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ONE WORLD, ONE REASON, ONE RELIGION, BUT MANY FAITHS: RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN AN AGE OF PLURALISM

[WITH AN EXCURSUS: "ON THE NIHILISM OF MEANING AND PURE RELIGION"]

Abstract

Contrary to the popular notion that "all religions are different paths to the same God" this paper proposes that what unites all religion is not God (much less doctrine, ritual, or institutional structure) but the shared physical conditions and creative capacity that constitute humanity's extraordinary position and responsibilities in the order of things. Just as the *conditions* for reason are the same for all, yet reason is manifested differently, there is one religion that involves the communal support of the moral improvement of each individual that is manifested differently in multiple faiths.

One World

One might conclude that the 19th Century "victory" in British geology on the part of the Uniformitarians over the Catastrophists, [1] represents the emergence of a merely Eurocentric consensus with respect to the nature of time and causality. The 19th century Catastrophists were the intellectual descendents of the 18th century "Neptunists," who had taken the account of creation in the biblical book of Genesis of receding waters to be an historical description of how geological features were created. The Catastrophists embraced the biblical paradigm that believed the earth to be 6,000 years old and the geological record (for example, of sea fossils on mountain tops) to be the product of supernatural causal interference in the natural order (hence, Catastrophist in light of the biblical account of a universal deluge at the time of Noah, which was taken to be historical). The Uniformitarians, in contrast, were the intellectual descendents of the 18th century "Vulcanists," who had proposed that the biblical account of receding waters was subject to grave perplexities (for example, what happened to all of the water?) and as an alternative proposed that the geological record was the product of vulcanic activity (that is, *the earth rose* rather than any *waters receding*). The even more "naturalist" Uniformitarians argued that there was no reason to believe that the earth was not of an indefinite age and that the causal order that we experience today has not been "uniform" throughout all time. Although the controversy between the Catastrophists and the Uniformitarians appears to be limited to Britain, the conclusion with respect to the earth's ancient age and causal uniformity throughout time was embraced everywhere in Europe in the 19th century, and it is the commonplace judgment with respect to the age of the earth and causality in the (western) world today. We live in one physical world that constitutes a totality that has conformed to the same physical laws as long as there has been a universe.

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1. For an account of this controversy, see Neal C. Gillespie, *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

However, if we acknowledge with David Hume that causal explanations are by no means absolute since we have access in sense perception only to effects, not to causes, we might be tempted to conclude that the world (and cosmos) could be accounted for by an alternative understanding of time and causality. This would mean not only that cosmologies are culturally relative but also that there would be legitimate reason to doubt our ability to give causal accounts of events. Pushed to an extreme, it would undermine the enterprise of the natural sciences since we could not be confident that there is a coherent causal order to be discerned. Given the absence of absolute, causal explanations, why would we believe that the physical universe is governed by a uniform causal system throughout unlimited time? The answer is NOT because "It is scientific to maintain such uniformity!" The answer is because "With this set of assumptions, our understanding of the world is coherently expanding!"

In short, we believe that there is "one world" because that belief is confirmed by our success in understanding it. When an event occurs that we don't understand, we don't throw the baby out with the bath water to conclude that the physical laws of nature are restricted by a super-natural causal agency. Rather, we *must* conclude that this is an event for which we have not yet discerned the appropriate physical law. If we embrace supernatural causality, then we would undermine the very epistemological conditions necessary for us to seek a physical law since we would be asserting that the system of physical laws is not a system of law but of contingency.

What distinguishes this conclusion from blind scientism is that it acknowledges what in German is called the *Fürwahrhalten* (the "as if") character of understanding. For us to gain understanding, we must approach the world "as if" it were a coherent totality governed by physical laws that apply in the same way, to all events, and at all times. We conclude that "the world is a single totalilty" because it is a *necessary* assumption that empowers our ever-expanding understanding of nature.

Why wouldn't we argue that the "facts" confirm the reality of our confidence in the world as a single totality? It is not simply because of epistemological skepticism -- as old as the Classical World and nothing new with Descartes (i.e., that facts are accessed only through the senses, and we can doubt our senses) -- that prohibits our invoking this argument based upon "facts". Rather, we can't invoke this argument that our knowledge is based upon our access to facts because even in the natural sciences it is *not sense data* that establishes the validity of objective explanations (i.e., the facts). If that were the case, then we would have no choice but to assert that the sun is moving around the earth. No!, objective explanations must be compatible, to be sure, with sense perception *somehow*, but any and all explanations are grounded in a coherent *symbol system*, not in sense perception of the "facts." We know that the sun is standing still and we are moving at some 1,000 miles/hour not because we factually perceive it but because we are capable of constructing a mathematically based model (a symbolic representation) that *accounts for the sense data by denying the senses*.

In short, our confidence in the world (and cosmos) as a single totality (in other words, our confidence that there is *one world*) is driven not by the facts but by *epistemological necessity*. *We cannot not believe in one world* because, were we to reject this assumption, we completely undermine our ability to understand anything whatsoever.

One Reason

The necessity of our having to assume one world with one time and constituting a coherent totality because of uniform causality already involves the necessity that reason must be a set of capacities and conditions that are also universally the same for all.[2] This is not a claim that these universal capacities and conditions are applied and developed the same by everyone. Nonetheless, for example, everyone must *necessarily supply* a causal explanation to the appearances that are the focus of her concern. The causes are not provided with the appearances. Reason (the supersensible dimension of experience) must always supply its account of those causes. That we must all add a causal explanation to the appearances/effects both accounts for and allows that causal explanations are not the same for everyone -- although the causes themselves *must be* the same at all times and everywhere.

As we have seen, however, that, although there is no way to prove (or disprove) our causal explanation, if we are to understand the world as an open-ended process of ever more coherent understanding, it is *necessary* that we assume that the world is a coherent totality that conforms to physical laws of causal explanation. Nonetheless, reason is *limited* when it comes to which system of causal explanation is going to be adaptable to an ever-expanding world of experience. It is limited by the assumption of a unified temporality and unified physical causality.

Yet there is more to the notion of "one" reason than the necessary assumption of physical laws for understanding the natural world. Among those capacities and conditions that we all must add to our experience of a world of appearances is the capacity of creativity. Every human being regardless of physical or mental condition is capable of introducing into her/his physical world elements that could not be present in that physical world were that individual not to exist. In short, we are talking here, first, about the uniqueness of conscious experience. Even if there was to be a consciousness right next to you over your entire life, it cannot be the same consciousness as yours. This is because already with our mental processes each of us is constantly *adding to the appearances* memories, patterns of understanding, and causal accounts far broader than physical causal explanations (e.g., why did you purchase a flashy sports car in your 60s?) that are unique to each of us.

In addition to this general capacity of adding things to the world of appearances that can't be there without each of us, we all to some degree (granted for some more than others because of physical and mental abilities) are capable of initiating a sequence of physical events that physical nature on its own could never accomplish. Although all that we are adding to the appearances of our world are a symptom of this creativity, it is manifest in the strict sense when what we create changes the physical environment in some fashion (for example, when we create a work of art, perform music, construct a house, developing a computer program, administer a business, serve in the government, etc.).

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2. See *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, vol. IV of *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 311, and *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre* (Leipzig: Bei Carl Friedrich Franz, 1817), 204.

We are unlike other species, then, not only because we insert a symbol system into the stimulus/response structure of consciousness[3] that is shared with all other conscious beings. Other species function within this stimulus/response structure *primarily* instinctually -- although some species at least at a rudimentary level and/or restricted sense employ symbols in their conscious processes as far as we can tell. However, our creativity occurs within the framework of conscious selection of our goals and the achievement of those goals based upon the acquisition of skills, knowledge of materials, and grasp of the necessary sequence for accomplishing those goals. The complexity of this process as well as the degree of sophistication it can reach are truly astonishing.

In short, the imperceptible dimension of our experience that consists of capacities and conditions that make it possible for us to *add things to the world that otherwise couldn't be there* constitute a supersensible (i.e., imperceptible) dimension of reason that possesses its own kind of efficient causality. Whereas nature's efficient causality is *a blind process of sequential steps* that bring about physical consequences, humanity possesses its own efficient causality (creativity) that is *a conscious process of sequential steps* that bring about its own consequences – not all of which are physical.

As with all causal explanation, as we have seen, we can neither prove nor disprove that we possess this unique kind of efficient causality. Causes are incapable of proof or disproof in the senses because only their effects are appearances. It may be that what we take to be an efficient causality unique to us is in fact only the consequence of blind, mechanical, physical causality (e.g., electrical charges jumping across synapses or chemical processes in the brain). However, one can categorically say that we will never be able to prove or disprove that our actions are exclusively the product of such material processes. Just as was the case with the *necessary assumption* that the physical world is a unified totality that conforms to the same physical laws at all times and in all places, so too, it is a *necessary assumption* for us to be the species that we take ourselves to be that we possess a unique kind of efficient causality that is irreducible to (but never separate from) physical causality.

There are a number of issues here that cannot be fully addressed. One is the apparent dualism that this set of necessary assumptions implies. Given, though, that any and all kinds of causal explanation are applied to a common world of appearances, there is no contradiction to our assuming the simultaneity of causes functioning in any one event -- any more than the presence of multiple physical causes requires us to give up our assumption that there is one material world that conforms to a unified system of causes. This is also not a plaidoyer in defense of a supernatural causality that can ignore the unified causal totality of the world since our creative

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3. On the significance of humanity's capacity to insert a symbol system into the *Merknetz* and *Werknetz* (stimulus and response) structure of consciousness, see Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, reprint, 1944 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 24.

freedom[4] is limited by the world's physical laws. We can change and destroy nature, [5] but we cannot ignore its laws as our supernatural causality is supposed to be able to do.

Another issue is raised by John Searle in his lectures on freedom and neurobiology. [6] He maintains that there can be only one form of causal explanation and that any sense we have of free choice is the product of a "causal gap" that exists between what we know about physical causes and what we experience as free will. Leaving aside whether the notion of "free will" is adequate for encompassing what is meant here by creative freedom, Searle is defending a version of what Otfried Höffe calls *dogmatic determinism* in contrast to *methodological determinism*.[7] Dogmatic determinism asserts that way reality must be, methodological determinism assumes that there must be a coherent causal system that governs the phenomena under consideration.

Given that we only experience whatever creative freedom we possess under the material conditions of a unified, singular world, methodological determinism maintains that we should always seek a mechanical, material cause for phenomena first[8] and as exhaustively as possible before turning to any other causal explanation, including creative freedom. However, methodological determinism recognizes that causal explanations are additions to appearances, that is, they are not capable of verification by appearances, so that methodological determinism

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4. For a parsing out of various distinctions regarding the meaning of "freedom," see "Freedom! What's It Good For?" at http://www.criticalidealism.com.

5. Already in 1775, Kant saw that our creative freedom in principle gives us the capacity to destroy the world. See *Vorlesung zur Moralphilosophie*, (1774/1775), ed. Werner Stark and Manfred Kühn (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 177.

6. See John R. Searle, *Freedom & Neurobiology: Reflections on Free Will, Language, and Political Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

7. See chapter 18 of Otfried Höffe, *Can Virtue Make Us Happy? The Art of Living and Morality*, trans. Douglas R. McGaughey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

8. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 259, 286, espc. 284, and 296.

leaves the possibility open[9] that we possess *a creative efficient causality that conforms entirely to, but is equally irreducible to, blind physical, efficient causality*.[10]

Under the assumption that we do possess a unique form of creative, efficient causality, we are confronted with the need for our assumption of responsibility for our unique actions. There is no responsibility so long as we are mere material beings driven by the blind, mechanical efficient causality of nature. We don't hold animals morally responsible for their behavior. However, we do hold ourselves and those like us morally responsible for our actions so long as we are not physically incapacitated (e.g., by mental illness or addictions).
When one looks at "reason" not as a human tool for calculating, manipulating, predicting, and controlling phenomena (i.e., not as exhausted by "technical imperatives"), when one rejects the transcendental idealism of Platonism (and Aristotle's "invariable, intuitive reason") that identifies reason with divinity, when one, rather, views reason as a set of limited though *necessary capacities* that allows us *to add things to phenomena* in order experience and creatively transform our world, it is appropriate for us to speak of "one" reason that is shared by all human beings. To be sure, this is not a claim that reason is exercised the same by everyone in every place. It is a claim, however, that all human beings to some degree share these same capacities.

One Religion

With the theme of moral responsibility we cross a threshold from nature to religion. This is not because we find ourselves trapped in Augustinian original sin incapable of moral goodness. To be sure, radical evil must be a constituent element of our capacity for creative freedom, but the temporal sequence between the capacity of freedom and evil maxims them makes all the difference. It is not that radical evil precedes creative freedom but that creative freedom precedes radical evil.[11] If we were not first creatively free, then we could not choose between a good or evil principle as the moral ground of our action. Furthermore though, if the alternative option of

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9. Although creative freedom is one of the ideas of *pure* reason, which means that it can never be manifest in appearances, Kant refers to it as the closest that we can come to a "fact of reason" because it is so necessary in order for us to make sense of our experience in the world. See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1974), 36–37, 122.

10. Whereas methodological determinism allows for creative freedom, the supersensible causality of creative freedom is not anything like a divine supernatural causality that could violate the laws of nature.

11. In Kant's technical language, creative freedom is an a priori synthetic judgment whereas the moral order to which it is to conform (that includes the option between good and evil principles to govern creative freedom) is an analytic judgment.

evil principles were not live options, then we also would not be free. Hence, there is no escaping the radical condition of always having an evil principle as an option. [12]

If religion isn't manifest by the moral corruption of original sin, what makes us speak here of religion? Kant suggests that our circumstance raises three questions (*Critique of Pure Reason* B 832-833[13]): 1) What can we know (answered by theoretical reason's understanding)? 2) What must we do (answered by practical reason's moral philosophy)? 3) What can we hope for (answered by religion)? The first question is addressed within the framework of "one world." The second within the framework of "one reason's" creativity and moral responsibility. The third question has to do with the conditions of possibility for a moral order and personal moral transformation.

What leads us to believe that there is an absolute moral order that governs our creativity? Rather than provide an objective list of absolute moral principles that the individual may or may not have encountered in experience (much less, that would be subject to fudging and manipulation), Kant reminds us that we never act (unless physically desperate or having had the capacity trained out of us) without applying a moral principle to our action. This principle serves as the *should* that governs our action. Since we cannot not act, we cannot not apply moral principles to our action.

However, the necessity to act on the basis of moral principles is no guarantee that there is an absolute moral order. What would lead us to such a conclusion when experience so strongly suggests that moral principles are culturally relative?

An initial step toward answering this question must be that we can neither prove nor disprove that there are absolute moral principles any more than we can prove or disprove absolute laws of nature. Is our confidence in un-known physical laws less valid because we are incapable of providing an exhaustive list of physical laws? As with the physical laws, a few moral principles (e.g., we shouldn't lie, we shouldn't commit suicide out of desperation in full health and the primve of life, we should develop our talents, and we should respond to the suffering of others[14])) are sufficient to confirm that such principles govern all of our actions. A second step is that we examine the differences between being awake and dreaming. [15] The clear difference is not the

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12. See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. and trans. Allan Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 52f.

13. In his *Logic* Kant adds a fourth question: 4) What is a human being (answered by "anthropology" or life wisdom)? See Immanuel Kant, "Logik (1800)," in *Schriften Zur Metaphysik und Logik*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 447–48.

14. See Section II of Kant's Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

15. Kant raises this theme in the *Critique of Pure Reason* B520-521, in the *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, vol. III of *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche

clarity and distinctness of the appearances but that the waking world is and the dreaming world is *not* governed by a causal system governed by rules. This suggests that where there is a causal system, there is a set of rules that govern that causal system. Hence, we are justified in assuming that the efficient causality of creative freedom has its rules just as the efficient causality of the physical world has its rules. As with the necessary assumption that nature is a unified totality that conforms to physical laws, so with the necessary assumption that creative freedom ought to conform to moral laws: neither is capable of proof or disproof, but it makes all the difference in the world to our understanding and to our actions if we assume the *necessity of such rules*.

The fact that we cannot know whether the laws of nature are absolute is no hindrance to our acting as if they are. The same is true of moral principles except that acting as if a moral principle is absolute when it merely serves a relative, cultural or particular, personal interest would be a violation of the notion of an absolute moral principle. Hence, Kant proposed three criteria for evaluating the principles on which we act:[16] 1) Act on the basis of a principle that you would want to be universal *as if it were a law of nature*; 2) act on the basis of a principle that *treats the other and oneself as an ends and not as a mere means*; and 3) recognize that all human beings are *free, self-legislating moral beings*.

This shift to identifying the conditions for the application of a moral principle rather than provide an objective list of moral principles is precisely what the Copernican Turn in Kant's moral theory means. Although we cannot be certain in advance whether the moral principle is absolute, we can be certain that satisfaction of these three criteria will keep us from acting on the basis of a relative moral principle in the belief that there is an absolute principle in play. This likelihood is enhanced when we invoke what Kant calls the three maxims of the understanding found in the third critique:[17] 1) think for oneself; 2) think from the perspective of the other (not merely in the altruistic sense but precisely out of the assumption that there is such a thing as what Kant called "common sense" in a non-pragmatic sense[18]); and 3) be consistent with one's highest capacities.[19]

Nonetheless, the conviction that there are absolute moral principles does not yet get us to the deepest sense of *hope* in the sense of religion. To be sure, both theoretical reason and practical reason involve the conviction that there is a God as the ultimate condition of possibility for there

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Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 154, and in "Metaphysik Mrongovius," in *Kant's Vorlesungen von der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, vol. VI, Ergänzungen II (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1983), VI, Ergänzungen II:885, 927.

16. See Section II of Kant, *Groundwork*.

17. See *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1974), 145–46.

18. See *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 122–24, 173–76.

19. That Kant means by "be consistent" here means to be consistent with one's highest capacity of creative freedom is suggested by his lectures on morality in 1775. See *Vorlesung zur Moralphilosophie*, 180; see 175-176 and 182, as well.

to be a unified cosmos whatsoever (and for whom we probably cannot escape anthropomorphic language, but we should recognize that any anthropomorphic language is figurative[20]). Yet even with this assumption of a deity, we still are lacking a hope. In his *Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason*, Kant suggests that the hope of religion is not in divine assistance in aid of our moral efforts, which would completely undermine the moral condition by inserting self-interest (i.e., a desire to please or not to dis-please this deity) into the heart of our selection of moral maxims. Rather, hope involves that, no matter how much we have developed morally reprehensible habits, the *good* condition of our moral effort always places every new action under the ever again, original condition of selecting an appropriate moral principle. In other words, religious hope consists in our confidence, incapable of proof or disproof, that we have the capacity of creative freedom (the *Anlage*) that makes for a new beginning over against our inclinations (the *Hang*) toward a good in contrast to an evil maxim to govern our actions. In short, *religious hope consists in confidence in our assumption of the conditions of possibility necessary for our moral transformation.*

Religion has to do with our highest capacity of creative freedom and its conditions of possibility that constitute a life of moral effort and moral improvement under the encouragement of an invisible community of ends (moral principles and persons) whose communal character is expressed by a "culture promoting the will" in contrast to a "culture of skill. [21]" Such a culture of the will is not a heteronomous culture that tells us what we *should* do, but it is that culture that encourages us to "do the right thing because it is right and not because it serves our personal interest." Here we take a step beyond cultural relativism since what is culturally relative is what is generated by the "culture of skills." Different cultures have developed the technical imperatives that govern what Rousseau called "second nature," what humanity adds "on top of" physical nature. However, religion is not interested in this second nature *per se*. It is interested in that community that encourages the individual to exercise her/his highest capacity in a fashion appropriate to humanity's being "the end of creation.[22]" Humanity is the *end of creation* because of our unique capacity of creativity with its accompanying moral responsibility. No other species can be creative and moral as we can.

Having transcended the culture of skills with the conception of religion as constituting the hope in the moral improvement of humanity, Kant's understanding of religion also transcends all historically conditioned manifestations of religious faith. This allows him to make what appears to be this politically incorrect claim that there is only "one religion.[23]" The claim here is not that

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20. See *Critique of Pure Reason* B 724-725, B 728; *Prolegomena*, 232–33; and *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre* (Leipzig: Bei Carl Friedrich Franz, 1817).

21. For this distinction, see *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 299–300.

22. See *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 294, 297–99.

23. See *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, vol. IV of *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 649n, 761, 764, 768, 778, 797; *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*, vol. VI of *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 225n; *Der Streit der*

all religions are equal "paths to God" or that all religions manifest themselves in the some common set of doctrines, rituals, or institutional structure. The claim here is that the religious hope of humanity as the end of creation is shared universally as a set of capacities and conditions that must be attended to and developed.

Religious Studies in an Age of Pluralism

The focus on "one religion" in this context does not mean to suggest that one is confronted with a simplistic alternative: the "one" religion of moral improvement as a replacement for "historical" faiths based upon particular revelations or historical events. In the second preface to *Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason*, Kant proposes that the "one," *pure* (in sense of anchored in supersensible capacities, not in the sense of superior or perfect) religion is at the heart of every "historical" faith. While only "pure" religion can found a *universal religious faith*, it cannot on its own found an institutional religion.[24] Even so, just as there is no absolute proof for causal explanations, so, too, with respect to historical revelations -- we are incapable of proving or disproving them: "… no human being can determine anything through reason regarding these matters.[25]" In contrast, "pure" religion in principle is possible without an institutional religion. Nonetheless, there is unquestionably a value to "historical" religion: it provides continuity for the "pure" religion that stands at its core: "… the doctrine of revelation, upon which a church is founded and which stands in need of scholars as interpreters and preservers, *must be cherished and cultivated as a mere means, though a most precious one, for giving meaning, diffusion, and continuity to natural* [i.e., pure] *religion* …[26] In other words, the distinction between "pure" and "historical" religion allows for multiple manifestations of "pure" religion through the superstructure of religious faith taken to be established by particular revelations or supernatural, historical events.

The embracing of religious pluralism that this allows, offers something extremely valuable in the current conversation about pluralism. No doubt politically correct in our day is the notion that we should embrace pluralism. It is facilely expressed by the bumper sticker constructed out of symbols from multiple religious traditions that says "Co-Exist." As laudable as the sentiment is that this bumper sticker expresses, though, it has a moral dark side that we cannot ignore. That dark side is that there is exploitation, persecution, and oppression in every religious tradition. The mere insistence that we should tolerate all traditions too easily conceals our responsibility to condemn any context or situation in which the dignity of anyone is violated.

Fakultäten, vol. VI of *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 301, 315; and *Über Pädagogik*, vol. VI of *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 758.

24. See *Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason*, 112-113.

25. *Ibid.*, 154.

26. *Ibid.*, 162.

Nonetheless, the dignity of human beings does not rest upon the claim of any particular religious tradition, for example, on the claim in the Abrahamic traditions that human beings are created in the *image of God*. Given our Copernican Turn in religion, we must now say that it is because each individual is an *end of creat*ion because of her/his creative capacity that we must speak of human dignity. In short, any violation of the capacities and conditions of creativity is a violation of the dignity of a human being.

Our "one" religion, then, has an antidote to the moral dark side of pluralistic tolerance. We can acknowledge the truth of the *pure religion* of moral improvement in every *historical religion*, but we must also respond to the suffering caused in any and all traditions when the conditions of pure religion are violated.

Where the material conditions of life are not met, we cannot expect morality, that is, there can be no religion. We have a moral and religious obligation , then, to work for a world in which hunger and poverty, persecution and oppression, despair and debilitating disease are obliterated and in which the realization of the *end of creation* as an open-ended process of the moral improvement of the human species can occur.

Excursus: On the Nihilism of Meaning and Pure Religion

Although the economization of our world seems complete, Aristotle already pointed out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book I) that when it comes to identifying the goals of life (eventually he votes for εὐδαιμονία, satisfaction), money doesn't have a place in the discussion because money is only a means to ends, not an *end in itself*. The highest goal for humanity, Aristotle proposes is an *end in itself*, not something that serves as an end to something else. However, when Aristotle comes to discuss (Book X) the highest activity of humanity that brings the greatest εὐδαιμονία since it is an activity shared with the gods, he elevates contemplation of invariable things as the level of divinity to which humanity ought to aspire.[27] Between the rejection of money as the key to life in Book I and the call to embrace the eternal as the highest achievement of humanity in Book X, we have the Charybdis and Scylla of the human condition. To be fair to Aristotle, he acknowledges several times that there can be no contemplation of the invariable (what he calls intellectual virtue) without first having one's basic material necessities met (1098a31, 1177a28, 1178a22-26, 1178b33-36), and he maintained that the excellence that comes from our experience of calculable variables (between those things of which we can have excess and defect) in life (what Aristotle calls *moral virtue* and *distributive* and *rectificatory justice*) are by no means eliminated by the pursuit of intellectual virtue. It is difficult to imagine, then, that Aristotle would have found a Simeon Styllites anything but an individual pursuing a maximum of excess to the detriment of εὐδαιμονία.

Certainly by the time we get to Plotinus and the Neoplatonists,[28] we find the notion of the "Good" and the claim for the ultimate "goal of life" are concerned with the pursuit of the

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27. Here Aristotle is in agreement with his teacher, Plato, who had said in the *Theatetus* (176b) that humanity should become "as divine as it possibly can."

28. Although the principle of the pursuit of invariable, eternal things is well in the saddle with the Stoics and in Philo of Alexandria. See Theo Kobusch, "Die Kultur des Humanen. Zur

unchanging elements in life. This is what allowed Augustine of Hippo to propose that the suffering of children is meant to instruct the parents[29] of the highest goals in life since the good doesn't love things that can be lost.[30]"

The introduction in the 12th and 13th centuries of the writings of Aristotle into the west (before the west had the writings of Plato to any extent) eventually brought about the revolution[31] that we know as the emergence of the mathematical sciences. For our purposes, this revolution interests us for its leading to the distinction between "natural" and "revealed" theology and the *via moderna* that long before the 18th century Deists had pushed God outside of history since divine things are eternal (concerned with Aristotle's invariables) and the world is a play of chimeras. The study of nature in itself was valuable as "natural" theology only because "science" consisted of identifying the *invariables* in nature, which "obviously" were a reflection of divine (intellectual) wisdom that is more prized than practical wisdom.

In light of this Charybdis and Scylla, 20th century Neo-Orthodoxy is by no means either an anomaly or a revolution. Neo-Orthodoxy maintains that the natural sciences and rigorous, historical, biblical scholarship have an open season and neither was nor could be a threat to Christian theology since God is outside of history and even the Christ event is not an historical event.[32] One has a strong echo here of that other grand meta-narrative of history proposed by Hegel where history is viewed as the preparatory conditions for the Absolute One seeking that point where it is able to experience itself in the second negation of the Concept -- now thought by the individual (as the Divine/Man in the subjective sense, not just as an objective representation in the Christ).

Given the rejection of Rationalism and the "end of metaphysics" that marks the Post-Modern world, the alternative has been to pull humanity so far down into the material world that we ignore any differences between ourselves and the animal/vegetative world. If there is meaning in life, one talks about a phenomenological "making sense" of experiences that embraces the ephemeral and subjective qualities of meaning. Ayn Rand has made a virtue out of the pursuit of

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Idee der Freiheit," in *Humanismus: Sein kritisches Potential für Gegenwart und Zukunft*, ed. Adrian Holderegger (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2011).

29. See Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin, trans & introd by L. H. Hackstaff, The Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964), 116.

30. See *Ibid*., 7, 8, 22-23, 26, 33, 50-51, 53, 55-57, 60, 101, 106.

31. For an account of this revolution that is not a simplistic substitution of Aristotelian thought for the Platonism that dominated Christian theology in the 13th century, see Alexander Koyré, "Galileo and Plato," *Journal of the History of Ideas* IV (1943): 400–28.

32. See Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton (trans) (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978).

subjective self-interest[33] that has so pervaded our economized society that it was a major factor in contributing to the sub-prime mortgage financial meltdown in 2007/2008. Economization with its rampant self-interest triumphs, and we have embraced a *means* as if it were the ultimate *end* to life: the pursuit of financial success with its crass consumption. Meaning as "making sense" of phenomena and as subjective consumption *turns the world into a meaning-less dimension* that has significance only in the subject's acknowledgement of it. The world and others are our mere toys.

The consequence of the metaphysics of Neo-Orthodoxy and Hegelianism as well as the merely phenomenological and crass consumerism can be called "meaning nihilism." The former two eliminate any meaning to history in favor of a meta-narrative that privileges the transcendent whereas the latter two make meaning so susceptible to the arbitrariness of one's ever-changing "tastes" (what Kant calls in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* the arbitrariness of the "agreeable" in contrast to the aesthetic taste of beauty[34]), material circumstances, and/or one's honor and status in the eyes of others that any real meaning is snuffed by fate and capriciousness.

This project proposes a "third way" that acknowledges with Aristotle the necessity of establishing a material basis for existence before one can think of morals and that maintains that there are invariables (e.g., concepts, physical laws, and moral principles) that govern experience without deprecation of our action in the world. In fact, we could not experience a world as we do without these invariables although these invariables don't require our turning our backs on the world. The claim is that humanity as the *end of creation* possesses a capacity of autonomous (autonomy from the blind necessity of nature), creative freedom that not only provides the condition for us to be moral beings but also provides an irreplaceable meaning to life that comes with our knowing that we have made our best effort and acted on the basis of a moral principle because it is right and not merely because it serves our selfish interests.

Here, though, εὐδαιμονία is not the final end of human practical reason. It can surely be the case that a deep sense of satisfaction accompanies our moral effort (when we know that we have done the right thing because it is right and not out of self-interest) and that this satisfaction is irreplaceable by anything material as well as be any acquired honor and status in the eyes of others. Nonetheless, the goal of our moral effort cannot be εὐδαιμονία itself but what Kant calls the "worthiness" of such happiness. Otherwise, we turn our moral effort into the self-interested pursuit of εὐδαιμονία. Εὐδαιμονία occurs, however, without succumbing to the *meaning nihilism* either of Neo-Orthodoxy and Hegel or of the merely phenomenological and crass consumption driven exclusively by self-interest since it is grounded in that over which we have control: the selection of the moral principle to guide our action.[35]

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33. See Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957).

34. See §3 in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 9192.

35. See *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 834; *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1974), 97*, 107, 149; *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis*, vol. VI of *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 131*, 133, 133*;

In Book I of Plato's *Republic*, the wealthy Cephalus observes that old age brings at least the advantage of liberation from the blinding, physical passions, and he advises young people not to do things that will come back to haunt them later in life. These are key lessons that inform the moral life, but it is our capacities and conditions that both distinguish humanity from other species and call us to seek our moral improvement throughout life. The hope that those capacities and conditions in fact make such an effort possible is the core of *pure* religion. It is a religious life that is facilitated by a community that encourages us to pursue the invisible, invariable ends of moral principles that respect the dignity of individuals – not because we must but because we can.

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