Religious Scriptors of Human Possibilities and Cultural Transformations

Carol Wayne White

> What is good, is something that comes through innovation.The good does not exist, like that, in an atemporal sky, with people who would be like the Astrologers of the Good, whose job is to determine what is the favorable nature of the stars. The good is defined by us, it is practised, it is invented. And this is a collective work.
> —Michel Foucault, "Power, Moral Values and the Intellectual"

Asking questions about the character of religious thought, its import, and perhaps its distinctive role within the academy and the public spheres, has become a necessary but difficult task in the postmodern era. No longer can scholars of religion assume that other academics and cultural critics view religion as an integral humanistic discourse that helps in clarifying what may be thought or practiced beyond the modern paradigm. Nor can we take for granted the possibility that the theological profundity or philosophical sophistication underlying widely practiced forms of religiosity are readily discussed by the general public. For most of our contemporaries, the various theoretical concerns preoccupying many scholars of

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religion appear to be tedious and irrelevant academic exercises—and in many cases they are. Too often our professional theorizations fail to address in concrete and immediate ways the psychological, existential, and social needs that lead most people to the practice of religion in its diverse cultural settings. Compounding this problem is the sad news that our current cultural milieu is inundated with facile expressions of religion, where individuals in search of meaningful interpretations and transformative experiences are often confronted with sterile, vacuous practices and paralyzing moralistic discourse.

Countering the prevailing sense of the decline of viable religiosity, I suggest that both public and academic appreciation of the import and necessity of religious valuing in the postmodern age must be achieved, not assumed. These and other concerns lead me to consider the meaningfulness of the term "religion" within current academic debates, and its distinctive role in helping to shape postmodern cultural formations. Assuming the role of a cultural critic, I contend that some sort of active engagement with religious reflection is necessary when addressing the conditions of life in the twentieth-first century. Put more succinctly, I am persuaded that religious thought has a critical role to play in contemporary analyses that attempt to address the ill effects of popularized modernistic values and cultural practices. I define this quintessential religious task as a critical re-assessment of the human, which has always been an implicit yet integral concept within systematic religious thought. Put another way, I suggest that if religious discourse has anything important to say in the current postmodern cultural milieu, it must address the full complexity of the "human," as at once artful textuality and stubborn materiality. In ascertaining the engagement of religion with cultural studies, I believe one is politically, aesthetically, and ethically compelled first to ask *which* human (in gendered, racialized, economic, and sexual orientation ways)—how, in other words, one might think about reconceiving the human in new ways.

I begin my discussion by outlining popular and traditional conceptions of religion that are often either assumed or dismissed by U.S. (secular) culture and, in different ways, by the academy. In an attempt to show the import of religious thought to cultural studies, I discuss specific developments in religious scholarship, which show both the growth of the modern religious discipline, and its dominant trajectories that have promoted distinct conceptions of the human. Specifically, I address some epistemic and methodological shifts in Western religious thought that have led attention away from a theological preoccupation with the Western god-construct to a renewed interest in the human. Following this, I outline the conception of the human emerging from modern atheistic humanism, assessing its contributions to modernist cultural practices and power-driven norms that some of us are currently trying to dismantle.

Engaging postmodern analyses in philosophy of religion and in cultural studies, I next seek possibilities for viable representations of the (postmodern) human. I specifically focus on the provocative religious scholarship of Russell McCutcheon, whose engagement with critical theory (or, most specifically, Roland Barthes' linguistic textuality) encourages some of us to reconceive the scope and aim of religion, and to re-examine the role of the religious scholar today. I discuss this new

direction in religious scholarship, questioning in particular its ability to address seriously the nature of the human. Finally, I consider how religious scholars might, through our critical understanding of language and praxis, participate in the creation of more benevolent, just, and interconnected definitions of humanity and cultural practices. At the same time, engaging various epistemological assumptions, I suggest that humans, as social, aesthetic, and ethical life forms, are also compelled to take material action in a material world. In short, we are compelled to seek a realm of possibility. Such a move, I hope, makes a place for religion within the limits of postmodern culture—without explaining it away or subsuming it under other disciplinary mandates. Throughout this essay, I confine my analysis of religion to the intellectual trajectory of Western Euro-American scholarship, distinguishing it from theological and confessional forms of thought.

Part One

In many academic settings, scholars, students, and critics name and identify religion as one of the pre-eminent institutionalized evils or guarantors of meaning and truth challenged by current theoretical tenets. Furthermore, when it comes to envisioning alternative modes of subjectivity, truth claims, values, and social practices, very few cultural theorists include insights from religious scholarship—they pay much more attention to other fields of knowledge. These thinkers often seem unaware that many religious scholars also embrace current critical theories, compelling us to cast a critical eye upon the intelligibility of pristine "Truth," that has illuminated the landscape of the West for centuries. With these religious scholars, I, too, have become increasingly aware of the limitations and ambiguities of our various claims and the contradictions inherent in all our systems of thought. I also question whether we can both posit and justify the import of religious thought in the shift from modernist to postmodernist cultural sensibilities and theory, and whether religious valuing can positively shape or enhance ongoing cultural analyses.[1]

I am further inclined to suggest that we should not be too surprised to hear that the term "religion" has fallen into ill repute, when considering three particular factors. First, the most influential religious discourses highlighted by popular culture and the media are those almost exclusively associated with certain ideological apparatuses where particular and contingent values (such as a theocratic vision, a prescribed normative morality, and an eschatological mandate) are legitimized as authentic truths with universal import. On college campuses, our students and colleagues are privy to this persuasively seductive type of rhetoric, often disguised as "family values" discourse, in the voices of such cultural icons as Bernice King and Star Parker. In the news media, we constantly hear about the ominous proclamations of Pat Robertson, and the political sway of such organizations as the Christian Coalition. Whereas most North American citizens are oblivious to the Foucauldian-based feminism of Sharon Welch (or the liberationist ethics of distinct Womanist theologians), or unaware of the deconstructive aims of Mark C. Taylor and the eco-spirituality endorsed by Charlene Spretnak, right wing public figures and their movements are almost household terms. Indeed, this popular and very problematic model of religiosity reaches as far as the consumer market, where some

of the best-selling books in the U.S. today are the 12 volumes of the "Left Behind" series written by Christian fundamentalist Timothy LaHaye. These examples have resulted in making religion sometimes seem the Rodney Dangerfield of the humanities—"No Respect! No Respect!"

This situation is compounded by an even weightier problem, namely, the very modern tendency of contemporary North Americans to compartmentalize and practice religion primarily and only as individual, subjective, or emotive phenomenon. Sadly enough, in our information-driven and technocratic culture, where scientists and medical doctors are afforded the highest prestige by the populace, all things identified as "religious" are often reduced to aesthetic experiences, individual quests, or emotive irrationality. This phenomenon, in particular, has promoted a great divide between the purported sacred and profane, sometimes leading cultural critics to ignore or dismiss the structural and social manifestations (and the potentially liberating and oppressive aspects) of religion.[2]

A third factor contributing to the marginalization of religion in contemporary academic debates is that the very dated (and myopic) view of religion as essential belief in the existence of a supernatural deity is assumed by many to be the only viable conception of religion worth addressing. This assumption necessarily leads some people to identify religious scholarship with (or erroroneously dismiss it as) an all-consuming theological preoccupation with the Western god-hypothesis. This monolithic view of religion has become suspect within many academic circles where definitive answers are contested, not least because such a view undermines and dismisses the richness and plurality of human religiosity that remains outside of the classic theistic paradigm. While a crucial component of religious studies today is the conviction that the various values associated with humanity's spiritual quests should no longer be confined to, or controlled by, one essential tradition or model of religiosity, seldom within our various public debates does one hear of crucial developments within religious scholarship that take seriously our very diverse and complex cultural settings.

Most U.S. citizens, intellectual consumers, and even friends of religion in the academy are often unaware that the discipline of Religious Studies has undergone various mutations since its inception in the nineteenth century as a distinct shift away from theology. Today, religious scholars still debate which methodological considerations we ought to associate with the academic study of religion, and what it is that we propose to be professing. Most recently, a debate has revolved around two major approaches within religious scholarship: one often called the theological or hermeneutical; the other, the empiricist or explanatory (which I define and address shortly). Both models are significant for my purposes, in that each presupposes a view of the human, replete with distinct epistemological assumptions of the real and important cultural implications. The first model (theological) assumes that there really is some sort of sacred or transcendent reality witnessed in and through the diversity of world religious traditions. In Western thought, this theo-centric approach, most commonly associated with Christian theology, has been closely identified with the dominant (and problematic) conception of God as omnipotent and omniscient, expressing an absolute alterity—a wholly otherness that is always

humanity's object of both desire and agon. As a result of this transcendence, deity is inaccessible to humanity. Furthermore, in this onto-theological tradition, God is virtually indistinguishable from the power of Being or Being-itself. To the extent that Being is interpreted as presence, God is viewed as absolutely present and thus totally self-present. Finally, in terms of God's *aseity* (self-presence and autonomy), human beings can never have that full total presence before them. The essential nature of deity approaches a type of thing-in-itself that does not fall prey to the polysemous interpretations of human ingenuity. An important correlation between these traditional images of God and the notion of self emerges here, for it is not until the divine is conceived in wholly other, transcendent terms, that Western thinkers begin to conceive of humanity in autonomous and unique terms.

Atheistic Humanism as Death of God/Birth of Modern, Sovereign Self

This general theo-centric approach has been dethroned by a number of crucial developments that divert attention away from the traditional object of faith (deity) to emphasize human subjectivity. With a general movement from Kant's positioning of morality as the focal point of religion, through Hegel's speculative idealism, to Schleiermacher's elevation of intuition or feeling, religious thought in the West has put more and more emphasis upon human ingenuity, and less on the divine as the transcendent Other.[3] Specific developments associated with a modernist philosophy of consciousness, along with influential atheistic critiques of the nineteenth century, helped to subvert the privileged status of Western theism, such that classical theology is supplanted by anthropology. With the movement of Descartes, through the Enlightenment, to idealism and Romanticism, a shift in imagery arose—attributes traditionally predicated of the divine subject were transferred to the human subject. In other words, ". . . through a dialectical reversal, the creator God dies and is resurrected as the creative subject." As God created the world through the Logos, so (western) humanity now creates a "world" through conscious and unconscious projection. Like the God of classical theology, this sovereign subject relates asymmetrically only to what it constructs and is, therefore, unaffected by anything other than itself. The subject becomes the first principle (formerly identified as God) from which everything arises and to which all must be reduced or returned. Moreover, an undue emphasis upon human knowledge eventually leads to a system of thought in which all objects of knowledge exist for the epistemological subject. "If [humanity] is defined as subject, everything else turns into object. This includes God, who now becomes merely the highest object of [man's] knowledge."[4] In areas of knowledge as diverse as science, theology, and early modern philosophy (albeit directed toward different ends), one locates an essential egoistical faith, or an exclusive concern for and interest in humanity. Knowledge in general, becomes knowledge for humans, "*pro nobis*." While denying God, modern (secular) humanists cling to the autonomous and creative self.

Sadly, this notion of the human and its spheres of creativity, as represented by modernity, have been ambiguous as well as potentially lethal in their consequences. One dilemma of modernism is that precisely in its creativity and success in enacting its most cherished ideals, Western humanity brought forth material conditions and

an ethos of dominion that threaten its own life as well as that of other sentient beings. Classic Enlightenment ideals—progress, universalism, guaranteed freedoms — once privileged at the end of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century now appear in our postmodern culture as suspicious ideologies, masking special privileges and selfish materialism. For example, scientific medicine, long viewed as the paradigmatic expression of Enlightenment reason, has been lax regarding health matters (and this is further complicated by the race, gender, and class inequalities in health care) as well as for its acquisitive nature that seems endless. Likewise, technical industrialism—in expanding as the Enlightenment had hoped—continues to pose a threat to the natural systems and to use up natural resources on which we all depend. An indirect yet very notable consequence of these historical trends has been the diminishing and eradication of religious valuing within our technocratic culture. And although the omni-competence of science has been questioned by various movements (e.g., Romanticism, Whiteheadian Process, Neo-Kantianism, Gadamerian Hermeneutics, Existentialism) that have objected to its claims to be the sole avenue to cognitive touch with reality, its reign is still quite intact.

Beyond these aspects of technological creativity, which have produced means of destruction overshadowing its more beneficent advantages, the modern era has been dominated by a humanistic spirit intent on reducing plurality to oneness, and overcoming ambiguity and temporality with certitude and eternal truths. Begun as a revolt against oppressive structures (political and religious), enlightened rationality falls short of its emancipatory aims to culminate in a reign of terror. Modern technological acquisition, domination, and utilitarianism—now well-established cultural truths—are the visible marks of a subjectivity possessed by the desire to be in and of itself completely, and to control itself completely. With its foundationalism and drive toward epistemology, the modern era produces the idea of the modern human as the secularized god, replacing the classical (male) deity of old—an essentially narcissistic phenomenon. Furthermore, this modern notion of selfhood contributes to a system of ordering and cultural representation that is entrenched in a certain fear of difference or suspicion of otherness. Humanistic knowledge involves identifying and naming oneself by way of differentiating oneself from another.

In one of its earliest and most recurrent forms, the problem of the other is posed in terms of the relationship between the one and the many, or unity and plurality, which has been the germ of conventional philosophical thinking, resulting in the onto-theological tradition. In modern humanism, "the (normative) self labors to establish its identity, attempting to surmount the threat that the other poses to its autonomy by dissolving alterity and assimilating difference, and perhaps revealing modernity's fear of death.[5] This interplay of identity/difference within the Western social/cultural realm unmasks psychological processes underlying hierarchical and domineering structures of Western thought. The myth of an all-consuming, powerful plenitude actually sustains its privileged position by simultaneously denying (and parasitically sucking the life out of) that upon which it is inextricably linked. In keeping with this theme, humanistic atheism becomes nothing less than the psy-

chology of mastery in which self-assertion functions to negate both material others constituted by racial, gender, and sexual particularities, and the Divine Other.

Part Two

Contemporary theoretical notions have responded to this modernist humanism (and its tyrannical, narcisstic self) with an emphatic sensitivity to the constructive powers of language and ideology that includes enhanced appreciation for difference and contingency. Some of these concerns are echoed in the second model of religious scholarship that I mentioned above, the explanatory or empiricist. Scholars advocating this approach argue that religion is a matter of social conditioning, unconnected with anything transcendent or sacred or holy; in short, that there is nothing "religious" about religion. A recent example of this emphasis appears in Russell McCutcheon's *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*, which has become a focal point of heated and lively discussions. Advancing a "political theory of religion," inflected by current thinking in poststructuralist theory and cultural studies, McCutcheon argues that religion is not something autonomous and extraordinary, but merely the classification some of us give to diverse collections of artful but all too human strategies that help portray any given world in which we happen to find ourselves (163).

McCuthcheon focuses on the set of rhetorical gestures used by early inventers of the modern "religion" discipline, deploring the self-justifying and self-normalizing tactics that often underlie scholars' assertion of the relevance of faith as a credible object of study. According to McCutcheon, religious thinkers must cease presuming that "religion" necessarily and solely denotes an inner world of unseen power and morality expressed in doctrine or ritual. Instead, he asks that we historicize this very conception of "religion" and underscore its materialist causes and effects, seeing "the discipline of modern religion" as a discursive technique used in particular situations. Challenging the Eliadian rhetoric that views religion as a unique, self-caused, unexplainable, nonreducible phenomenon—*sui generis*—McCutcheon claims: "[Scholars] should reconceive the study of religion not as a special case but as one among a number of fields engaged in the theoretically-based study of human beliefs, behaviors, and institutions. In turn, this will require us to describe religion not as a privileged instance of private human experience but as a public technique of social formation" (140-141). He sees the discipline of religion as reduced to a type of social-cultural classification with significant political import—a theory with which I, in part, agree.

In addressing the (re)invention of the modern discipline of religion, McCutcheon also problematizes the notion of the religious scholar, arguing that our subjectivities as "scholars" are created, maintained, and reinforced through our discipline's strategic, rhetorical devices. Here, McCutcheon augments an earlier critique inaugurated by liberationist, feminist, and postcolonial theorists—all of whom share in a basic hermeneutics of suspicion that draws attention to the issue of "who" controls the knowledge claims that circumscribe a discipline by asking how a discipline is made possible in the first place. McCutcheon's analysis of the field encourages religious scholars to assess how its "disciplining" effects actually create the "we"

who maintain its truth claims. Instead of being overly preoccupied with the question of "What is religion?," he suggests religious scholars may be wiser to ask: How do "we" come to ask this particular question?

Religious Scriptors of the Postmodern Human as Artful Textuality

McCutcheon's analysis, in my opinion, is a fine example of the creative intersections of critical theory, cultural studies, and religion. By suggesting that the religious scholar becomes a cultural concept implicated in particular processes of meaning, symbolization, and power formation, McCutcheon appropriates the cultural/linguistical theories of Roland Barthes. Barthes shifts emphasis from an all-knowing, unified, intending subject as the site of production to that of language and its rhetorical effects. McCutcheon opens a conceptual space in which those belonging to the academic field of religion might consider the trope of the religious scholar who operates in the "writing" and "reading" of religion as artful textuality. In my estimation, this concept has profound implications for analyzing crucial interconnections among subjectivity, meaning, power, and knowledge, and for advancing religion as cultural discourse.

In his pivotal essay "The Death of the Author" (1968), Barthes uproots established epistemological terrain in humanistic thinking, proclaiming that an author is not simply a person but a socially and historically constituted subject existing as a cultural process—what Barthes calls a scriptor, and what Foucault will call an author-function.[6] Barthes revitalizes Marx's crucial insight that it is history that makes humans, and not, as Hegel posited, humans who make history. Barthes concludes: "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147). For Barthes, the author cannot claim any absolute authority over her text because, in some ways, she did not write it. Any subject who enunciates is a creation of language itself, so that meaning belongs to the play of language and is far beyond individual control. As we acquire language, we enter a flow of meaning with broad cultural implications, so that, for example, Foucault can speak of stepping into the flow of meaning, and Lacan of our entering, through language, into the Law of the Father, the rule of the governing conceptions of our culture. Accordingly, the type of religious discourse that emerges is one that transforms the current religious scholar into the Barthian "scriptor," who is born with the text at the same time.

Barthian textuality also has to do with the fuller conceptions of meaning that accompany a reconceived style of reading, writing, and reflection. One might again recall Barthes famous assertion: "We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146). This conception of language as a multivalent system of differentiations and as a depository of cultural meanings and power-inflected gestures resonates well with my own desire to re-inscript religion. With McCutcheon and others, I also invite contemporary students and friends of religion to look at religion's "disciplinarian" constructions as part of a complex web of cultural meanings, a texture of them—even as a text. Accordingly, a (religious) text, then, is in Barthian terms, "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture"—a

human text that is "written *here* and *now*" rather than after some (theo) author's thought. Hence, religious students and scholars must pay particular attention to the conventions and structures of writing (146). We consider what is expressed, how different topics are written about, and how things are expressed in writing, as well as how texts relate to previous texts, and to the way we speak about various aspects of our lives and experiences. The inevitability of each religious scriptor's supplementing—as Derrida might phrase it—already written texts opens possibilities of collective authorship that dismantle the idea of writing that originates from a single, fixed source and results in a single, fixed meaning. Meaning is indefinite and in flux, because signs can only point to other signs (146). Since we are inside the circle of language, we express its logic, its stereotypes, its rhetorical twists, and its power effects in all we do.

Re-inscripting the Human as Artful Textuality and Stubborn Materiality

The theoretical impulses I have just articulated draw attention to the rhetorical and political effects of all textual/linguistic formations—including religious ones. However, while I agree with McCutcheon's concern with religious thinking as a type of artful inscription, I am not fully satisfied with the extent of his emphasis on the "trope" of the religious scriptor—itself a convenient and artful rhetorical device McCutcheon uses to describe (and simultaneously hide) the complexity of approaches, assumptions, desires, aims, and ambitions of constructed selves within the disciplinary field of religious studies. For example, some religious scriptors may want to do more than simply describe or explain the morass of human behaviors. At least, as one scriptor among a multitude of constructed others who participate in distinct cultural formations of knowledge, meaning, and power, I feel compelled to do more. While re-inventing and participating in distinct forms of disciplinary rhetorical strategies that contribute to the always-ongoing constructions of human knowledge, I am also concerned about human joy, suffering, and transformation—all manifestations of cultural realities. I acknowledge the inevitable processes of open-ended textuality, yet I want to stress that just as we should not participate in naively essentialist notions of selfhood, we must be careful not to construct an insufficient subjectivity, where historical agents are "erased" by linguistic forces over which they can have little or no control. In doing so, one risks losing sight of those aspects of the human that are rooted in intimate and concrete social relations, and of something within and among humans that is not merely an effect of the dominant discourse.

These concerns lead me, as a religious scriptor, to raise a crucial question to readers and writers of religious textuality: What is this human that is generally implied or assumed in our cultural observations? I believe that religious discourse involves more than a recognition and description of ordinary human behaviors—it is itself an ongoing, constituted celebration of the conundrums, dreams, and desires of the irreducible human. If religion has anything important to say about the real, or the sacred, as the hermeneuticists wish to claim, it must address the full complexity of the human, as at once stubborn materiality and artful textuality. I thus urge religious scriptors to join with our other colleagues and cultural workers in

asking: What possible, perhaps ennobling and dignifying images of humaneness can we artfully inscript upon these tissues, bones, and liquid of which we are constituted? Religious textual inscriptions can inspire and motivate, compelling humans to dream possibilities beyond the present moment. Artful textuality also enunciates the residual poetic or ecstatic in every disciplining discourse – even while recognizing and acknowledging the risk, play, and loss of sense and univocal meaning of the Logos (of ultimate meaning, lordship, presence).

Part Three

The combined legacy of modernism and postmodernism compels some of us to move beyond the secularized, utilitarian, epistemological construction of the human to imagine new possibilities that respect both textuality and materiality. I also think that the diverse theories emerging from the current science and religion paradigm provide rich imagery and solid support for such a gesture. Neurologists have emphasized the social character of cognition in animals and humans, providing various types of evidence for understanding humanity as symbol makers, creators of a world imbued with value, and as social organisms. For example, in *The Humanizing Brain*, James Ashbrooke and Carol Albright use Paul MacLeane's notion of the tripartite brain to argue that the limbic system, which we share with mammals, is the center of emotions that mobilize action and makes possible richer forms of relationship that involve empathy and caring for the young.[7] These factors, in turn, lead us to recognize emotion, social relationships, and values often associated with traditional religious symbols—all as part of human reality. Ashbrooke and Albright go on to theorize about the role of the neocortex, as it is developed in primates and humans, as the center of interpretation, organization, symbolic representation, and rationality. While some critics of MacLeane have argued that the relationships between the three regions of the brain are more complex than he recognized, they acknowledge that a distinction of three functions of the brain might still lead to some of the assumptions outlined by Ashbrooke and Albright. Other neurologists maintain that although humans seek meaning by viewing their lives in a cosmic and religious framework that is itself a human symbolic construct, the brain is part of the cosmos and a product of the cosmos. Its structures reflect the nature of the cosmos and whatever ordering and meaning-giving forces are expressed in its history.

Evolutionary biologists, sociobiologists, evolutionary psychologists, and philosophers are currently debating the extent to which one can argue that humans are value-driven decision systems with primary values built into us. Some of these theories suggest that one component of being human is the heightened awareness of our ability self-consciously to make decisions, act upon those decisions, and take responsibility for them.[8] Moreover, various biologists assert that evolutionary history shows a directionality, or a trend toward greater complexity and consciousness. They note that there has been an increase in the genetic information in DNA, and a steady advance in the ability of organisms to gather and process information about the environment and respond to it. Others claim that the human self emerges in a biological process that is affected by genes but also by many other factors at higher levels. In human development, as in evolutionary history, selfhood is always

social, a product of language, culture, and interpersonal interaction as well as genetic expression.

Ian Barbour, a major representative of the religion and science dialogue, has persuasively argued for a construction of the human individual as a multilevel psychosomatic unity that is both a biological organism and a responsible self.[9] Relying upon the insights of neuroscience, computer science, and western religion, Barbour advances a conception of the human as necessarily connected with such themes as embodiment, emotions, the social self, and consciousness. For Barbour, the notion of the human involves the integration of body and mind, reason and emotion, individual and social groups.

These ideas emerging from the scientific sphere are not so much prescriptive as they are suggestive in helping me propose an artful construction of humans as value-laden, social organisms in constant search of meaning (cognition), enamored of value (beauty), and instilled with a sense of purpose (telos). The human, in my estimation, entails a modality of existence within a sphere of values in which transformation occurs. As Konstantin Kolenda suggests, the concept of God, or of any absolute value, has functioned as humanity's recognition of our longing to take our highest ideals or values seriously.[10] The very presence of this longing attests to the reality of religiousness, or of what I wish to call a religious impulse or religious valuing. This experience of religiousness suggests a "divinizing" element to the construction of the human when we interpret the divine as an awareness or sense of distance between what we are and what we wish to be, or between the world as it is and as it could be. I believe that through it we might do as the poet Emily Dickinson beautifully encourages us: "dwell in possibility / a fairer house than prose."[11] Religious valuing points to a tenacious refusal of humans to reduce our various actions to mere "brute" existence (or rather determinist forces and mechanistic explanations of cause/effect). I also associate this impulse with humans' ability to reflect upon the past, to assess the present, and, inevitably, to consider the future. In short, religious valuing symbolically represents what the human individual or group might do with its concept of time, as a guide to behavior. Here I invoke Alfred North Whitehead's view of religion as "the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts. . . . something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension . . ." (34). This religious quality has been variously expressed as the desire to experience a profound intimacy with others, or perhaps to construct "worlds" of meaningful relations, or, sometimes, to discover fuller dimensions of reality beyond what appears obvious. In any case, the question of whether there may not be the possibility of something "more" or some positivity (however that is conceived) beyond what we currently experience has been (and continues to be) a persistently religious one.

I maintain that a fuller sense of humans' religious valuing lies in our envisioning newer forms of embodied relationality that allow a vital flourishing among all sentient entities. It involves human engagement with diverse processes of life. In the twenty-first century, we are developing new premises regarding nature that chal-

lenge the dominant trajectory of ideas and methods derived from such seventeenth-century figures as Bacon, Descartes, and Newton. Instead of immutable order, or change as rearrangement, we now understand nature to be evolutionary, dynamic, and emergent. We see historicity as a basic characteristic of nature, and science itself as historically conditioned. Second, now in place of full determinism, we speak of a complex combination of law and chance, in fields as diverse as quantum physics, thermodynamics, chaos theory, and biological evolution. Both structure and openness characterize nature. With these assumptions, religious scriptors can begin proposing the image of human as a value-laden organism within community — an evolving, multileveled network of interdependent beings. I further explore the fuller implications of this religious valuing as it is enacted in communal, social settings and in cultural transformations.

The Religious Impulse as Experiencing of Otherness

The existential matrix constituting the lived realities of humans help shape us as social beings who enter into relations with perceived others. Here, there is an acknowledgement of our radical historicity and an inevitable encounter with otherness, which is another way of suggesting that religious valuing accentuates crucial intersubjective experiences in which the human subject comes face to face with another reality. Granted, the category of the "other" can encompass a wide range of modalities and meanings—from the ideational, transcendental source and ground of being of traditional metaphysics, through the concrete materiality of *other* selves or communities and the non-human *otherness* of natural eco-systems, to the suppressed or the hidden *other* of psychoanalytical theory, which challenges a dominant conception of self as an unified and transparent consciousness. Religious valuing also makes explicit to us those precognitive, extralinguistic experiences from which arises the conviction that one is not alone. Put more simply, it puts us in touch with our radical relatedness to otherness, however that is conceived and experienced.

Assuming that religious valuing mandates life-affirming encounters with other(ness), there is the further suggestion that it also becomes one precondition for conceiving particular notions of objectivity, or transcendence, or communal moral reasoning, for it is only through an acceptance of one's material, concrete embodiment and perceived relatedness that one begins envisioning (or is even challenged to think of) what may lie beyond one's own self-perceptions and thoughts. Hence, it is not surprising that historically, many religious systems have sought to provide integrative frameworks of the perceived whole, often in transhistorical, objective, or universal terms. The various cosmologies, metaphysics, and value systems emerging from the world religions show a persistent human propensity and desire to construct worldviews, which may adequately express something more, beyond the commonsense knowledge and restrictions of empirical datum.

Further, religious valuing can never be viewed only as an individualistic phenomenon — there must be some type of communal ontology implied. For example, I may perceive and experience myself as an unified, separate entity, yet this "I" inevitably confronts on a daily basis the facticity, experiences, thoughts, wishes, and desires of other life forms and subjectivities. Here the "I" is not even meaning-

ful without the context or "other" which allows the "I" to be. In other words, religious valuing reinforces the anthropological and sociological insights that we are social beings who necessarily interact and derive profound meaning from our relations with others. Nowhere is this idea more evident than in the formation of religious traditions, which range from older, historically established ones (Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the myriad Indigenous wisdoms, for example) to more recent, alternative religious communities such as the Church of Scientology, the Jehovah Witnesses, and the Amish. These various types of religious formations provide colorful and fascinating insight into the human need to build and sustain certain and diverse types of intense group interactions, namely, communities of affinity.

A community of affinity, or like-mindedness, is based on what people feel they have in common—a common creed, historical legacy, set of concerns and values; this notion of commonality can also be extended to include such factors as one's social-economic status, nationality, sexual orientation, etc. This, however, does not always mean that everyone within the community of affinity does the same thing, or that they do it from the same point of view. Rather, what makes such a community realistic are the people who understand that their shared concerns call each of them to respond to each other and to their perceived pivotal value(s) with as much integrity and integrated knowledge as possible. One's very existence within an affinity community presupposes one's commitment to share the perceived common concerns, and to care for one another. Ideally, this caring begins with reflexive understanding from within the actual members present, yet, as is evident from historiographical analyses, this model of human interaction has been obscured by the harsh realities of misogyny, homophobia, ethnic and cultural biases, unjust power relations, and authoritative models of leadership which plague many religious traditions. An invaluable lesson to be gleaned from these religious communities and traditions is that even in spite of these historical realities, ongoing and reflexive, dialogical relations with others, and with the group's established value system is paramount and never exhausted. In other words, religious valuing persists.

This leads to my second point, namely, that religious valuing, in its myriad cultural forms and manifestations, helps to disclose the hermeneutic dimension of human existence. Religious valuing helps to show us humans as primarily constituted and enhanced by our efforts to interpret, make sense of, symbolize, and assess our relations with otherness. In this context, the other is identified with the many worlds that we inhabit, i.e., the organic or natural systems that surround us, the constructed and symbolic worlds of ideas and thoughts, the physical, constructed world of social institutions, and the internal, psychological realms that also help to configure our sense of selfhood. One direct implication is that we humans ought always to be expected to invent, create, or construct viable worlds of meaning and significance. Here the Hedeggeriain notion of truth as "revelatory" is implied, in which a partial, open-ended, and tentative epistemology will always accompany one's interpretive practices. As we human encounter others and ourselves in a host of ways, we are guided by an interpretive mandate, which compels us to derive meaning, purpose and quality to our existence as *homo religious*.

With an emphasis upon the necessity of the process of valuing, religious discourse can continue to inspire some of us to think and hope beyond what seems immediate and available. Yet given the realities that face us in the latter twentieth century, we may very well ask whether religious valuing can help us overcome some of the nihilism and spiritual malaise that presently strikes at us. The existentialists (and most recently, the poststructuralists) are right in arguing that a metaphysical grounding of our beliefs is not necessary, yet for some of us, the simple ahistorical acceptance of the absurd is itself absurd and very dangerous. This, of course, does not mean a revulsion to the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities that assail us daily—such qualities are to be lived and not resolved or controlled through tyrannical reason or slavish emotions. We remain open to the mystery of existence, yet, at the same time, increasingly critique those forms of social relations, cultural formations, and ideational systems that would deny others and us a basic dignified existence.

Human (Con)textuality and Cultural Transformations

More definitively than most other humanistic discourses, the religious discipline has demonstrated that the process of valuing is an inevitable and necessary dimension of being human. I thus encourage contemporary theorists (especially poststructuralists and cultural critics) to begin emphasizing the import of religious valuing in ongoing attempts to think beyond the ills of modernity. Religious valuing implies that we humans are capable of reflecting on aspects of our personality or subjectivity, which for most of us is constituted as some "perceived" unity; that we also desire a sense of the whole; and, beyond this, that we seek to provide standards of virtue to the various tasks to which we apply ourselves as we relate to others. This latter component often involves constructing an assorted set of judgments that unifies our knowledge of "what is" with our expectations of "what ought to be." In short, religious valuing provides an integrative understanding of human desires and perceptions that help to constitute us as relational, becoming entities. In the process, we are concerned with posing and answering the following key questions: What is true? What ought to be? How ought we to act? What may be good for us? For what may we hope? Why live at all?

These assumptions lead me to suggest that at least minimally when we think about religious valuing, we are acknowledging a fundamental human propensity towards life that features distinctive cognitive and emotive elements. Uniting cognition and affectivity as inseparable elements of religious valuing departs from empiricist approaches that focus exclusively on religious knowledge. My approach to understanding religious valuing is directed against tendencies to seek the "essence" of "true" religiosity in a faith that is understood only as a divine gift, or in a belief system that provides a normative vocabulary for its adherents. I also wish to challenge those explanations of religious valuing as merely a by-product of social and psychological processes, a by-product that has, at best, instrumental value, or is, at worse, a superstitious survival of earlier times. Consequently, what I identify as religious valuing ought not to be viewed as an objective philosophy, nor conflated with social institutions, nor even reduced to subjective experiences. Indeed, cur-

rent theories of subjectivism — whether that of cultural relativism, psychologism, Freudian and Neo-Freudian psychoanalysis, behaviorism, Sartrian existentialism, or linguistic analyses — can only begin to hint at the richness of religious realities. The complex and diverse range of religious phenomena itself suggest that any reductionistic approach to religion will itself be challenged by certain historical and empirical realities.

While religious valuing cannot be reduced to epistemological certitude, neither can it be divorced from cultural manifestations. At most, religious valuing suggests a mode of being "human" in the world; this may be variously described as a particular pattern of discernible behaviors, a distinct set of commitments, a life-stance, or even one's basic response and openness to life in its varied historical and cultural manifestations. This lived reality is ontologically prior to any one particular expression in creed, ritual, and group interaction. At the same time it is inseparable from these cultural expressions and cannot be distilled out and objectified. What this means is that essentially the notion of religion is inseparable from the notion of culture. Although we can no longer presume that the meaning of the totality of human experience or of cultural life is possible, we can continue to construct appropriate symbols, in language, and action, to express our reflective comprehensions and emotional commitments to certain forms of cultural life. This is what religious valuing or thinking can offer to social and academic life in the present era, and it is one dimension of cultural critique that must be acknowledged and appreciated by others. Here we are lead away from a modernist view that demands an "All or Nothing" epistemological framework and towards a poststructuralist one that takes into account our very complex historicity and radical relatedness, and all the possible nuances associated with that term.

If religious valuing is to be able to assume a meaningful place in contemporary culture, it must continue to provide sympathetic understandings of (and critical responses to) the worlds we live in, without necessarily clashing with other forms of human knowledge, or either withdrawing into a self-serving universalism. Poststructuralist religious valuing must be versatile enough to adapt to the ever-changing cultural situations; yet it must also be conceptually sophisticated and symbolically rich in content so that we are able to comprehend in a more positive light the dizziness resulting from the complexity and multiplicities of life in all its myriad splendor and pain. As indicated above, it is increasingly unsatisfactory to view religious valuing as a separable module of human experience because the need for meaningful commitment intrudes into virtually every contemporary reflection. As long as certain configurations of the world exist—what some of us would call asymmetrical social and power relations—there is the need for alternative cultural values and ethical mandates. The recognition that theories do not yield truth but constitute different, competing versions of reality that are tied to specific social interests is central to cultural critique. Thus, some religious scriptors dream of different practices, of expanded configurations of relationality, of new worlds—holding up a historicizing mirror to society that compels a recognition of its transitory and fallible nature, such that more people realize that "what is" can be disassembled and improved. With our emphasis upon the necessity of valuing implicit in

religious textuality, we continue to inspire cultural critics to think and to hope beyond what seems immediate and available. Raising the questions of "What if?" or "Why not?" or even "Could it be?" is of paramount importance in the postmodern era. Either we at least attend to these questions, or we cease to use our human potential and artfulness to construct and interpret more benevolent worlds. What those worlds turn out to be depends on how much we become dreamers of values that enrich and sustain our constructed humanity and interdependent existence. As Rilke says of our artful, material lives: "O Earth: invisible! What, if not transformation, is your urgent command"?[12]

Notes

[1] See my fuller discussion of religion's engagement with poststructuralist and feminist philosophies in Carol Wayne White, *Poststructuralism, Feminism, and Religion: Triangulating Positions* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002).

[2] Equally important here is that religion is often reduced to the insights of empirically-driven epistemologies which can view it only from one of several possible perspectives when it is viewed exclusively as a specific social institution or cultural apparatus (which accentuates only its function in society).

[3] Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Random House, 1954); Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Response to its Cultured Critics* (1799), trans. Terrence N. Tice (Richmond: John Knox, 1969). Schleiermacher is often described as the father of modern theology because of the direction he gave theology towards reflection on experience. Writing to an Enlightenment audience held in sway by the reasonableness of Deism, Scheiermacher attempts to place God at the center of human concerns by insisting that there are certain universal human experiences that cannot help but raise the question of God.

[4] Mark C. Taylor, *Erring/A/Theology* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1986) 22.

[5] Taylor, *Erring/A/Theology*, 30.

[6] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Noonday P, 1988).

[7] James B. Ashbrooke and Carl Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet* (Cleveland: Pilgrim P, 1997).

[8] For current debates, see Elliot Sober, ed., *Conceptual Issues in Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1994); Michael Bradie, *The Secret Chain* (Albany: SUNY P, 1994); Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse, eds., *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999); Paul Thompson, *Issues in Evolutionary Ethics* (Albany: SUNY P, 1995); Paul Lawrence Farber, *The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics* (Berkeley: U California P, 1998); Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Why We are, The Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (New York: Vintage,1995). James Grier Miller, *Living Systems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978); Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 1989); Theodosius Dobzhansky, *Mankind Evolving* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1962);

Theodosius Dobzhansky, *Human Culture: a Moment in Evolution* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983); Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988); Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology; The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2000).

[9] Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature, God* (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 2002), 71.

[10] Konstantin Kolenda, *Religion Without God* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1976) Chapter 3.

[11] Emily Dickinson, "Poem 657," *Complete Poems of Emily Dickenson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957).

[12] Ranier Marie Rilke, "The Ninth Elegy" "Duino Elegies," *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 203.

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