



The Dehellenization of the Religious Imagination

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I. THE UNSETTLING OF A SETTLED QUESTION

Just after the death of William James, in an article entitled “Empiricism and Platonism in the Philosophy of Religion,” Ernst Troeltsch drew a sharp contrast between James’s empiricism and the Platonic “type of philosophy of religion which is traditional on the Continent of Europe.”¹ Troeltsch pronounced James’s empiricism an important and non-European interpretation of religion—one which offered several correctives for the European discussion of religion, correctives ignored, Troeltsch thought, only at the peril of European philosophy of religion. But Troeltsch decided that on the whole he could not follow James’s pluralism and empiricism; he had to stay with Platonistic rationalism and monism, and, of course, in this he typified the Europeans. He also set the course for American students of religion, who—except for an episode of “empirical theology” and then one form of process theology—not only ignored the Jamesian precedent, but continued to ape the Europeans, especially the Germans.

Now, many decades after Troeltsch’s 1912 article, new social and intellectual developments may press American students of religion to reexamine the choice between empiricism and Platonism, and to ask whether to take again the turn Troeltsch took or to find new reasons for following James’s still-thorny route. The developments prompting a reconsideration of James’s American option are those social developments which have moved us all closer to pluralism. As communication increases, we are forced to live closer to people adhering to a variety of world religions, to people representing different class, economic, political, national, and even moral loyalties. Further, it is becoming all too clear to us that our thought itself is largely a creature of our multiplying contexts of communication. To put it another way, our thought does not just lie in our many contexts of communication, but our thought is composed of those contexts. This is an inescapable condition, humiliating both to our sense of individuality and to our desire to reach beyond plurality to something uniting everything. Further

¹Ernst Troeltsch, “Empiricism and Platonism in the Philosophy of Religion,” *Harvard Theological Review* 5 (1912) 404.

still, communication itself is the subject of new interest; the replacement of the industrial age by the electronic age can be interpreted as the movement from the fascination with reproduction to the fascination with communication. Consequently, we focus even more tightly on the new plurality of our contexts of communication. All these developments have contributed to a new sense of pluralism which, in turn, has had an inevitable effect on our thinking about religion. To

take a personal example, twenty years ago at the University of Chicago it was sometimes thought odd that I should want to write a dissertation which proposed the relativity of the revelation of Jesus; whereas today I am in conversation with an orthodox Lutheran theologian writing a book on christology, who tells me that it is intellectually irresponsible to think about christology apart from a serious and appreciative consideration of the savior figures of other world religions.

This is a shock to our religious systems—both our psychic systems and our theoretical systems. It may have been easy for James to ask, “Why may not the world be a sort of republican banquet...where all the qualities of being respect one another’s personal sacredness, yet sit at the common table of space and time?”² But most of us experience the kind of trauma described by Shirley Jackson Case in autobiographical reflections a full twenty-two years after James’s death. Narrating his movement from liberalism to some sort of 1932 postliberalism, Case says, “From concentration upon reduction and simplicity we turned to the study of variety and complexity. And soon we found ourselves groping about in a vast labyrinth.”³ Case was a person who had thought it would be “an irreparable disaster to be forced to abandon belief in the normative quality and eternal validity of at least a modicum of traditional dogma. The Heraclitean postulate that all is flux could surely not be true in the realm of Christian verities; somewhere the mind must come to rest in its search for dogmatic certainty.”⁴ Then Case realized he had been infected by the sense of variety and complexity. Still, he went back to biblical studies, then to a study of religious experience in order to reacquire religious certainty. Finally, though, Case adopted what he called “a policy of aggression”: “If today’s ‘truth’ should prove unsafe tomorrow, might it not be wiser to move forward to what seemed tomorrow’s strategic position, even though this might have to be evacuated the next day in advancing to a new stand?...Truth was not an endowment in perpetuity but a springboard from which to gather momentum for another leap into the unknown.”⁵ So Case took the Jamesian option; and there have been over the past half century more and more cases like Case’s. For Case in 1932 the pluralistic and relativistic option was more live than it had been for Troeltsch; given what has happened since then, it is likely that Troeltsch’s dilemma must be faced again. In originally stating that dilemma as a choice between Platonism and empiricism, Troeltsch raised the choice to enormous proportions. Not only could he

²As quoted and developed into an American metaphor by Martin E. Marty, “A Sort of Republican Banquet,” *The Journal of Religion* 59 (1979) 387.

³Shirley Jackson Case, “Education in Liberalism,” *Contemporary American Theology*, ed. Vergillius Ferm (New York: Round Table, 1932) 112.

⁴Ibid., 115.

⁵Ibid., 116.

say that “the whole of European philosophy and science stands essentially under the influence of Platonic rationalism.”⁶ He also could say that James’s empirical approach to religion is “the first thoroughgoing contribution from America to the philosophy of religion.”⁷

The Platonic procedure avoids pluralism and offers us the security of an eternal and universal truth by showing how to “transcend the merely actual through the demonstration that, seething and developing within it, is a rationally necessary conceptual element.”⁸ While this tendency has dominated European arts and sciences, it has controlled the philosophy of religion

and theology, which, Troeltsch says, “is throughout Platonic and Neoplatonic in nature.”⁹ Troeltsch supports this rather broad generalization by tracing the high points of the philosophy of religion, from Origen and Augustine, to mysticism, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Lessing, Herder, Schelling, and Hegel. Troeltsch stops to consider at greater length Kant, who, despite his skepticism, was intent to establish that the actual and finite mind was connected with “reason in general.” Kant’s Platonizing effects on modern theology were enormous.

James, Troeltsch says, occupies exactly the opposite position; James’s “radical empiricism” can really be read as radical antiplatonism. James’s position grows out of British empiricism. In particular, it grows out of John Locke (who opposed Descartes, that “founder of the modern Platonism of natural science”) and out of the subsequent work of Hume, John Stuart Mill, and Auguste Comte.¹⁰ But James was an unusual empiricist, giving empirical validity to the full stream of experience, including value experience. This, in turn, meant that ethical, religious, and metaphysical hypotheses refer to a kind of “sense” of values and have, thereby, an empirical status. However, James’s recognition of the objective foundation of ethical, religious, and metaphysical hypotheses did not put him back in the camp of the Platonists, because he treated these hypotheses as quite without any absolute unity or necessity. The hypotheses were nothing more than a short-hand about irremediably plural sense experiences. Further, James finally rejected the positivisms of Comte and Herbert Spencer for exactly the same reason: those positivistic empiricisms were crypto-Platonisms, placing prime confidence in their spare, necessary, and “scientific” laws, excluding all sense experience not confirmed by those laws. James’s principal rebellion against these positivists was to treat all religious phenomena, no matter how bizarre and “supernaturalistic” (that is, nonpositivistic), as possibly important sources of truth.

In recent years, recognizing the inescapable importance of pluralism, a group of philosophers (together with a few literary critics and a theologian or two) have done much to restore and to amplify James’s type of approach. And it may be only a matter of time before the spirit represented by these people will reenter the philosophy of religion, theology, and the general study of religion.

⁶Troeltsch, “Empiricism and Platonism,” 404.

⁷Ibid., 401.

⁸Ibid., 404.

⁹Ibid., 405.

¹⁰Ibid., 409-10.

This seems even more likely, because the work of these people has been unexpectedly confirmed by people from a surprising quarter—biblical theology.

In the discussion which follows, I will portray the choice between James’s empiricism and pluralism and Plato’s rationalism and monism as a choice between two kinds of imagination. As Troeltsch noted, the heart of the Platonic approach lies in its confidence in a kind of imagination. Platonism understood that the rationally necessary concepts were “thought-engendered intuitions and abstractions of the genuinely ideal.”¹¹ James, by contrast, not only doubted that we know any such universal and necessary ideals; he simply, Troeltsch said, “takes the facts solely as facts.”¹² I will call the first “the Hellenistic imagination” and the second “the

interpretive imagination” and the movement from the first to the second, “the dehellenization of the imagination.” I should note that I will not refer to the Jamesian imagination as the empirical imagination for two reasons: first, “empirical” is too readily associated with the positivist tradition which James opposed; second, given those associations, “empirical” fails to suggest that for James “facts” are not remote objects, but are relations between subjects and objects, and these relations are interpretations with objective and subjective poles.

I will suggest that the interpretive imagination indicates something new for twentieth century Christian theological anthropology, with significant effects for theology—in America, at least.

II. THE RESURGENCE OF THE INTERPRETIVE IMAGINATION

The new proponents of the interpretive imagination are interested in imagination per se. Like the Platonists, their accounts of understanding reject both an utterly private, or solipsistic, mind, and they accept that something outside the mind is imaged in the mind. But while the proponents of the Hellenistic imagination seek to consult a reality independent of the contingencies of place and circumstance, the proponents of the interpretive imagination feel that they must live without such privileged consultation, and look instead merely to the chain of historical events in the past. The functions of the two imaginations are quite different as a result. The Hellenists seek to imitate in historical practice what they have learned from their visits abroad, in the eternal, universal, and Hellenistic world of ideas or any of its avatars—be they non-historical “science,” non-historical structures of human mind and emotion, or be they the non-historical and eternal logos of the non-historical nature of God. Theirs is a mimetic imagination. But the proponents of the interpretive imagination, having only the present individual in contact with its past, can do nothing but interpret the past—that is, relate themselves to the past by seeing it in their own way.

Among the most important of the new proponents of the interpretive imagination are four philosophers: Richard Rorty, Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Bernstein. They all work primarily out of the Anglo-American, rather than the Continental, tradition of philosophy; further, their

¹¹Ibid., 404.

¹²Ibid., 409.

recent work is more American than British, resembling so much the philosophical tendency of James and Dewey that it properly can be classified as neopragmatism. Their specific accomplishments in recent writings are to ferret out the still-active Platonisms in common thought, to extend and sharpen the pragmatic paradigm, and to address certain important problems still unresolved in the contours of thought suggested by the pragmatic paradigm—such as the problem of how within relativism to avoid meaninglessness or the problem of how to maintain significant intellectual interaction amid the plurality of incompatible stances permitted by pragmatism.

Although it was not the first of the neo-pragmatic writings, Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) did bring neopragmatism to the attention of nonphilosophers. In an arch and sometimes ironic manner, Rorty pronounced dead the role of the philosopher. To

witness a group of academic philosophers discussing that book could remind a theologian of scenes almost twenty years earlier, when the “death of God theology” hit theology. With a guilty satisfaction the theologian could secretly realize: for centuries the philosophers were the ones who brought the harsh news of the real world to others; now the message has come to them, delivered by one of their own. Rorty argued that behind the urbanity of the positivists and the linguistic analysts there lurked the pious and Cartesian assumption that the imagination was still a mirror to something truly real, something impervious to the swirl of disconnected and apparently arbitrary historical events. Rorty countered with the assertion that there is nothing solid and non-historical beneath it all, at least not anything we can know. We have only history; and history is merely a sequence of interpretations, interpretations piled on interpretations piled on interpretations. To compound the problem, Rorty gallingly announced that our momentous effort at exact inquiry is, more than anything else, like a mere parlor conversation between our incommensurable interpretations. Only later, in 1982, with the publication of his *Consequences of Pragmatism*, which was a collection of his earlier essays generally unknown by the nonphilosopher, did it become clear that Rorty had a method to order this otherwise hapless conversation. Rorty, like an American prodigal, returned to William James and John Dewey to recover the pragmatic criterion. The contributor to conversation, Rorty said, would make a point (in two senses of the word) if his or her interpretation indicated some palpable effect.

It is not the case that Rorty had that much new to say, for almost a century earlier a group of Americans sitting in the living rooms of Cambridge called themselves (with the same arch spirit) “The Metaphysical Club,” rejected idealism and positivism, and invented pragmatism. But Charles Sanders Peirce, Chauncey Wright, James, and the few others could not then foresee that their century’s tides of science and of the speculative spirit would wash onto the twentieth century, drowning it with decades of dogma, dyeing into twentieth century minds new beliefs in supra-historical realities. So today, Rorty’s impact is explained not so much by his originality as by the mounting undercurrent of pluralism, pulling back those nineteenth century tides, allowing other shores to show and to receive again the flag of pragmatism.

The nonphilosophical public has become aware of more books which

fortify the Rortian thesis. Nelson Goodman’s 1982 *Ways of Worldmaking* argues, in effect, that the real world we know is a world we have made through our own acts of interpretation. But what is it that is being interpreted then? Why, says Goodman, earlier worlds interpreted from still earlier worlds. Are we then being deluded? No, Goodman says, because our worlds are truly real; there is nothing more real that casts a shadow of judgment on our interpreted worlds. Hilary Putnam’s 1981 *Reason, Truth and History* argues that our values and reasons and truths arise out of our history; and that that history is created, not from an archetype beyond space and time, but from our growing tradition of interactions. Richard Bernstein’s 1983 *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* argues that the interpreted world, rather than any objectively true world, is as deep as we can go; and that certain postmodern European thinkers, like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas, share that view, though perhaps take it less strictly. These writings are all committed to the interpretive imagination as the faculty out of which we create our words, worlds, histories, or nonobjective pictures of reality. They all agree in rejecting the Hellenistic imagination, which would insist that reality is found only in a Word beyond history, leaving to history only the job of

imitating that nonhistorical reality.

A Hellenist like Paul Tillich will feel that the interpretive imagination is a counsel of despair, leaving us, finally, with no meaning. But Putnam and Bernstein, in particular, are committed to preventing this conclusion. They argue that we do not live with a forced option between Hellenism and meaninglessness; we are not in a position where the denial of the Hellenistic imagination leaves us with nihilism. All four of these philosophers advance pragmatism as the third option. As Bernstein would say, “beyond objectivism and relativism” there is a pragmatic option. We are not caught in a criterionless situation, for we still can test our particular conclusions in practice, in relation to our other conclusions, and in relation to the conclusions of others. If in those relations the conclusions work, well then, they are true. If they don’t, well then, they are false. Gather together in some great conversation, these philosophers have suggested, and try your particular views on each other. If your conclusions accord well with the opinions of others or convert others to agreement, they are no longer merely private and thereby meaningless. Admittedly, they are not objective, absolute, universal, or eternal, either. But then, the loss of that blessing from beyond may be what it means to live in our time. It is a less secure, a colder world. But it is the only world which some people can accept honestly.

III. THE BAPTISM OF THE INTERPRETIVE IMAGINATION

Cornel West of Yale Divinity School has accepted what I am calling the interpretive imagination, but has maintained that for a Christian, or for a participant in any explicitly religious tradition, the philosophical version is not enough. He develops the positive meaning of this position in his 1982 *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Because he accepts the interpretive imagination, West makes no claims for the universal validity of the specific theological conclusions of his book, nor does he apologize for the relativism which such a denial might seem to invite. He begins his interpretation, not as a

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bourgeois, university individualist, but as one working out of his own normative history, which is Christian and Afro-American. On the other hand, even though it is his own history with its own theological implications, West invites its practical and critical evaluation. Further, West insists that “the conversation” as it has been described by the philosophers, is an inadequate metaphor, for it involves the history of ideas but not the history of actions. Pragmatic application and testing for West involves a sociopolitical-economic history as well. From the Marxists West takes a commitment to test and to apply one’s notions in material history as well as in spiritual history. In this West is fully in accord with the classical American philosophers, James, Dewey, and Alfred North Whitehead, who affirmed a mind-body monism, involving religion in both mind and body, rather than a mind-body dualism which confined religion to the life of the mind.

West’s step in the development of an interpretive imagination suggests, but does not spell out, a new program in a Christian or Judeo-Christian theology. I will take a few uncertain steps in this direction, all dependent on the notions set forth above.

First, the theological baptism of the interpretive imagination fulfills the first rule for a theology: that it should have something to say that will not otherwise be said or politely go out of business. A Christian interpretive imagination would naturally say something more than the philosopher, as represented by those above, is inclined to say. It places the interpreter not within

a merely personal history, and not merely within anyone among a range of particular social histories, but always and necessarily within a Judeo-Christian history. Of course, any use of the interpretive imagination will work out of some particular social history, whether or not the interpreter styles himself or herself as an autonomous individualist or not. As Putnam said, all people get definitions both of truth and of value from their history. In their specification of the nature of the pragmatic conversation the philosophers speak as though the values of the bourgeois, university community of intellectuals are sufficient for their lives. But while that history and those values may be adequate for the philosophical community, on descriptive grounds alone it must be said that they are not adequate for the Christian community. A Christian has come from a distinct and biblical history, in which a God is thought to act and where that God has committed its people to action in material events, as well as to the avowal of beliefs. Consequently, the pragmatic conversation of the Christian suggests something traditionally called a God and a heavy involvement in material history (in moral practice in social, economic, political, and personal spheres), as well as the involvement in intellectual and aesthetic conversation. This makes the Christian interpretive imagination distinct.

Second, the Christian interpretive imagination, by contrast to the Christian Hellenistic imagination, adds a new seriousness to the meaning of tradition and the church. For the interpretive imagination there is no access to any saving reality outside the course of historical events, there is no heavenly Spirit waiting to join us in a contemplative retreat from history, there is no Savior from beyond history waiting to rescue us from history, there is no heavenly abode to receive us after we die. All religious powers are now seen as powers in and with history, but not under or above history. If history fails, we suffer. There is no recourse.

Within this history tradition is important because it represents the chain of past interpretations to which the Christian must refer. The church is important because it not only refers back to previous interpretations, but creates the new interpretations which fuel the growth of tradition. Admittedly, today the terms tradition and church must be much more broadly defined than they typically have been, for the real Christian history and its real interpreters have far exceeded what is conventionally meant by tradition and church. The real Christian tradition now includes artists and scientists and any number of other ordinary prophets. Nevertheless, living without the Hellenistic imagination, the Christian interpretive imagination must look to history, to its chain of “traditions” as avowed by “churches,” and to that alone for religious succour. There is no hope beyond that: it is traditions and churches all the way down.

When viewed from the standpoint of one subscribing to the Hellenistic imagination, there is a harshness in the outlook of a Christian who takes *that* seriously the tradition, the church, and God’s action through tradition and church. The Christian Hellenist of the imagination can diminish that commitment by looking to a God who lives above the historical plane. Within history the Christian Hellenist may beat his or her chest in recognition of sin, may ask forgiveness from a judging God, may be self-abasing and God-adoring, but these are only local and temporary concerns. Overriding these self-abasements within history is that sublime confidence which makes all the difference—a confidence which comes from contact with an unsullied and eternal God beyond history, and a confidence that one will live beyond history by and by. Ironically, the Christian Hellenist, having all this, tends to treat those who disagree as self-centered.

But from the standpoint of one subscribing to the interpretive imagination, there is little choice. We have built the Christian tradition from a chain of interpretations, beginning with the community of Hebrews, passing to the early Christians, then to the life of the church, and then to a more generalized Christianity of the modern era. The Christian identity is the identity which arises from accepting that tradition as one's own, from claiming to belong to the tradition and to the church. The Christian faith is the faith that working with this tradition, work even adding to it through new interpretation, holds the highest hope for the future. God language is introduced to express the inexplicable power and the value inhering in that glowing tradition, the power and the value which give meaning to one's life.

Third, the interpretive imagination corresponds rather neatly with the recent traditio-historical method of Hebrew Bible criticism, extended by some people into analysis of the New Testament. Tradition history examines the social and literary process by which a text came to be in the form it has come to be in; this examination is directed both to oral and to written phases of what became the canonical text. For purposes of the present discussion, the importance of tradition history is its assumption that the living, interpreting community creates the religion, and that the text is one outcome of this community interpretation. If the traditio-historical case is accurate, it would indicate that the Christian proponents of the interpretive imagination, while perhaps antiquated, are

at least speaking for an ancient tradition—a tradition more ancient and more biblical than the tradition behind the Hellenistic imagination.

Although an earlier version of tradition history was powerfully set forth in the third, fourth, and fifth decades of this century by Shailer Mathews and Shirley Jackson Case, both members of the "Chicago School" of theology, what we know as tradition history became theologically important in Europe only after the publication of Gerhard von Rad's 1938 essay, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch." There von Rad argues that the Hexateuch came about by means of ever-amplifying re-expressions of the creed exemplified in Deuteronomy 26, re-expressions of the faith in the divine redemption of Israel from Egypt to the settlement in Canaan. From spoken creed, to larger oral and literary units, to the four sources, to the final redactions leading to the Hexateuch, the story was told and edited from different locations in space, time, and history. Von Rad opposes this historicist and interpretation-centered account to what he calls "the high-handed methods of pneumatic theology."¹³ In 1957, von Rad repeated his methodological thesis, arguing that form criticism together with a historicist rendering of the development of the Hebrew Bible has made quite inadequate any effort to understand Hebrew religion in terms of theological doctrines.¹⁴ According to von Rad, each generation believed: 1) that it must understand itself as acting largely in continuity with the Israel of the past and with its redemption story; 2) that it must understand itself as acting also partly in discontinuity with the Israel of the past, needing to reshape the redemption story to answer the problems distinct to its own place in history. Hence, "a law of theological dialectic seems to have presided, a dimly or clearly felt need to hold the transmitted material in suspension, and to correct it by means of accounts expressed in a strangely contradictory fashion."¹⁵

Twenty years later, in 1977, *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, edited by Douglas Knight, was published. It aimed to solidify and amplify tradition history. Von Rad is

acknowledged as the pioneer of the method, and Martin Noth's *A History of the Pentateuchal Traditions* is cited as a prime illustration of the method at work. Douglas Knight, writing what is perhaps the central essay, argues that "tradition process creates new meaning,"¹⁶ as the community of Hebrews reinterprets the past tradition in order to meet its new needs. Knight contrasts the traditio-historical method with efforts by W. Pannenberg and R. Rentorff to equate revelation with history or by K. Barth to define revelation as the self-revelation of God in Christocentric terms. Knight is careful, however, not to equate revelation with the tradition-making process, and to hold for the "ultimate mysteriousness" of God, above and beyond the tradition. (But how, one might ask, is the mysteriousness of God known, except in the fact of the unexpected evolution of tradition?) Robert B. Laurin notes elsewhere in this

¹³Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 3.

¹⁴Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962) 1. v, vi.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁶Douglas A. Knight, "Revelation through Tradition," *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 169.

anthology that the early Christian church's use of the Hebrew scriptures also can be explained by the tradition history method; for the early church creatively reinterpreted the Hebrew tradition to address the new events and needs experienced in the church's own life.¹⁷

This brief glimpse at the traditio-historical method has been introduced to demonstrate the continuity between biblical perspectives and what is here called the interpretive imagination. The traditio-historical method denies that an imagination of concepts is an adequate model for understanding Hebrew religion or scripture. All the more, it would have to deny that the Hellenistic imagination of eternal truths is an adequate model for understanding the Hebrew religion or scripture. On the contrary, the traditio-historical method must affirm that this religion and scripture were created by an interpretive imagination, one which looked to its past tradition, reinterpreted and amplified that tradition in ways which enabled it to meet new needs, and thus created its religion through this process. None of this is to deny that the divine was active in this process. It is to deny, however, that the Hebrew was anything but utterly dependent on its tradition and its community's present interpretive efforts. Take away that history, and the Hebrew was finished. Through most of its ancient life, there is little evidence that the Hebrew had recourse to a world "deeper" than the world of history. When its history went well, Israel went well; when its history went poorly, Israel went poorly. There was no recourse.

¹⁷Robert A. Laurin, "Tradition and Canon," *Tradition and Theology*, ed. Knight.