well when discussing the particular and astonishing development of astral and gnostic cults in the late Roman period.

The idea of “two worlds” was part of the religious topography of man in late antiquity. For pagans and Christians alike, the “other world” was the seat of a supreme God, infinitely remote from the human world.⁷

This discovery and display of the sacred level of being in mythology is (as we shall argue in more detail later) the first step in the long process whereby human beings came to orient their lives in the light of an interpretation (Hermeneutic) of the meaning of being. Human beings don't just exist; they exist and act in the light of some ultimate sense of what it means to be. In a very real sense, religious mythology moves and shapes people's lives by helping them to notice the difference between what is in themselves and the world and what might or ought to be, thereby helping them to discover an ultimate vision of what they are living for. *Heaven* expresses the important fact that our human reach exceeds our grasp, that we construe (or see) our ordinary lives in terms of an ideal perfection we discover through our founding myths. We know of no human beings or cultures which do not involve some human sense of what life means—what it is for—and it is these overarching interpretations of life which configure and found the variety of human cultures or worlds. As Robert Oden put it recently:

Many scholars have proposed that any society's myths are an integral part of the ways in which that society presents to its members and to the wider world a full articulation of its deepest values and beliefs.⁸

1:2 Myth and Historical Revelation

But what about the Biblical tradition of historical revelation? Is it too mythological, or does it (as many adherents have claimed) lie entirely outside myth as a historical and ‘factual’ disclosure of God's nature and will?

If by historical revelation we mean the disclosure of God in and through real historical events, then I believe we can say that it is an extension of myth to covenantal history. As we have already indicated, by ‘mythology’ we don't mean lies or falsehoods, but rather the narrative disclosure of ultimate meaning for our lives—in this case, through historical events.

‘Sacred history’ is not a mere chronicle of events, but an *interpreted* account of what those events mean within a narrative historical construal or ‘reading’ of them. In other words, we ‘see’ the events

of history in the light of a narrative plot which links those events into a meaningful whole. As Arthur Danto argues, because narrative organization and meaning involve a telos which could not have existed at the time of those events, it is not something lying within historical events themselves, but of necessity is something which a later historian brings to the events in terms of 'temporal wholes.'⁹ We can say then that, although revelation may involve real historical events, the *meaning* of those events is not itself objective as much as a narrative, interpretive framework in which the events become mythologically disclosive of an overarching and transcendent dimension of life. Donald Polkinghorne has argued that literary, mythological, and historical narratives are all the result of cultural attempts

to impose a satisfactory, graspable, humanizing shape on experience. The historical narrative takes the types of plots developed by literature and subjects them to the test of endowing real events with meaning. The knowledge provided by narrative history is what results from the application of the systems of meaning originally elaborated by cultures in their myths and (in some cultures) later refined by their literatures. Historical narratives are a test of the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning patterns that its stories have fashioned from imagined events. Thus, historical narratives transform a culture's collection of past happenings (its first-order referents) by shaping them into a second-order pattern of meaning.¹⁰

There is no question that the great covenantal, historical tradition has discovered something new and important; and yet, for all that, it still remains a mode of mythology. It has discovered a mythological dimension to history, an interpretive story in which individual events become windows through which we can encounter the ultimate meaning of our lives. The Bible is not so much a set of doctrines as it is a collection of stories about historical events which make the meaning of those events narratively available to the reader. Sacred history is the shaping of (past) historical events into a narrative pattern of meaning. In other words, we come to 'see' the events of history in the light of a narrative plot which links them into a meaningful whole.

One simply has to realize sooner or later how much of the truth about historical people and events requires the imagination of the story-teller, the creativity of the literary artist, for its telling.¹¹

The Biblical scholar Robert Alter makes this point explicit in his recent book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

As odd as it may sound at first, I would contend that prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative. Or, to be more precise . . . we can speak of the Bible as *historicized* prose fiction . . . Let me hasten to say that in giving such weight to fictionality, I do not mean to discount the historical impulse that informs the Hebrew Bible. The God of Israel, as so often has been observed, is above all the God of history: the working out of His purposes in history is a process that compels the attention of the Hebrew imagination, which is thus led to the most vital interest in the concrete and differential character of historical events. The point is that fiction was the principal means which the biblical authors had at their disposal for realizing history.¹²

1:3 Allegory and Metaphysical Knowledge

The next step in the story of Western understanding of religious knowledge was tied up with the religious reform which attended the development of classical Greek philosophy, from Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, and other pre-Socratic cosmologists to the great systems of Stoicism and Neoplatonism. The reform involved the allegorical method of interpreting the (by that time) classical myths and mythological history, especially with the Stoics, but also with Philo Judaeus and (later) Origen. We should keep in mind from the outset that that allegorical method—whether in the hands of the Stoic Chrysippus or the later Christian, Origen—is a hermeneutical or interpretive method, indeed *the* method of scriptural interpretation in Christianity at least until the seventeenth century and in Judaism until the present day.¹³

As H.A. Wolfson has put it, "The allegorical method means the interpretation of a text in terms of something else . . ." ¹⁴ Myths (and later scripture) are polysemic. That is, they embody another (or several other) level(s) of allegorical meaning beyond the literal meaning of the text. The naive religious myths and biblical history were interpreted or 'seen as' implicit allegories which could be translated into explicit scientific or metaphysical insights and systems. As we noted earlier, mythology expresses a two-level reality—a transcendent or sacred level of reality (what Emerson called "a world elsewhere") and the lesser, dependent reality of nature and ordinary life. The simple mechanism for this allegorical interpretation was to replace that transcendent,

deep-level sacred with principles (*Archai*), natural law (*Logos*), mind (*Nous*), or eternal ideas. The great Greek philosophers picked up this notion of a bifurcated reality and 'saw' this life (the many particulars in motion) as a dependent reflection of an ultimate metaphysical reality (the One which is eternal) known by the mind. Plato, for example, defined the "ideas" as

an unchanging and harmonious order where nothing can do or suffer wrong, where all is in order according to reason.¹⁵

These ideas are as it were patterns fixed in the nature of things; the other things are made in their image and are likenesses; and this participation they come to have in the ideas is nothing but their being made in their image.¹⁶

Mircea Eliade's comments on the religious reform which Plato's idealism constituted could be said of the allegorization of myth in Greek philosophy in general.

The distance between Plato and the primitive world is too obvious for words; but that distance does not imply a break in continuity. In this Platonic doctrine of Ideas, Greek philosophy renewed and re-valorised the archaic and universal myth of a fabulous, pleromatic *illud tempus*, which man has to remember if he is to know the *truth* and participate in *Being*. The primitive, just like Plato in his theory of *anamnesis*, does not attach importance to *personal* memories: only the myth, the exemplary History is of importance to him. One might even say that Plato comes nearer than Pythagoras to traditional thinking: the latter, with his personal recollections of ten or twenty previous lives, is more nearly in line with the 'elect'—with Buddha, the yogis and shamans. In Plato it is only the pre-existence of the soul in the timeless universe of Ideas that matters; and the truth (*aletheia*) is the remembrance of that impersonal situation.¹⁷

The 'something else' in terms of which reality is interpreted, to use Wolfson's terminology, is a philosophical or cosmological system. The myth is thus given a metaphysical reading or gloss, and traditional Greek religion is thereby reformed and made acceptable to its more sophisticated members.

Indeed, the allegorical interpretation began with the sixth-century B.C.E. Greek cosmologists who found the literal meaning of Homer's

and Hesiod's stories of the gods literally incredible. Rather than simply reject these by now traditional and authoritative myths, thinkers such as Heraclitus, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, and Anaxagoras translated the stories allegorically into one or another version of natural law or mind (*Logos* and *Nous*). Even Plato and the Neoplatonists who followed much later, while belittling the exuberance and exaggeration of allegorical interpretation (both Plato and Porphyry do that), clearly indulged themselves in such allegorical interpretation of traditional religious myths, practices, and terminology. But it was the Stoics who finally perfected the method and passed it on to the Hellenistic Jews through Philo Judaeus and the Christians through Origen. For the latter, scriptural interpretation involves three levels of meaning—the 'flesh,' the 'soul,' and what he called 'pneumatic *nomos*.'¹⁸ In spite of a tendency toward interpretive exaggeration and the emergence of inconsistency between the interpretive levels (the problem of 'double truth' in the Medieval period), the method of an allegorical discovery (some say a "reading into") of philosophical understanding and perspective within the scriptures led to the synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem which was the heart of Medieval culture and theology and fundamental to the development of European culture and religion. As I have already indicated, the allegorical method remained *the* method of critically interpreting religious texts and stories at least until the seventeenth century.

I believe the significance of this development for the Western tradition's conception of the nature and status of religious understanding cannot be overemphasized. There is a traditional and perennial knowledge or wisdom¹⁹, this allegorical method seems to imply, that can be expressed in at least two forms—that of religious stories for the common people and that of a parallel philosophical or metaphysical understanding for more intellectual devotees. In whichever form, we have here a conception of an encompassing sort of spiritual wisdom, clearly and closely associated with religious truth. It was a wisdom which had to do with understanding how life might be lived fully in the light of a vision of ultimate reality disclosed narratively or allegorically. Such wisdom both encompassed and exceeded mathematical and empirical forms of knowledge, which were envisaged as subsets within it. Rather than a kind of technical understanding which seeks to subordinate nature to human drives and ambition, then, this was an insight which insisted on integrating human life into an overarching cosmic order. It was this model of an encompassing religious understanding which (disastrously, I believe) was destined to be set aside during the Enlightenment.

1:4 Modernity

It was when the so-called "modern" period emerged that the story of religious knowledge took a rather bizarre turn. "Modernity" is the name commonly given to that worldview which emerged in seventeenth-century Europe with the development and eventual domination of modern science and technology; and which, outfitted in secondhand European clothing, has in the meantime spread around the world. It should be noted here that by "modernity" I do not mean the movement in artistic, architectural, and literary circles in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries called "modernism." Rather, the term *modernity* (or the modern world) indicates the worldview and concrete technological and industrial culture which developed from the Cartesian, Galilean, Baconian, and Newtonian views of science, nature, and human destiny, as well as Adam Smith's conception of economics. *Postmodern*, then, indicates a contemporary worldview and possible cultural evolution which—although certainly not setting aside science and technology—critically goes beyond the modern premises and presumptions concerning knowledge, nature, and human life in general.

We might define a worldview as a culture's overarching and encompassing sense of the meaning, purpose and essential point of human living. Perhaps we can borrow Clifford Geertz's now-classic definition of religion to spell out what we mean in more detail. A worldview is a cultural "blueprint or template," he tells us,

- (1) a system of symbols which acts to
- (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by
- (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
- (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
- (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²⁰

The dominant worldview of a people or age—their fundamental outlook on life—colors their thoughts, behavior and beliefs.

In the last analysis, it is the ultimate picture which an age forms of the nature of its world that is its most fundamental possession. It is the final controlling factor in all thinking whatever.²¹

From a phenomenological and Heideggerian perspective, a worldview is the symbolic hermeneutic or interpretation of the meaning of Being which constitutes the ultimate horizon of the various human

'worlds' in which people happen to live.²² Using a structuralist manner of speaking, we could call it the code or deep grammar which conditions and delimits the variety of thought and activity which takes place within it in much the same way that the rules of the game condition and delimit all the baseball games actually played out.

Like any other worldview, modernity was not just a matter of thinking. Rather, it entered concretely into how people shaped their environment, built their homes, and ordered their political lives; what ultimate sense of right and wrong they held; how they saw themselves as men or women, family members, or citizens of this or that nation-state. As we shall argue later when discussing the hermeneutical, religious foundations of culture, it was not so much thought about as lived and behaved. It was an attitude toward life which cast a mood and structured a whole epoch and world with meaning, at least until recently. It established cultural and intellectual limits as well as opportunities which characterized the modern period as such. As Langdon Gilkey puts it, it was a worldview which

at the deepest level. . . has been founded on a new philosophy of history, a philosophy built on faith in knowledge and its power to control, on the triumph through knowledge of human purposes over blind fate, and on the confidence that change, if guided by intelligence informed by inquiry, can realize human fulfillment in this life. Such a view of history as guided by science and shaped by technology was the implicit 'religion' of the West until a few decades ago.²³

What emerged in the Enlightenment, then, was an overarching hermeneutical (and mythological, I shall claim) interpretation and picture of reality, self, history, and the human role and destiny within nature.

In his brilliant analysis of the origins and roots of modernity, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Stephen Toulmin points out that a more tolerant and nondogmatic (skeptical) period in European culture before 1610 fractured on the nightmare of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). The result was a failure of nerve on the part of the new philosophy, for it in effect proposed to address that bloody and painful crisis by establishing a philosophical methodology and view based on certainty and unambiguous language. What they proposed, in short, was to overcome ambiguity and conflict by establishing an apodictic, foundational theory beyond the contradictory and inflammatory claims and passions of the various faiths and cultures

involved in the nightmare. By this means, the new philosophy swept away the previous, more humble skepticism of sixteenth-century thinkers such as Montaigne in favor of foundations which were taken to be certain to the degree that they were (initially) mathematically 'proven' or (ultimately) empirically traceable back to 'facts.' From this point of view, philosophy itself was to be foundational by being rationally grounded on abstract, universal, and timeless concepts. By doing this, Toulmin points out, the new philosophy decontextualized its own thought and science, and devalued the real and the particular (in short the concrete world of ordinary experience) in favor of an abstract and ideal theory.

The three dreams of the Rationalists thus turn out to be aspects of a larger dream. The dreams of a rational method, a unified science, and an exact language unite into a single project. All of them are designed to 'purify' the operations of human reason by decontextualizing them: i.e., by divorcing them from the details of particular historical and cultural situations.²⁴

The word *modern* is etymologically derived from a Latin word meaning "contemporary" or "of this time." The English word seems to have two principle meanings: (1) that which is contemporary, and (2) the present era which is thought to be new (novel) and different from the traditional culture which preceded it. Thus, the general sense of the term is to name the cultural period in which we are presently living, a period which has developed beyond the pre-modern and pre-industrial culture by critically standing outside of and over/against it. Thus, modernity is sometimes referred to as "the critical era" insofar as it consciously holds up the earlier traditional (and religious) culture for critical analysis.

Within this overall characterization, the modern worldview is generally thought to incorporate the following attitudes and ways of seeing life and human destiny.

1. *Human destiny lies in its increasing domination and control of reality.* God only knows (if you'll excuse the pun), but it seems like ever since being expelled from the Garden of Eden for picking the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (in other words, a long time ago), human beings have sought to recapture their lost security by discovering a way of knowing—an aggressive and controlling form of knowing—which would permit them to dominate and order all of reality. "If we can master our earthly environment," they seem to be saying, "we can at last feel secure: the more control, the more security."

This search for a controlling form of knowledge led at first to the creation of special tools and techniques to force a niggardly nature to yield more than she seemed willing to give on her own. The next step along the road to the modern, industrial world was taken at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

In 1620, Francis Bacon published his *Novum Organum*, which defined genuine knowledge as the fundamental tool in the human arsenal for mastering nature. He called for a new, objective scientific method which would permit human beings not only to avoid egregious error fostered by subjective passions ("idols of the mind"), but to achieve a genuine and practical kind of understanding of nature "from which must necessarily follow an improvement of their estate, and an increase of their power over nature."²⁵ And Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method*, echoed this sentiment when he indicated that by knowing how to know we can become "masters and possessors of the earth." True knowledge permits a kind of control which assures human security.

This attempt to control and dominate nature in ways which other (traditional) cultures could never and did never achieve has become a characteristic element of modern life. We moderns seek control and order through our technologies (the practical application of scientific understanding) not only over the cruel accidents and perfidy of nature, but over the disruptive ambiguities and pains of society as well. Witness the host of such social technologies as criminology, education, journalism, public relations, marketing, advertising, and so on. In fact, astonishingly enough, we seem bent at present on trying to order and master our own bodies and selves through genetic engineering.

2. *History is progressive.* The notion that history is progressive and that things are getting better and better for human beings is an important and rather unique aspect of modernity. In all probability, the notion was inherited in germinal form from the earlier, traditional Judaeo-Christian worldview, but it was quickly shaped and adapted to fit into the modern situation.

Human history is not simply the endless, natural, cyclical repetition (as with the seasons) of what has been before; rather, it is linear. It starts somewhere and is progressing toward a human goal and destiny of perfect—or at least expanded—security. Such progress, then, entails the emergence of genuine novelty, and that novelty is envisioned as progressively better and better.

Although environmentally disastrous in its anthropocentric point of view, this notion (humanly speaking) is profoundly optimistic,

perhaps naively and dangerously so for those of us here at the end of the twentieth century. When this concept of progress is combined with the drive for control discussed above, we are left with the typically modern view that human history displays as its inherent nature and telos the unending development of human control and security by knowing how to know. The rewards of that kind of mastering and dominating knowledge, we are told, will continue to pour down upon us as we extend it throughout nature and human society.

3. *The reduction of knowledge to technical understanding.* For purposes of this essay, the most fateful step in the development of the modern worldview was to limit knowledge or even rationality itself to a kind of calculating reason—i.e., careful observation based on matters of fact along with an equally careful and clear use of deductive reason. In other words, ‘knowledge’ was limited to matters of fact or matters of reason. This is, of course, what some have referred to as the fetishizing of fact and deductive logic. The social sciences, arts, and humanities, in this context, must either utilize just those methods of knowing or be banished from the arena of ‘knowledge’ and ‘rationality’ entirely. According to Rorty:

Since the Enlightenment, and in particular since Kant, the physical sciences had been viewed as a paradigm of knowledge, *to which the rest of culture had to measure up.*²⁶

All that was left for the nonscientific, human arts and sciences, then, was value—either moral or esthetic. However it is expressed, a radical distinction emerged between genuine science and the leftover ‘human arts’—including, of course, religion and theology.

Science is radically different from art. The former is cognitive, the latter imaginative. The former discovers, the latter creates. Science is *hard*, art *soft*. Many find this disjunction tremendously important, for without it there seems no way to distinguish between matters of fact and matters of taste, between “objective” and “subjective,” between “what is true” and “what I like.”²⁷

However interesting and even inspiring they may be, these human arts and sciences (once again, including religious understanding) are construed as emotive decoration, matters of taste or subjective feeling and attitude projected upon a meaningless nature, but certainly not ways of ‘knowing’ anything. Put more bluntly, we

learn nothing from our great paintings or music, nothing from religious myths or practices, perhaps nothing even from our great philosophical essays—because knowledge or learning is *a priori* limited to matters of fact and matters of reason.

4. *Modernity is critically anti-traditional.* This is true in two senses. First of all, the modern reduction of human understanding to scientific and mathematical knowledge assures a critical scrutiny of those earlier, traditional claims to religious wisdom or understanding. Embodied in this critical approach, then, is what has been called a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” in which the modern observer not only puts the tradition at a distance, as it were, but also simply obliterates its claims to truth of any kind. In other words, the entire religious endeavor is suspected of sheer fantasy. Indeed, ‘mythology’ in this context is interpreted as ‘lie’ or ‘scientific error.’ It is often said that something is “just a myth.” This of course leads to the typically modern interpretive antithesis of either a return to some version or other of tradition or a reduction of the tradition to modern terms and understanding. Ultimately, of course, I shall argue that this interpretive dilemma is characteristically modern and must be transcended in any postmodern conception of our relation to our various traditions.

Second, by critically questioning and distancing itself from the earlier tradition, modernity frees itself from its social and moral constraints. To be modern, then, means to be free from traditional social, class, institutional, and even national definitions of who we are. A characteristic element of modern culture is the sometimes painful and sometimes exhilarating sense of sheer freedom and possibility which is ours—a dizzying sense that our morality, vocations, and perhaps our very selves (for Sartre, for example) are matters of freedom and choice.

Modernity, then, introduced a cultural climate which separated it from the traditional point of view preceding it. It is a climate which seems to dissolve any possibility of spiritual life in the harsh glare of its critical suspicion, and which leaves us fascinated with and yet distraught by freedom.

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. . . . it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air.”²⁸

5. *Modernity desacralizes nature.* As everyone knows, Descartes split reality into two essentially distinct kinds or forms; *res extensa* and *res cogitans*—matter and mind. In the overall economy of his ontology, Descartes envisaged ‘mind’ as the appropriate domain for religion and morality, whereas ‘matter’ (nature) was reserved for genuine scientific understanding. This, of course, has led not only to the desacralization of nature but also to the typically modern sense that science and theology have nothing to say to one another. Furthermore, because ‘mind’ gradually disappeared as modern culture unfolded, reality was increasingly pictured as made up of independent things or objects ‘out there’ which are knowable as they are ‘in themselves’ only by genuine science. Epistemologically, the problem was to show how the ideas we have in our minds about those things hook up with and “mirror” (to use Richard Rorty’s phrase) what is actually there. In this cultural context, of course, God and theology have neither a role to play in understanding nature nor a ‘real’ home they can call their own. The earlier Christian tradition had conceived of nature as sacrosanct. Think of the Augustinian and Neoplatonic tradition—in St. Bonaventure, for example, or mystics such as Meister Eckhart, or, more concretely, the ordinary Trinitarian notion of the Holy Spirit. Now, however, nature was stripped bare of any possible epiphany.

Descartes considered matter (nature) to be simple extension and thus geometrically rule bound. In fact, he says somewhere that “God is a geometer,” thereby implying that He generated nature at creation by simply embodying the geometric design of it that He had already within his mind. This not only empties nature of anything spiritual, but (at best) pushes God off into a nebulous and ultimately self-contradictory realm ‘before’ creation and ‘time.’

Newton added mechanics to this stark vision of nature. Although nature in itself is made up of meaningless bits, it constitutes an ordered whole structured by the principles of mechanics. Nature, then, is thought of as a machine the parts of which are ordered by mechanical law. As with Descartes, it seems that the only place and role for God in this picture is as the deist creator of the machine. As a machine, of course, nature (like any other machine) can be utilized for our own use. We can best control and utilize her for our ends by scientifically grasping the principles which inform her motion.

This means not only that nature was given over to mathematical (calculus) physics, but that theology was all the more rigorously excluded from trafficking with her. Science was separated from the earlier natural theology of which it had been a part and the modern slogan became: “What science has put asunder let no mere theologian

attempt to rejoin." So nature was increasingly desanctified and, to the degree that it was pictured as a machine ready for use, prepared for the industrial and technological revolution which was soon to follow.

6. *The economic base for modern industry.* Just as Newton saw nature as made up of bits which were organized into a machine-like whole by the natural law of mechanics, John Locke viewed human society analogously. Society, according to Locke, was made up of individual persons (bits) whose singular purpose is to perpetuate themselves by fulfilling their own needs. But just as with nature, there is a natural social law which harmonizes and orders the bits into a machine-like whole. Adam Smith, of course, drew the appropriate economic lesson: the common good of society is fostered by each individual seeking his or her own material advantage because a natural law of supply and demand (the famous 'invisible hand') regulates the organic whole of these bits of economic activity.

The scene was thus set for the development of modern industrial society. Nature was desacralized and pictured as a meaningless machine ready for human use. Human society itself was thought of as being made up of individuals whose chief good was to maximize their own economic control and success. Everything else would take care of itself.

1:5 The Spiritual Blues of Modernity

The modern worldview, then, was set in place and began its long evolution up to the present day. In fact, as I shall emphasize in more detail in the next chapter, it was founded upon a story. We humans, the story goes, have always wanted to achieve genuine knowledge, for such knowledge would bring us control over nature and a consequent security in life. Heretofore, we have had only pallid and useless mythological and metaphysical counterfeits of the authentic understanding of nature. But recently we have learned how to know. We have discovered that true understanding is limited to matters of fact and matters of reason. That in turn has revealed that nature is fundamentally mechanical and 'objective' in nature. It is not in any case the location or occasion for religious understanding or experience of any sort. This *knowing how to know*, the story concludes, makes possible the human dream of achieving a heaven on earth by dominating and ordering both nature and society. Put simply, language, ontology, and epistemology were placed in service and limited to those ways of speaking, that conception of reality, and those kinds of understanding which were effective in gaining mastery over the universe.

We should note at this point that this modern worldview led to many important and positive benefits for human life—its critical questioning of unsubstantiated claims, its demand for ‘rational’ analysis and evidence, its evident technical advances in medicine, agriculture, manufacturing, and so on. In fact, I shall argue later that the critical and interpretively ‘suspicious’ side of modernity should not only *not* be set aside but should be expanded and applied to modernity itself!

However, if modernity entailed positive benefits (as I think it did), it also introduced a host of disastrous, dysfunctional consequences for spiritual life—what I call “the spiritual blues of modernity.” It is precisely these difficult spiritual aspects of the modern world, of course, which the postmodern concept of religious understanding I will outline in Part Two must address and (hopefully) help to ameliorate. What were these spiritually dysfunctional aspects of the modern worldview?

1. *First of all, modernity broke the tradition of perennial wisdom.* In a stroke, the earlier tradition which saw religious understanding and metaphysical knowledge as forms of a single, encompassing ‘wisdom’—a wisdom in which empirical knowledge and mathematics were but aspects—was overturned and irrevocably broken. This was important for at least two immediate reasons. First, as we have seen, that wisdom had to do with understanding how to live a meaningful and qualitatively rich life as opposed to a merely technical understanding which in effect reduced human destiny to power, control, and security. What was lost, then, was a form of hermeneutical understanding which involved an overarching sense of what human life was all about and how it ought to be lived. What replaced that kind of wisdom was an implicit (and assured) sense that all that matters in life is order and security and an insistence that in the light of that, the only form of human understanding worthy of the name was that which was useful in achieving it. This was a remarkably blinkered and constricted view of human understanding.

But secondly, this overturning of the traditional sense of wisdom entailed a critical attitude which in effect not only undercut and obliterated the various traditions but also insisted that the only possible alternative to them was the modern view itself. This either/or situation—either a return to the traditional views and life or an insistence that the only alternative worldview and life is the modern one—is not only characteristic of modernity but (I shall argue) an inadequate and overly constricted conception of historical possibility.

2. *Modernity lost sight of the world of ordinary experience.* Modernity was a view which suppressed the world of ordinary experience in favor

of a picture of reality as a collection of object-things (matter) present to observers (mind). Thus, our immediate and ordinary experience of being-in-the-world was suppressed and in effect replaced by these two substances or realities. This not only blinded us to the relational field which *is* experience, but actually constituted an abstraction out of it in favor of one or the other pole within it—subjective perceiver and objective perceived. This left what many consider to be the main problem of modern philosophy, the bifurcation between subject and object and the consequent construction of philosophical perspectives on either the subjective and idealistic pole or the objective and realistic pole. With the rock-bottom presupposition of these two ‘realities,’ modern philosophy seemed to swing back and forth between constructing the world ‘out there’ either from the structures and contents of the knowing mind or reducing that knowing mind to a passive reception of the world as it was imagined to be ‘in itself.’ And while modern philosophy was limited in this way, at the same time it was simply unaware of the actual bipolar horizon of immediate experience. This constituted what Heidegger calls “the forgetfulness of Being”—the willy-nilly interpretation of being—not as concrete experience ‘in the world’—but as either a worldless ‘mind’ or an equally worldless ‘matter’ construed as things ‘in themselves.’

Stephen Toulmin refers to this remarkable blindness to ordinary experience as the “decontextualization” of understanding. From his point of view, modernity set aside the uncertainties and ambiguities of life (what I am calling “the world of ordinary experience”) acknowledged by such sixteenth-century skeptics as Montaigne in favor of an abstract, timeless (eternal) and ‘rational’ understanding and certainty.

That change of attitude—the devaluation of the oral, the particular, the local, the timely, and the concrete appeared a small price to pay for a formally “rational” theory grounded on abstract, universal, timeless concepts. In a world governed by these intellectual goals, rhetoric was of course subordinate to logic: the validity and truth of “rational” arguments is independent of *who* presents them, *to whom*, or *in what context*—such rhetorical questions can contribute nothing to the impartial establishment of human knowledge. For the first time since Aristotle, logical analysis was separated from, and elevated far above, the study of rhetoric, discourse and argumentation.²⁹

This is not a merely parochial dispute between philosophers about ‘ordinary’ versus ‘ideal’ language, for it has immediate and important

consequences for our understanding of religious knowledge and behavior. From the postmodern point of view I am trying to articulate in this essay, to lose sight of and suppress that experiential world of ordinary experience is to take away the only context and framework in which religious life and understanding make any sense whatsoever. It is a kind of 'category mistake' then, an intellectually illicit attempt to grasp religious realities in categories which are appropriate only to things. This not only distorts the religious realities we are trying to get at; it also blinds us to those categories embedded within ordinary experience which seem more useful in coming to understand them.

3. *It introduced the twin specter of meaninglessness and fanaticism.* As we have seen, modernity insisted on the reduction of valid knowledge to inductive hypotheses (matters of fact) and deductive conclusions (matters of reason). Physics and mathematics were increasingly viewed as the very paradigm of human understanding; all other cultural claims to understanding had to measure up to this model.

One consequence of this shift in paradigm was that religious understanding was increasingly construed as either a relative and noncognitive illusion or a kind of matter-of-fact knowledge (true beliefs) about the existence and nature of an absent, entity-like God.

On the one hand, attempts by rationalists and empiricists to force religious understanding or belief into either the deductive or inductive molds failed for rather obvious reasons. Because of this, as modernity evolved, such understanding increasingly was assigned to the trash heap of emotion and decoration, matters of taste and subjective feeling rather than any sort of genuine understanding of life and its demands. Religious belief (along with any understanding claimed by literature, history, the arts, and even philosophy) was banished from the realm of knowledge altogether. We learn nothing from gospel and myth.

We can put this another way. Because the inductive and deductive forms of understanding in terms of which religious belief was being judged were based on an implicit commitment to control and order, any form of understanding not in the service of the mastery of nature was simply considered irrelevant. We might call this a methodological atheism, for all talk of God was excluded in principle in a world dedicated to calculating, ordering and controlling 'things.'

Given that exile from the epistemic kingdom, then, any claims to truth by various religious traditions or scriptures were seen to be merely relative, perhaps sheer 'subjective' illusion, but in any case a matter only for the weak, mentally enfeebled, or childish naive. There was no true religious belief. And because no particular tradition could

actually validate its truth claims, life itself became meaningless. In fact, this sense of skepticism about any and all religious claims and a consequent sense of meaninglessness has come to haunt the modern world.

On the other hand, against the relativizing and subjectivizing of religious understanding, some defenders claimed willy-nilly that religious knowledge (like science) is 'objective,' in spite of the fact that there was neither empirical nor validly deductive evidence for it. It was thought to be 'objective' because this seemed to be the only kind of knowledge available and the alternative (mere subjectivity) seemed so unthinkable. It was thought to be absolute and increasingly exclusive both because the Aristotelian laws of logic meant that it couldn't be both true and false, or that contradictory truths couldn't both be true, and because revelation in any case gives a particular religious interpretation a supernatural seal of approval. In that case, religious understanding was pushed toward dogmatism if not outright fanaticism. As Pope Leo XIII put it in his 1879 Encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*:

Reason declares that the evangelical doctrine has shone as the light from its very beginning, by signs and miracles which are infallible proofs of infallible truth.³⁰

Not to be outdone in this sordid matter, various contemporary evangelical Protestants have taken the same, inflexible position. Francis Schaeffer, for example, claimed recently that Christianity is not only true, but is exclusively so.³¹

The *Lusanne Covenant* of 1974 carried the same thought even further toward a kind of exclusivistic intolerance between various interpretive, religious traditions.

We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and theologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. . . . To proclaim Jesus as 'the savior of the world' is not to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ. Rather it is to proclaim God's love for a world of sinners and to invite all men to respond to him as Savior and Lord in the wholehearted personal commitment of repentance and faith. Jesus Christ has been exalted above every other name; we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him Lord.³²

Modernity, then, forced religious understanding to be conceived of as either an inductive matter of fact (or deductive conclusion) or nothing—i.e., a mere illusion and whim of human fancy (not a kind of understanding at all). No alternative was permitted to this stark dilemma, because understanding was willy-nilly limited to matters of fact and matters of reason—and only those. Because of this, a difficult and painful spiritual dilemma was imposed upon us: spiritual life seemed to be limited to either a meaningless and disoriented relativism and skepticism or a kind of matter-of-fact knowledge about the existence and nature of an absent (because ‘transcendent’ and, in any case, removed from nature) God. The twin specter of relativistic meaninglessness and dogmatic fanaticism came to haunt the modern world.

4. *Modernity made the pursuit of religious understanding and development almost impossible, especially for the educated.* As we have already indicated, the interpretive framework of modernity forced observers to see religion as either objectively true (like science or math) or merely a subjective illusion. Thus, the entire phenomenon of religious understanding was pushed into an alien interpretive framework which made either horn of the dilemma spiritually difficult. If you chose the emotive horn, as did such ‘liberal’ theologians as Freiderich Schleiermacher, then you seemed to take religious interpretation and practice right out of the game of understanding and truth altogether. This is apparently why Hegel, in a critical review of the first half of Schleiermacher’s *Glaubenslehre*, heaped invective upon Schleiermacher’s apparent retreat from traditional religious truth claims with his notion that religion is a mere feeling of dependence. As Hegel sarcastically (and humorously) put it,

If religion in man is based only on a feeling, then the nature of that feeling can be none other than the feeling of dependence, and so a dog would be the best Christian, for it possesses this [feeling] in the highest degree. . . .³³

This subjective horn of the dilemma, then, seems intolerable, because if there is not some form of understanding and truth involved, why bother to pursue it?

On the other hand, if you chose the objective horn of the dilemma—as did the post-Tridentine Roman Church or various forms of evangelical or fundamentalist Protestantism, you increasingly found yourself sounding rather fanatical by asserting that your own views