

## *Reason and Revelation in the Third Millennium*

*David Walsh*

THE PROBLEM OF the politicization of our discourse is that no suggestion can be taken at face value. Advocacy of change is presumed to carry a political motivation and represent a particular interest or point of view. The burden is particularly onerous when the proposal is intended to provide a corrective to the received perspective, as is the case when the need for sustained attention to revelation is mooted. It is presumed that this is merely a ploy for representation by the religion lobby, rather than a proposal to be evaluated on its own merits. A secular cultural setting might indeed prove quite hospitable to a religious angle, just as it accommodates racial, ethnic, sexual orientations on a pluralist basis. What cannot be done is of course to challenge the exclusivity of secular or liberal principles that constitute the dominant public horizon of understanding.

Anyone who would advance the significance of revelation within the public conversation must avoid the pitfall of ghettoization. To accept categorization

as one of many partial perspectives may perhaps be welcomed by the secular world, but it is at the same time to be neutralized of all significant challenge for that world. It would be far better to remain a despised minority than to win acceptance as a tolerated but non-serious one. Permission to coexist with the secular world is only granted when the opinion leaders have been able to ensure subordination to the dominant intellectual culture. A subordinate minority is a permanent minority. Religious understanding is in this sense permanently blocked from challenging the secular presumptions in principle. In accepting entry into a secularly constituted world, we surrender the right to any radical questioning of the presuppositions of that world.

Ironically, this also means that the world of secular learning loses the difference that a theologically grounded perspective might be able to contribute to it. The problem is a familiar paradox of pluralism. A true plurality of viewpoints is blocked because all who are admitted to the dialogue have already surrendered in advance any claim to authoritative truth. Pluralism increases homogenization under the guise of diversity. Holders of non-relativist perspectives are very often confirmed in their suspicion that pluralism is merely a cover for a more

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DAVID WALSH is Professor of Politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He is the author of *The Third Millennium: Reflections on Faith and Reason (1999)* and *Guarded by Mystery: Meaning in a Postmodern Age (1999)*.

subtle form of conformity. Secular nihilism is seen as the real force behind the demands to abandon the claim to transcendent truth. This of course is not an inevitable outcome. It is simply that true pluralism requires a deeper foundation in truth than is available in the indifference of the secular world view.

The obstacles in principle to a serious integration of religion within public discourse are thus formidable. But the situation is made more challenging by the factual difficulties that stand in the way. Even with the best will in the world for religious inclusiveness there are two problems that must be overcome. First is the uncertain state of scholarship which, while it has progressively enlarged the boundaries of the disciplines, has still not reached a stable assessment of the place of religion within such obvious fields as history, literature, or politics. Scholarship may be somewhat further ahead of the secular consensus, but it has not yet arrived at any truly inclusive consensus of its own. We may be more inclined to admit that the Pilgrims were guided by religious motives, but we are still not quite ready to grant the plausibility of such an inspiration. Religious explanations may not be excluded but they are not as self-evident as material ones. The role of religion in politics has gained new salience but it is still regarded as somewhat exotic.

To this uncertain state of scholarship we must add as a second difficulty the uncertain mindset of many of the religiously sympathetic. Having imbibed so much of the secular mentality, we are loath to impose our beliefs on others. Living in separation from the surrounding culture is a far more comfortable position than the struggle to engage and direct that world. The ghetto, like all prisons, becomes home to its inmates. This is especially the case when we have lost our ability to live life on the outside. Believers of all faiths seem somewhat

helpless when it comes to addressing the secular world in which they live. It is not so much that the language of secular learning and society is so strange, for we live and use it every day. The problem is we have lost the key that would allow us to translate or mediate between the two. In particular we lack a means of challenging the secular world in its most settled assumptions and thereby opening a crack by which the light of transcendence might penetrate.

What follows is a list of directions that might be used to break the stalemate. They contain no hidden agenda and are innocent of presuppositions except for the one that is indispensable—a willingness to think problems through on the most fundamental level. It is not necessary to be a Christian to recognize the logic of Christ. One cannot participate in the gift of eternal life without such faith, but one can certainly apprehend the outline of what is entailed. That is, the revelation of transcendent Being can occur only through the advent of transcendent Being within time. Only God can reveal God. No intermediaries, no tangible representative, not the cosmos in its depths or heights, can communicate that which lies Beyond all. The transcendent can only be known through itself, through its self-revelation, because it is that which cannot be reached from within existence. This is the intimation that is recognized in all of the inchoate human quest for the ground that is not itself a ground. But it is only through the advent of Christ that the structure of the experience itself becomes fully transparent: that there would not even be a quest without the gift of intuited revelation and that the quest would not reach its goal without the answering response from Being itself. The transcendent is what lies beyond all finite capacity; it can be known only because of its self-disclosure within time. Once that has occurred then the event is definitive. No further revela-

tion is possible because nothing more can be revealed than the fullness of transcendent divinity. It is the true turning point of history, whether acknowledged in our periodization or not, because the limiting differentiation of human existence is constituted by that boundary. In this sense we still live within the millennium of Christ.

What follows is not intended to suggest Christian triumphalism either in relation to the modern world or in the other world religions. We are far from a dogmatomachy of spiritual truths. This is the one great positive feature of our contemporary moment. Our temptation is perhaps the opposite one of yielding to the fluid exchangeability of all symbolic forms, and thereby rendering the whole conversation superfluous. No, the openness of the moment suggests a far deeper possibility of true conversation based on mutual recognition of the revelatory source of all movements of the spirit. To the extent that they are genuine, whether couched in religious terms or hidden within secular discourse, all meditative unfoldings have their source in the stirrings that come from beyond the boundary of immanent experience. In that enterprise there are no superfluous developments.

Far from the differentiations rendering the more compact illuminations obsolete, they are dependent on the earlier forms for their elaboration. Without the Old Testament the self-understanding of the New Testament would hardly have been possible. Moreover, in the irreducible mystery of plural revelations within history, differentiation does not result in the transformation of the earlier forms. The persistence of the earlier spiritual traditions within time enables the contemporary conversation within space to be engaged. It is perhaps not too much to suggest that we are on the brink of a new recognition of the plurality of spiritual outbursts as itself one of the providential

patterns of revelation. To the extent that Being is beyond the grasp of all finite perspectives, its inexhaustibility can only be reflected through the richness of the historically emergent perspectives on it. This includes even the perspective of absence that has prevailed in our secular modernity.

#### *Directions*

1. *Theological character of all symbolisms of order.* A comparative perspective on world civilizations alerts us to the peculiar character of modern secular society. It is alone in human history in establishing a publicly authoritative order without reference to the divine. The exceptional nature of a secular age raises the interesting question of whether it is the exception that proves the rule, and perhaps confirms it implicitly. Is the relationship of human order to a divine reality beyond it an indispensable feature of experience or an accidental historical pattern? Do we really live in a secular age that is capable of living entirely within an anthropocentric universe? Or has our civilization merely found a way of concealing its relationship to transcendent reality? These are questions of great philosophical and public import which, in many ways, have defined the central intellectual preoccupation of the modern world.

2. *Greek discovery of reason is the result of openness toward the transcendent.* The fundamental character of reflection in the past hundred years has directed us back to the roots of the Western intellectual tradition. The received narrative in which the advent of secular rationalism begins with Greek speculation has encountered a challenge. A closer reading of the sources reveals the extent to which the Greeks had no such intention in mind. Their discovery of *nous*, or reason, occurred within the context of a meditative search for the divine ground and thereby

tied *logos* to the point of ultimate contact between the human and the divine. Reason in the Greek world is anchored firmly within the context of the self-revelation of Being. Our own complaints about the instrumentalization of reason still carry the reminder of that substantive rationality, for reason directed toward the ultimate ground of existence still represents our true foundation. We are directed toward the rereading of the philosophic opening precisely because of the crisis of reason to which our age of reason has led. That awareness is perhaps the most powerful evidence of the truth of the Greek acknowledgement of the revelatory character of reason. *Nous* is divine and human *nous*, to the extent that it is rational, consists in the recognition of the derivative character of all human knowledge.

3. *Paradoxically, the contraction of reason is the result of its Christian absorption.* No one in the Greek or Roman worlds talked about “natural reason.” It was the Fathers of the Church who first joined philosophy to the Christian revelation, although a similar conjunction had begun to take shape in the Jewish world of Philo of Alexandria. Possessing the more dramatic revelations of the Old and the New Testament, the *patres* had little need for the complications entailed in absorbing a parallel mode of philosophic revelation. As Western culture became progressively Christianized the force of history moved in the direction of a truncated understanding of reason, in which philosophy was revised to become the handmaiden of theology. Within the medieval synthesis of faith and reason a natural reason willingly occupied the subordinate role to overarching faith. But this theologically sanitized reason was eventually to turn the tables on revelation when, in the modern era, the link with faith was broken. Now reason and science occupied the high ground, and

revelation was to be permitted into the public realm only on sufferance. The aspiration of the medieval conjunction of reason and revelation remains valid; its formulation cannot remain conceptual, and it cannot include the suppression of the revelatory source of reason as a condition.

4. *At the same time, Christianity enlarged the range of human reason.* The subordination of reason to revelation was only part of the story, because the limiting revelation of God in Christ constitutes the limiting differentiation of human experience. On a political level, separation between the state and a human fulfillment beyond it becomes definitive. No longer can the being of man be absorbed by any mundane community. This is of course the basis for limited government, constitutionalism, and the notion of individual rights. On an intellectual level, science emerges as the study of a contingent world and is no longer an unfolding of necessary rational deductions. Without the Christian understanding of creation and incarnation, nature would never have been so fully dedivinized as to become a sphere of rational empirical investigation. On a civilizational level, Christianity definitively opens up the horizon of historical existence. It is precisely because we do not find our end within this world that the movement through time comes into view in all of its limitation and greatness. It is only the modern effort to bring about the end of history that has betrayed a desire to abolish history and, consequently, the essence of our humanity.

In other words, the dependence of reason on a revelatory opening has even been expanded and confirmed by Christianity, despite the subordinate role assigned within the relationship to theology. The need to restore the relationship is not merely a question of securing protection for revelation. It is just as signifi-

cant from the perspective of preserving the integrity of modern reason itself. If our achievements in science and respect for human rights, central determinants of our world, are dependent on a spiritual openness to revelation then the severing of that link will precipitate a crisis of reason. An evocative expression of that crisis is the recent encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, in which it falls to the Pope to pronounce the word of encouragement to a postmodern despair of reason.

We can rely on reason to lead us toward reality because we have faith in the order of divine goodness in which it is embedded. This is surely a far cry from the anxiety of a world that is no longer sure if its science leads toward any knowledge of reality, that questions the integrity of the nature it investigates, and is fearful of the darkness of nihilism that threatens to overwhelm it. Even the slender thread of human dignity that our modern world has managed to salvage from the maelstrom now seems vulnerable to the inexorable drift toward homogenization and manipulation. Where Kant had limited reason to make room for faith, we now find that faith is what makes room for reason. Pure reason can hardly be sustained in the absence of faith and the great incomplete task of philosophy since the time of Kant has been to find a new conjunction between them.

5. *Admit the problems of the effort to create a Christian civilization.* The most notorious excesses of the medieval period are familiar, such as the Inquisition and the Crusades. Indeed they are often treated so familiarly that their real character as deformations of Christian society are often not noticed. They bear closer investigation, especially with a view to understanding them as products of an increasingly mundane absorption of Christianity. Both the Inquisition and the Crusades were most destructive when in

the hands of secular rather than ecclesiastical powers. But the point is not to furnish an apologia for medieval Christianity. It is to understand the underlying shift at work by which a civilization with a transcendent focus became transformed into a civilization with an immanent focus.

The process of secularization does not denote a separation between these two poles but, paradoxically, their identification. Medieval sectarian revolutionaries bear this out most dramatically and their study has done much to illuminate the parallel phenomena of secular messianism of the modern ideological movements. But there is a broader shift at work in the medieval world of which the revolutionary paracletes are only a symptom. It has something to do with the very success of a Christian civilization that contained within it the seeds of its own excess. Embodiment of the transcendent trajectory of human existence, nowhere more evident than in the construction of the great cathedrals, shifted the accent toward embodiment as such. The transcendent character of the transcendent is eclipsed by its absorption ever more massively within time. The logic is surely at the heart of the great energy poured out in the epochal achievements of modern civilization.

6. *The modern world does not so much demolish the medieval Christian one as search out the means of replacing a synthesis that has collapsed.* Modern critiques of Christianity are rarely critiques of Christianity as such. They are more likely to originate in revulsion at the deformed and opaque character of an excessively worldly Christianity and are, therefore, still critiques that originate within the Christian orbit itself. Even Nietzsche's critique can be viewed in this way, and the intimation literally drove him mad. It draws its moral strength from the same Christian principles because there are

no higher standards by which men can be called to account. What is best in the modern world therefore still lives off its Christian past, for it continues to insist on the demands of justice and truth. The great danger of our world is that it will forget this religious past or never find a way back to the affirmation of its sources. Either way we will continue to live in postmodern limbo, neither capable of extending the modern impulse nor of overcoming it. The problematic of the modern world is a Christian problematic. Its resolution lies in a deepening of the Christian revelation that constitutes the limiting differentiation.

*7. Ideology is the result of a religious inspiration that now seeks expression apart from the divine.* This is what caused the catastrophe of the past two hundred years. The militant ideological movements of Marxism, Nazism, Fascism, nationalism, anarchism, positivism and so on, became the most destructive political forces imaginable once they gained power. The reason was because they were never truly secular political movements. As quasi-religious movements they sought an unlimited transformation of humanity and therefore could not be satisfied by any finite achievements. Only the force of reality, the opposition they encountered, could arrest their unsatisfiable longing, but not before they wreaked the most destructive and inhumane century in our history. Ideological madness was what awoke the modern world from its dogmatically secular slumbers. The project of a secular civilization was exposed as a shambles. The impossibility of human beings settling down in a world of limits, without metaphysics, without transfiguration, proved empirically untenable. But the realization of impossibility is still not the same as the discovery of possibility.

*8. The rediscovery of Christianity was fi-*

*nally the only means of overcoming the totalitarian nightmare.* Christ, as Dostoevsky portrayed, is the only one whose affirmation of love for mankind is utterly unconditional and therefore the only true fulfillment of the humanist aspiration for fulfillment. This is a realization that has large significance for our anthropocentric world. It reveals, as our past century has shown, that the search for a secular self-salvation opens up an abyss of cruelty because it masquerades for the divine opening of redemption. Only God can offer man the gift of transcendent life. A Christ-haunted civilization such as our own can find its longings fulfilled only when it returns to the source from which they have derived. The collapse of the militant ideological movements is only one half of the great story of our time. It is completed in the other half that acknowledges the terrible misdirection in which they originated by accepting the only truly revolutionary transformation that is available to human beings. Rather than simply turn away from the ideological aspirations for transformation they must now be understood. Even the quasi-religious can form an opening toward the truly religious. We cannot simply return to a secular order of limits, which previously provided the fertile soil for the revolutionary convulsion; we now must acknowledge the validity of the transcendent aspirations that underpinned the ideological project. We must see them as failures within a Christianly formed civilization that can still not surpass its Christian limits...except by submitting to them.

*9. The great danger of our postmodern moment is despair at the incoherence of the fragments of meaning that remain.* Such a mood is not only desultory, it is also corrosive of the very real greatness that sustains our global civilization. The clearest achievements of the modern secular world, in science and human

rights, derived from a background of openness to the transcendent. Forgetfulness of Being is the great source of potential disorientation for the future, because the vacuum will not remain unoccupied. Even in the absence of great ideological schemes of transformation there will persist the myriad private dreams and fantasies, some stemming from perennial forces in the human condition, that threaten to collapse the spiritual differentiations on which our common order depends. If we lose faith in the intelligibility of reality then we can scarcely continue the scientific enterprise. If we are no longer sure that each human being is a transcendent value then we will hardly remain committed to the recognition of the inviolable rights and dignity of all. Without a boundary science is perpetually tempted and must inexorably presume to explain the boundary, even though it is then no longer a science of the given. As an interpretation of what is there before the beginning or of the reasons for the way reality is as it is (such as the relationships between mind and body or other varieties of reductionism) science loses its moorings.

In rights talk we are familiar with the expansion of claims that seek to include the presuppositions of rights themselves, *viz.*, the givenness of concrete human beings. We can neither choose our natures nor control our birth or death, precisely because all choice presupposes our existence as given. Rights become an abyss for endless manipulation if there is not first a subject of rights, a human being. The logic of reason, whether expressed through science or through the morality of human rights, points toward the presupposition of openness toward Being, toward revelation. We will eventually work our way back to the horizon of transcendent mystery so long as we avoid erecting roadblocks of hostility or incomprehension. Least of all can we afford to be handicapped by the prejudice

that science and public morality have nothing to do with revelation.

10. *Without an openness to the revelatory dimension of reality we will be unable to carry on the great global conversation of the day.* Our only discussions will be of a strictly pragmatic and instrumental nature. Having constructed world media of communication and the free movement of goods and people, we will have nothing to talk about. The opening of a global community at this time hardly exhausts its purpose in spreading market efficiencies. The latter must surely provide the conditions for a more substantive encounter of the spiritual traditions of mankind. What finally gives the lie to modern secular civilization is the discovery of the spiritual impoverishment it entails. A paradoxical consequence of the global modernity that secular civilization has made possible is that it renders the encounter with spiritually more intact civilizations both possible and inescapable. If Westerners are to hold their own within that conversation something more than technological efficiency will be needed. We will need to rediscover our own spiritual language by which we may enter more deeply into the dialogue of mankind in space as well as in time.

It is also only by understanding the inner spiritual sources of our technological and liberal modernity that we can be of real assistance to the non-Western world. Certainly Asians and Africans desire and will enjoy the benefits of technology, trade, development, democracy, and human rights. But they need more than such tangible goods. Most of all they need understanding. They must be able to work out their own answer to the question of how this highly specialized rationality relates to their own historic spiritual traditions. In this regard the West will be of no help unless we have worked out the meaning of a secular civilization in relation to our own back-

ground of philosophy, Judaism and Christianity. Once that bridge has been rebuilt then there is the prospect of building new bridges to the other world religions. The conversation can then extend beyond the perfunctory invocations of tolerance and enter into the deeper inquiry for truth that alone can sustain meaningful discussion between human beings. The necessity of addressing the crisis of meaning in the postmodern moment, a necessity pressed upon us by the very process of globalization, is the most substantive ground for a genuinely interreligious dialogue. Its authenticity is guaranteed by the common threat to the rationality on which our world depends. At stake is nothing less than the meaning of human existence, now raised as a global question.

11. *Then we will have come full circle to reconsider the character of our own modern world.* We will see that it had very little to do with the evacuation of all reference to the divine or the assertion of an indomitable humanist spirit of independence. Instead, it was unfolded through the more piecemeal process of the search for meaning in a world in which the traditional symbols of Christianity had become opaque. In many ways the titanic energy that went into the construction and transformation of this modern world was itself a misplaced expression of the same drive for transcendent perfection. But the tragic character of that enterprise is not the full story. Along the way a new form of synthesis between the transcendent and the immanent was being formed. It is a synthesis that fully acknowledges the rigorous unfolding of reason as well as the inviolable dignity of each human being. Beyond the limits of knowledge and morality it has learned to hold itself back in openness toward a mystery whose depths and reaches cannot be known. All that does become clear is that the mystery of divine presence,

however unspoken it may be, represents the boundary by which all that is good in our world is guarded. We may look forward to the secular future only because we know it now is constituted by the true meaning of the term: it is merely what has been allowed its freedom from the divine. A secular world without reference to God is impossible in conception and in reality.

What remains when the ideological displacement of revelation has disappeared is not simply a world whose confidence is badly shaken. Postmodern is the term that best indicates that mood but it does not capture the vitality of the world that still carries on. We may live within an acceptance of limits. Our expectations may not rise to the apocalyptic heights of progressivist and revolutionary fantasies, but we do not for all that live in a world without enchantment. It is the boundary of mystery that still sustains the hope by which human life in its great collaborative engagement is carried forward. From that perspective we can reread our history with a greater sense of its different strands. Not everything need be seen as a halfway house toward the totalitarian convulsion. Gradually we become aware that along with the spirit of Promethean self-assertion a far more modest, more indeterminate, and more open spirit was at work.

In the face of the failures to work out a definitive synthesis between faith and reason, to evoke a new intramundane spirituality, it is far better to accept the uncertainty and irresolvability of the world in which we find ourselves. More than merely muddling through on the basis of ad hoc compromise, this attitude at its deepest preserves the appropriate sensitivity to transcendent Being. Just as our abbreviated language of rights may seem to rest on a truncated understanding of human dignity, it may also maintain the proper silence about what cannot be said. Rather than risk the dis-

tortion of transcendent mystery through the effort to capture it in language, it is better simply to point. The discipline of restraint that characterizes modern reason at its best is sustained by that horizon of transcendent openness, an openness that can scarcely be voiced since it is turned toward what is beyond. That may be the best that can be expected and maybe even the best for a world in which earthbound creatures expend themselves in creating an earthbound civilization. An order of limits reaches its height when it becomes transparent for what lies beyond the limits.

12. *Balance of reason that sustains modern civilization is rooted in revelation.* The life of reason is thoroughly grounded in the real world. It recognizes the finitude of all existence and abjures all illusion, yet perceives the transcendent importance that attaches to all that we do. To be fully rational is to give a full account of the intermediate status of the reality within which we find ourselves. Transfiguration definitively lies beyond this life, yet it radiates its light of meaning over all that is transacted here. The limits that determine all human existence, individual, social and historical, are recognized and accepted because the beyond of transfiguration is fully glimpsed. God's self-revelation that culminates in Christ confirms what is intuited in every human heart, that the way toward reality consists in shouldering the burdens that existence imposes upon us.

Christianity constitutes the limit of revelation because it shows this mysterious law of the cosmos as not only the way toward Being but also as the way of Being as well. In Christ the driving aspiration to overreach the boundaries of existence meets its deepest confirmation. We now behold the inner truth of the longing in the disclosure that it originates in the divine invitation that draws us beyond

all that is finite. Our deepest longings are simultaneously affirmed and restrained through the recognition that they have no other source than the gift of the divine presence. There would be no inexhaustible trajectory beyond all limits if there were not the awareness of that which we lack, and there would be no such awareness if there were not first the gift of transcendent life by which we are made participants within the order of Being itself. Christ is in this sense the revelation of history as a whole.

The full differentiation of the drama in which we are engaged brings the problem of balance completely into focus. Indeed it makes the problem of balance a peculiarly Christian problem, because it renders the dangers of imbalance explicit. At the same time Christ is the one in whom the problem is most fully answered. We may not know the why or the how or the when, but we have definite confirmation that the process is utterly trustworthy. Not only is the mystery of existence one to which Being itself has fully submitted, but also the enactment of transfiguration, the triumph over sin and death, has already begun to take effect from the moment of Christ's death forward. The problem of finding a balance in existence is a perennially human one that does not await, although it does become more articulate, through Christianity. But the definitive affirmation of the way of balance as the way of transfiguration only becomes possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paradoxically this means that Christians are the ones who can most thoroughly expend themselves in service toward this world. The full release of the civilizational energy by which the greatness of the modern world can be sustained can only come from those whose existence is so balanced that they can simultaneously pour themselves out in building up what can never be attained.

Modern rationality, despite its vaunted

power, has always been in doubt. A rigorous application of analytic reason has always coexisted with a burgeoning capacity for illusion and despair. The great crises through which we have passed have teetered on the precipice of these twin directions. Would substantive irrationality triumph within a society that retained highly developed formal rationality or would there be some restraint exercised from the side of technical and scientific reason on the surrounding madness? Now we are in a better position to see that there is only one life of reason and that its parts cannot be truncated. Reason in every mode depends on the capacity for self-restraint and this in turn is rooted in existential dispositions that can be characterized as "spiritual equilibrium." For all that we know the great movement of historical creation is likely to continue for a very long time and is sustained by far deeper providential purposes than we may suspect. We are neither at the end of modernity nor at the end of history. Rather we are engaged in building a civilization by which the collaborative venture of human beings within time is realized. That long uncertain historical struggle can only be sustained by those who can affirm most profoundly the value of this world because they have definitively glimpsed the reality that transcends it. Neither prone to impossible schemes of transformation nor to the despair of all meaning, they can work fully to realize the highest possibilities of human existence within time.

### *Conclusion*

The transparency of the modern world is difficult to sustain. It is based on abbreviations and must remain compressed of necessity since it functions as the common currency of a global pluralism. However, modernity cannot afford to forget the self-revelation of Being from which it is ultimately derived. The major upheaval

of our time, the outbreak of messianic ideologies, arose directly from the turning away from the Christian fulfillment while still retaining the transfigurative expectation. Merely because we have negotiated that crisis does not mean that the underlying problem has disappeared. Now it is manifest as the threat to the life of reason that extends more pervasively through contemporary life. Nowhere is the concern more manifest than in the incoherence that looms over science and technology, turning them into ominous fatalities beyond human control; or in a parallel incoherence that now seems to use the language of rights to deprive the notion of human rights and dignity of any meaning, and precisely at the point where the legitimacy of such conceptions has become world wide.

More generally there is the danger that the postmodern doldrums might become a pervasive malaise that would sap the very energy on which the vitality of the modern world depends. Without hope, there is no future. The problem remains one of balance, of restoring the equilibrium of human beings that Tocqueville diagnosed had been lost in the French Revolution. We need to find a way by which we can expend our energies in building up this world while recognizing that it does not constitute our final purpose. This life must again be taken with transcendent seriousness while also perceiving that it can never attain its fulfillment within time.

Christ is not only the way toward life beyond this world but also the center of affirmation of life in this world. He is the one who definitively makes clear the impossibility of anything imminent becoming the vehicle for the revelation of Being. Only that which is transcendent can adequately reveal the Beyond. At the same time by entering existence he renders all that is finite transparent for its highest possibility: Without embodying transcendent divinity, all that is finite

can nevertheless point toward it. Without attaining the transfigurative goal, we can long to receive it. The consummation entirely lies on the divine side and Christ is the one through whom it enters time as a gift. Finite reality now points toward its transcendent fulfillment while simultaneously receiving the assurance that the gift of transcendent life has been poured out. No higher possibility is conceivable for finite existence. Life in this world is recognized in all its real limitations, and it is raised up through the glance of higher possibility that shines through it. Now life can be lived fully in its own terms while simultaneously recognizing the higher importance that attaches to it. Finite existence while remaining finite is raised up to participate in the drama of eternal Being that enters time to redeem it for itself. No higher possibility of existence is conceivable and this is what constitutes the limiting differentiation of the Christian revelation.

Anything else would either diminish the greatness of which human existence is capable or would seek to emulate it through some easier counterfeit. The latter is of course the perennial danger within a Christianly formed civilization. It is the temptation of Gnosticism, to give way to impatience and attempt to leapfrog our way into perfection. No doubt there is something comic about all such endeavors, as Kierkegaard pointed out. Indeed he took comedy as the supreme mark of the Christian perspective on a world of secular substitutes, because only Christianity preserved the full openness of reason that would allow the ludicrousness of human schemes of self-perfection to shine through. The temptation dies hard, however, as evidenced by our premier contemporary Gnostic, Harold Bloom.

Even when faith in God has become difficult, faith in Gnostic spiritual forces remains eminently possible. The danger

in all such new age spiritualism is not that it entails the denial of Judaism and Christianity. It is that it rejects the very structure of human existence by which we cannot simply short-circuit the path of spiritual perfection. It is a collapse of the very differentiation on which the rational investigation of reality and the moral imperative of human rights and dignity have been based. Nature again becomes the playground of divine cosmic forces and human beings lose their inexhaustible participation in the transcendent love of God. The fixed points of rationality and morality in our world become obscured. The perennial character of the Gnostic temptation renders it a threat not only to the differentiations of revelation but also to the world whose rationality has been derived from those very differentiations. Reason and revelation, far from constituting an opposition, are in effect mutually dependent. Their relationship is perhaps never more in evidence than when they must struggle against the tide of more compact superstition, of soft gnosticism, that perpetually threatens to swamp them.

To combat the challenge neither reason nor revelation can succeed alone. If anything has become clear over the past millennium it must surely be this recognition. There are many indications that such a profound reconsideration of their relationship is underway, but its full unfolding will require a revision of the constitutive narrative of our world. The reason why the revelatory dimension has been overlooked, even when its presence is abundantly evident, has been because it did not fit within the dominant narrative of our history. If the emergence of a secular modern civilization is the overarching theme then religion inevitably appears as a residual expression of a now gladly or sadly vanished past. It makes all the difference in the world if our encompassing narrative is different, if instead of taking secular civilization at

face value we wonder if indeed it is all that it appears to be.

The radical revision suggested here would place secular modernity in question as merely an episode in the unfolding of a much deeper story of the intersection of the timeless with time that has its central axis in Christ and its extension

in all of the great spiritual traditions of our history. Seen from this vantage point the question becomes less whether there is space for religion within secular society, but whether the secular spirit of modernity will be able to endure without finding its home within the revelatory differentiations from which it arose.