

Styles of Transcendence: A Genealogy of Faith in the Modern West

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ABSTRACT

This work provides a basis upon which to regard various different or “styles” of faith in the modern world, i.e., the ways in which faith—and matters of transcendence—is identified and manifested at the personal, interpersonal and socio-political levels. Although this investigation is concerned most particularly with religious faith, it also deals with faith in Reason and Progress, which flourished during the 19th century but has been put into question by the disastrous wars of the 20th century. I posit two essential, but contrasting styles of transcendence that emerged in Western Europe after the Renaissance and Reformation, and that even today characterize significantly different ways of conceptualizing faith and belief in things unseen. These are *fundamentalism* and *fideism*. Dealing first with the more heavily loaded term fundamentalism, I discuss religious fundamentalism as the most evident manifestation of the phenomenon. After a brief examination of several modern Christian fundamentalist movements, I retrace, in “genealogical” fashion, the roots of the fundamentalist vocabulary in modern European history, while at the same time unearthing an alternative option to the road most traveled by modernity as a whole, and by modern Christianity in particular: fideism. This leads into an explication of fideism *vis-à-vis* fundamentalism, as well as a discussion of a conflict rooted in competing vocabularies of the Reformation era—epitomized by the figures of Erasmus and Martin Luther—and a similar conflict that exists today in secular moral theory, between the virtues of relativism/anti-foundationalism and absolutism/essentialism. At the heart of this issue lies the important question of the meaning and status of religious faith today; or perhaps, whether the very notion of transcendence can be reconciled with the pluralist demands of secular liberalism and the postmodern paradigm more generally. It is my contention that a demythologized perspective of the fideist-humanist sort, based upon Erasmian tolerance and intellectual creativity and updated with the insights of post-analytic theory (e.g., the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, and Jeffrey Stout), without revoking the vocabulary of transcendence, can reinforce the weathered but still valuable post-Enlightenment moral vocabulary, and can reiterate the humaneness of liberal hope without undue encumbrance from the dogmatic baggage of traditional theological jargon and metaphysics.

Human beings seem to be binarizing creatures, if the penchant for oppositional delineation with respect to socio-political issues and ideologies is any indication of a more generalized human characteristic.¹ A prominent feature of Western traditions is the tendency to define, clarify, and (perhaps most importantly) *justify* one’s own (or one’s group’s) opinions or beliefs *against* a clearly defined—whether real or mythical/perceived—enemy. The Cold War provided no lack of fodder for such dualistic rhetoric, with its concomitant ideology of a Manichaean global situation, one that succeeded only in perpetuating and reinforcing the very otherness of the Other. Now the Cold War is dead, and rival world-views have not been slow to fill the ideological, conceptual, and political void left by the USSR and her satellites. One “alternative” to emerge in the past few decades, and that shows no signs of disappearing quickly, is of course “fundamentalism”—a phenomenon that cuts across political and religious boundaries, and yet seems to be based in much more deeply-rooted convictions than that of Soviet communism. Fundamentalism has emerged as the new Other for the West—not, this time, against the “free” (i.e., liberal-democratic industrialized world), but rather against the secular post-Enlightenment paradigm that gave rise to both liberal democracy and communism. Thus the new dichotomy actually appears to be a much older and more divisive one, going back at least to the dawn of modernity, between the virtues of *relativism* and *absolutism* (in the loosest sense, exemplified in an essentialist or foundationalist conception of truth, values, and ethics). With the upsurge of fundamentalism across the globe, and the predominance of the pluralist perspective in the Western academy and among most secular liberals, each side

has found its respective champions, and is preparing for what many on both sides believe to be a sustained confrontation.

This paper examines the roots of fundamentalism as both an anti-modern and an aggressive forward-looking religious and political impulse—roots that are deeply engrained in Western culture by virtue of the hegemonic paradigm of modernity that emerged after the Renaissance and Reformation. In addition, I will analyze some general reactions to the rather unexpected resurgence of popular religiosity in a presumably “postmodern” world. After a brief look at several Christian fundamentalist movements of recent years, we will retrace the roots of this particular vocabulary within modern European history, at the same time unearthing an alternative option to the road most traveled by modernity as a whole, and by modern Christianity in particular. This leads us into to an examination of fundamentalism’s alter-ego—*fideism*—and an analysis of the ensuing conflict rooted in the competing vocabularies of the Reformation era, as voiced, in particular, by the figures of Erasmus and Martin Luther, as well as a similar conflict that exists in secular ethics today, between relativism/anti-foundationalism and absolutism/foundationalism.

At the heart of this issue lies the crucial question of the meaning of personal religious faith and vocabularies of transcendence in the present age; or, perhaps, whether standard notions of faith can be reconciled with the pluralist demands of secular liberalism. It is my contention that a demythologized perspective of the fideist-humanist sort, based upon Erasmian tolerance and intellectual creativity and updated with the insights of post-analytic theory (e.g., the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, and Jeffrey

Stout), without revoking the vocabulary of transcendence, can reinforce the weathered but still valuable post-Enlightenment moral vocabulary, and can reiterate the humaneness of liberal hope without encumbrance undue from the dogmatic baggage of traditional theological jargon and metaphysics.

Foundations

The style of an epoch, it is certain, affects not merely the artist; it penetrates all contemporary activities, and crystallizes itself not only in works of art but in all the values which make up the culture of the age.

– Hermann Broch

As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued (in *After Virtue*), the arbitrary academic division of history and philosophy—of actual events and the theories/values behind them—into separate and (supposedly) clearly distinguishable areas of study in fact seriously limits our understanding of the modes of thought and values of particular eras and peoples. In our own era, “post-modernity” has emerged as a somewhat elusive but useful rubric to describe the fractured-ness of a world without a recognizable or stable core of transcendence (i.e., Truth, Progress, God, and so on). As a heuristic term (Hans Küng: “a name for what is as yet unknown”), post-modernity connects such diverse human achievements as painting, architecture, and literature, and is applied more generally to the “dis-ease” felt by many ordinary Western folk when it comes to matters of faith and belief.

In 1931, the German novelist Hermann Broch wrote the following words:

[T]he sole question at any moment is whether... even the thought of an epoch is not a vehicle for its style, governed by that same style which attains visible and palpable expression in works of art; which amounts to the assertion that truth, *the ultimate product of thought*, is equally a vehicle for the style of the epoch in which it has been discovered and in which it is valid, precisely like all the other values of the epoch. (Broch 414)

The ultimate product of thought. In Broch’s sense, truth is neither fully an end to be strived for nor a means towards something else, but becomes a vehicle that is both utilized and sought. This conception holds that truth is contingent, and (for Broch) symbiotically linked with the “style” of a particular epoch or cultural milieu. Yet truth is not *relative*, in the sense of a mere value among other values: “truth also governs all the actions of mankind, which are, one might say, steeped in truth” (Broch 415, my emphasis). The truth (or, truths) of an epoch evolves and becomes a set of values that not only make a person’s actions plausible, but it is only through one’s conception of the truth that one’s actions are thereby justified to oneself and others. With the truth as a beacon, “at least in the very moment of action, [one’s] actions are *always justifiable*.” And this can be extended, for not only a person’s thoughts and values, but her actions and intentions as well may be determined or dominated by the style of the epoch in which she lives. But what of the post-modern style, which promises and delivers no essence, no foundations whatsoever? Dr. Johnson, in his preface to Shakespeare, remarks: “Nothing is essential to the fable but *unity of action*.” This approach to

truth will be discussed in more detail below, *vis-à-vis* the problem of relativism, faith, and the so-called narrative approach to ethics, but the “justificatory” aspect of truth, and the interrelation of values to epochal styles (usually framed in ways of speaking, in acceptable, or paradigm vocabularies) will underlie much of the argument forthwith.

My approach in this essay will follow largely the “reflexive anthropological” method proposed by Jeffrey Stout (in *Ethics After Babel*). In tackling the various dilemmas facing ethics in a pluralist world, Stout advocates a method of moral *bricolage*—one that attempts to add substance, however piecemeal, to the present (“pidgin”) dialect of shared moral understanding. This study of distinct moral vocabularies and evolving communities of belief is by necessity largely historical and comparative. Borrowing a line from Alasdair MacIntyre, I will employ the motif of the Quest as an important Western method of conceptualizing the “story” of one’s life in its successes and its failures. Linked with this (heroic-comic) attitude towards life is the issue of literature and a specifically narrative approach to understanding human behavior, which will be explored *vis-à-vis* the trope of “ironism” in the work of Kierkegaard and Richard Rorty.

One final word on method: according to Isaiah Berlin’s famous characterizations, the “fox” is the writer who is fascinated by the infinite variety of things, who pursues many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected (if at all) only in some *de facto* way, seeking causes which are related to no moral or aesthetic principle. In contradistinction roams the “hedgehog,” who relates everything (or tries to) to a central, all-embracing system. Foxes, says Berlin, lead lives that are *centrifugal* rather than *centripetal*—

their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision. (Berlin 3)

This dichotomy can be easily overdrawn, but it neatly sets the framework, or, more correctly, the spirit of the present work, which falls decidedly under the sign of the fox.² As Karl Mannheim wrote, in *Ideology and Utopia*, (a work published in 1931, the same year as Broch’s modernist lament, *The Sleepwalkers*): “The modern investigator can answer, if he is accused of evading the problem of what is truth, that the indirect approach to truth through social history will in the end be more fruitful than a direct logical attack.”³

Fundamentals of Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism, though an imprecise and over-simplified term, can be described as a world view that highlights specific eternal ‘truths’ of traditional faiths and applies them with earnestness and fervour to twentieth-century realities.

– Lawrence Kaplan

In some sense, fundamentalism has become what “totalitarianism” once was for Western critics—a loosely defined but very real threat to modern liberal values, and thus a phenomenon worthy of historical and comparative study. In

the early 1990s a five-year program sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences at the University of Chicago called the Fundamentalism Project began to publish its findings in several weighty tomes, and numerous other works of comparative fundamentalisms have since appeared on the shelves of bookstores and libraries across the Western world. Seeking a common thread, or at least certain recognizable family characteristics shared by the many instances of this contemporary phenomenon, the Fundamentalism Project found that so-called fundamentalists tend to be, for the most part, traditionalists who have been “forced” (by the encroachments of modernity) into activism, in order to secure the “purity” of their faith, and of the particular beliefs and values tied up with (and justified by) that faith. Thus, it is largely in reaction to the forces of modernism, secularism, and relativism that fundamentalists seek to remake the world, via an eclectic combination of modernity and tradition, and utilizing whenever necessary modern *forms* (technologies, mass media) in order to present and “re-establish” traditional *content*.

Lawrence Kaplan (in *Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective*) gives what he feels is the central need for the study of fundamentalism (as American political theorists like Zbigniew Brzezinski during the height of the Cold War defended the need for a careful study of the menace of totalitarianism), namely, the implications of the (“naturally”) hostile political manifestation of such, and more specifically its connection to “terrorism.” The particular mindset behind fundamentalism, says Kaplan, what one may call the fundamentalist impulse, is *only* of consequence (and therefore “worthy of attention”) when such becomes politically potent (i.e., disruptive), “altering what had been considered the normal and predictable parameters of a country’s political life” (Kaplan 5). Without denying the importance of overt political consequences, such an unashamedly functionalist justification for the study of fundamentalism has the danger of neglecting the contextual (psychological, sociological, and historical) roots and motivations that may in fact underscore the *actualization* of the so-called fundamentalist impulse. Most importantly, as I will argue, the fundamentalist impulse is in a certain respect foundational to modern Western thought, and may benefit from an introspective (or reflexive) hermeneutical study.

Fundamentalism has characteristics that have been around for at least as long as religion itself, but the term is generally used to imply the peculiar combination of traditional concepts with certain modern ideas, and modern *techniques* in particular, that makes this a distinctively modern, in some respects even post-modern phenomenon. This curious blending of the old and the new, of unwavering idealism and practical realism, has at its root “a reaction to changing circumstances by [the] select[ion] and recycling [of] parts of a received repertoire of texts and symbols in novel ways” (Ruthven 31). One important point must here be made: fundamentalism as *reaction* need not be confined to the sphere of religion, but may coexist with any body of shared beliefs, being essentially a style or form of faith-orientation. This deserves mention here because there is some danger in attributing a necessary or causal link between, not only fundamentalism and a particular religion (say, Islam), but also between the fundamentalist impulse and religiosity more generally. Religious contexts *are* extremely hospitable (or,

negatively, one might say susceptible) to fundamentalism, if only because religion remains in our day the one realm where faith, belief, and a sense of universal Truth can be maintained. God, in however abstract or vacuous a form, still holds the ultimate veridical and justificatory power for many people. And, of course, within the religious context, fundamentalism is not confined to the monotheistic or Abrahamic traditions, but can (and has) become evident in all of the world’s major religions.⁴

As a world-view, and a particular form of faith-orientation, then, fundamentalism can be identified by the following family resemblances:

1. A general hostility towards modernity (or, more accurately, towards the values, or lack of such, of modernity), particularly as embodied in the rationalistic, post-Enlightenment world view;
2. a sense of the necessity of reviving or retrieving the past, usually taking under the auspices of a charismatic leader who draws legitimacy from a deity or some other transcendent referent (often in the form of a sacred, revealed text);
3. a reactionary political manifestation that will strive to enforce the (re)-institution of “traditional” values against the current of the times, often accomplished by the paradoxical use of the tools and techniques of modernity (i.e., guns, video, and the internet) against modern values and society.

Politicized Religion or Sacralized Politics?

The underlying idea [of fundamentalism] is that a given faith is to be upheld firmly in its full and literal form, free of compromise, softening, re-interpretation or diminution.

– Ernest Gellner

In the Western media, the term fundamentalism is most frequently cited with respect to political unrest in the Middle East. Islamic fundamentalism is without question the most noticeable (and perhaps most “successful”) religio-political experiment in modern times. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 shocked many in the West as well as in the Middle East, with the very notion of establishing a religious state in the late twentieth century baffling conventional wisdom, which held that the world was leading, slowly but inexorably towards political secularism, whatever the particular ideology expressed in political or economic terms. Not only was the new Islamic Republic a religiously inspired state, it was one that claimed to foment the rebirth of a purified and severe single value-system, a value-system of a culture of the distant past. Moreover, though it is and may remain the only successful political manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism, the Iranian example did not go unnoticed by jihadists, revolutionaries, clerics and secular leaders of other Islamic nations.

The very same year of the Iranian revolution, 1979, witnessed the birth (or rebirth) of fundamentalism as an active and aggressive force in America, in the formation of the (now defunct, at least in name) Moral Majority. It is in fact from Protestant Christianity that the term “fundamentalism” originates: in the late 1920s it was applied to (and proudly accepted and disseminated in turn by) a faction of conservative Protestants concerned with the growth and spread

of liberal Protestantism, and insistent on the claim of biblical inerrancy as the basis for the actualization of true Christianity.⁵ This movement eventually faded away, overwhelmed perhaps by the McCarthyite crusade that had greater enemies than liberal Christians to defeat. But, with the Reaganite “new morning” for conservatism, and with communism in obvious and irreversible decline, Christian fundamentalism was given new life in the 1980s.

Fundamentalism involves a double-sided reaction: a) against the liberalization (what they perceive, in some cases not unjustifiably, as the virtual secularization) of the faith-tradition in question; a liberalization that is generally carried out by liberals, moderates or reformers who wish to convert long-standing precepts to contemporary tastes; and b) against secular modernity more generally, often lumped under the all-embracing epithet “secular humanism,” which is seen to be amoral and destructive, not only to personal values, but inevitably to political culture and social stability. Yet, as has already been suggested, the rejection of the modern is selective: it is often the case that fundamentalists are willing to utilize (often with great expertise) the most advanced technologies and means of the modern world. The goal, a purified, orthodox regime, or at least the hegemony of fundamental values within the larger community, outweighs any qualms they may have regarding the co-optation of the weapons of the enemy. After all, it is the underlying values and beliefs of the group that are at stake, not the (superficial) state of technological sophistication. In this sense it would be wrong to condemn fundamentalists out of hand for bad faith (though of course there will be cases of such).

The Enlightenment is of course a common target for fundamentalist rhetoric in the West, while the forcible exportation of such (as cultural imperialism), and its consequent failure, is a theme common to both leftist academic circles and within Islamic and Third World fundamentalisms. There is general agreement that the Euro-American emphases on materialism, luxury, and rampant consumerism contribute to the “disintegration of values” now being felt throughout the world. *Anomie*—moral decay on a grand and devastating scale—is understood as the necessary and inevitable culmination of the modern secularist paradigm; the breakdown of family structures (the infamous “family values” issue that has dogged US presidential elections for several decades), and the spread of violence and (especially internet) pornography are cited as evidence in support of this claim. Here arises a point of difference between American (i.e., largely Protestant Christian) fundamentalists and those of the Islamic or Third World varieties: the former frame their arguments in terms of a revived but distinctly American way of life that includes many of the individualistic values decried by the latter. On the matter of moral decay and the need for a resurrection of values there is common consent, though of course the *content* of the values in question differs accordingly (though perhaps less than one might think).

Fundamentalism embodies a particular form of *politicized religion*—a combination that runs contrary to the modern agreement regarding the separation of Church and State.⁶ Steve Bruce suggests that the foundation of the Moral Majority was in fact part of a conscious design of a group of conservative Republicans to utilize religious rhetoric and motifs to further their political goals. For Bruce this is a

typical example of the manipulative aspect of fundamentalism, a view that is widespread among Western critics, who frequently deride fundamentalists as little more than carnival hucksters cheating the naïve masses out of their money. However, this condemnation (for such it seems to be, even in Bruce, who couches his remarks in analytical and dispassionate terms) would only be valid if the values and beliefs of the fundamentalist leaders did not reflect those of a recognizable subsection of American society. Dismissing fundamentalism as a scam—an ingenious ruse perpetrated by an hypocritical elite over a hopelessly naïve group of undereducated and underemployed people—not only smacks of intellectual elitism, but seems to be an attempt to explain away the fundamentalist phenomenon as an anomaly, a form of fanaticism which only relates to a small number of easily manipulated loonies. The fundamentalist impulse is much deeper than this, as we shall see, and much more complex.

Certainly, there *are* contradictions to be found in the rhetoric of fundamentalists as they attempt to transpose so-called traditional values onto twentieth and twenty-first century realities, but as we have suggested, content and ends outweigh form and means when it comes to the actualization of the Truth.⁷ Also, there appears to be an undeniably gnostic element within such movements: in the Shia version, Islamic clerics and scholars are the sole experts, the only ones capable of deciphering the content of the sacred texts, and thus come to embody a private elite (akin to Lenin’s Bolshevik vanguard), ready to carry out in practice the exact meaning of the transcendent texts, for the good of the people, the community of the faithful. The power of knowledge is unapologetically circumscribed to an in-group within the larger in-group—a highly undemocratic form, it would seem, particularly as such movements often claim to be “popular” uprisings, but we must not conflate these two terms, for (as we know all too well from the experience of twentieth-century Europe) what is popular may not be by any means democratic. Kaplan, speaking of Islamic fundamentalism in a cynical tone reminiscent of Bruce on the Protestant variety, concludes that such “permits a traditionally minded clergy to manipulate the masses for its own advantage” (Kaplan 11). But again, does not the faith of a great number of those involved, a faith that seems very *real* indeed, obfuscate this point? From liberal-democratic eyes such practices seem suspect, but perhaps it is to Allah’s or God’s advantage that the priests maintain strict control over the sacred referents, and that the family remains the centerpiece of social organization, and so on. While these sacred texts may make no mention of a politicized clergy, family values, or an Islamic Republic, could not practical foresight be here confused with intentional deceit and willful manipulation for strictly power purposes? Obviously I am here playing devil’s advocate, and have no wish to defend fundamentalism as a political manifestation, but it *is* my contention that the deeper roots of the problem remain largely unexplored, sacrificed to the equally valuable but limited (and co-opted, as a form of apologia for the cause) liberal political analysis, which tends to be overwhelmingly functionalist in orientation.

The Faith Imperative & the Fundamentalist Impulse

[U]nexpected developments now characterize contemporary world affairs... [and therefore] we should be less confident than some of our Enlightenment forebears that rational

modernity will inevitably overcome the remnants of irrational traditionalism.

– Lawrence Kaplan

Unexpected developments, just because they are unexpected, do not arise without a history, out of nowhere. Martin Marty, in his “Fundamentals of Fundamentalism” makes no attempt to determine what role individual psychology may play in fundamentalism, resisting, as he says, the temptation to psychological reductionism. But what about basic “psychological factors,” such as personal and interpersonal ideas about faith, or notions of solidarity and exclusionism? In a similar fashion, *The Guardian* newspaper in their treatment of fundamentalism arrives at the conclusion that “fundamentalism has less to do with faith, than with the moral basis of social behaviour” (Ruthven 31). But is not personal faith inextricably intertwined with morality and social behavior, particularly in the context of religion?

At the personal level, the fundamentalist impulse is, first and foremost, a conservative one, and can develop only where there exists a sense of tradition that once had authority, but whose authority is now threatened by the encroachments of the new and/or the other. The element of threat, which is more often than not real (though perhaps more diffuse than imagined), bolsters what can be called a siege mentality, which does not, however, exclude the possibility of heresy, of apostasy from *within* the group. Whether internal or external, the “enemies” must be identified (often indiscriminately co-opted by the all-encompassing bywords like Satan or the Infidel)—a process that is usually left to the leaders of the movement. Once identified, these enemies (whether Zionists, Western imperialists, liberals or secular humanists) bring together all that threatens the “world” that the group seeks to reinvent. Authority is sought, as we have seen, in a charismatic leader, a holy office, a sacred text, each of which is beyond doubt or reproach—infallible—in expressing the “final truth about reality” (Marty “Fundamentals” 20). Though highly exclusionary, fundamentalists may seek to *persuade* (for instance, by means of telecommunications in the USA), though they do not generally aim for the *conversion* of the other, as such would likely lead to further dissolution of the sacred values. Marty employs the image of a castle: “One needs thick walls, fortresses, a ‘keep’ for the people within; one needs towers and battlements from which to try to keep others out, or drawbridge over which the party within can make forays to clear space and keep enemies at a distance; and there must be a moat, into which those who would transgress from either direction would sink.”

Thus, exclusionary gnosticism combines with a Manichean attitude towards the universe, which is clearly and unambiguously divided under hegemonies of Good and Evil, with the world (*this* world) pictured as a grand battleground for this apocalyptic struggle. The Good is commensurate with the in-group (purged of apostates and heretics), which defines its boundaries *vis-à-vis* the Other, and thus not only in terms of religious sect but frequently ethnic or tribal affiliation. Tribalism and racialism are not *necessary* elements behind the fundamentalist impulse, but are easily invoked in order to stir up anger and more clearly delineate the boundaries between Us and Them. A strong sense of being chosen as the elect by a transcendent force of some sort reinforces the readiness to go to battle for one’s side. In order to act, however, one must

have faith, an unremitting faith in the transcendent imperative that has been accurately deciphered by the holy leaders, and that, in its severity, calls one to action.

As a historical phenomenon, the fundamentalist impulse can be viewed in the light of a long history of reaction and counter-reaction in the West. The prospect of a “return” to fundamental or pure principles is an appealing message for persons or groups confronting uncertainties at any level, and particularly those which arise from new and seemingly threatening situations. As Marx well knew, religious certainties fulfill this role admirably, and have done so since long before the sixteenth century, when, in reaction to the decadence of the Roman Church, a certain Wittenburg monk called for a dramatic return to biblical sureties, not only to reaffirm the weakening moral voice of Christianity but also to control the alternative forces unleashed by the European Renaissance.

Christian Fundamentalism I: Protestantism

I believe I owe this duty to the Lord, of crying out against philosophy and turning men to Holy Scripture... It is high time now to be carried away from other studies and to learn Christ and him crucified.

– Martin Luther

As we have seen, fundamentalism, in its roots and its manifestations, is neither an exclusively Islamic phenomenon, nor one confined to developing or pre-industrial societies. In fact, a look at Christian fundamentalism in the West (more specifically, the USA) may tell us more about the impulse behind fundamentalism by reinforcing the fact that, while the particular vocabulary expressed in such is not intrinsic to any specific tradition or pattern of historical development, it does have roots that are deeply-ingrained within the development of modern Europe. Fundamentalism has been around in name within Protestant Christianity for eighty years, but it is only recently that critics have begun to appreciate the complexity of the movement. In the 1950s and 1960s, Daniel Bell, Martin Lipset, and Reinhold Niebuhr all regarded such unfamiliar, fervent religiosity as a sign of reactive anti-modernism, and little else—a backward-looking orientation to be swallowed, in due course, by the modern liberal wave. (Ribuffo 35)

In one sense they may have been right: American Protestant fundamentalist groups have recently backed down somewhat on their attacks against non-fundamentalists. Whether this presages a genuine recognition or acknowledgment of, even in some minimal sense, pluralism, or is, as Steve Bruce is more inclined to believe, a mere pragmatic realization by the leaders of such groups (several of whom faced public disgrace in the late 1980s) as to the political inefficacy of virulent exclusionism, there is little doubt that the tone of Protestant fundamentalist rhetoric has been tempered of late. As Bruce puts it: “Although young evangelists still have a strong sense of what is right for them, they no longer seem so sure that what is right for them is also right for everyone else” (Bruce 29). The self-confidence of Protestant fundamentalists has not suffered, however, but rather seems to be growing with this relaxation of standards.

Bruce remains skeptical of the intent of this turn, if it can be even called such; changing the name of the organization (from Moral Majority Inc. to the rather innocuous Liberty Foundation), he says, does not stop fundamentalists from

dreaming of the “righteous empire.” It does seem to be the case that fundamentalists of the Protestant sort are less inclined to engage in theological disagreements with others (which would entail dialogue and a partial recognition of opposing claims) than to proffer the Truth to those who are mired in Error (if not in Sin). Despite the less combative approach in the political sphere, fundamentalists *cannot* disavow their gnostic claims, or they would be only one among many, in short, they would be *relativists*. “It is difficult for them to deflate their self-image from that of a ‘moral majority’ to that of a minority which asks nothing more than the right to do what is right in its own eyes” (Bruce 46). Indeed, any appeal to “minority rights” on the part of Protestant fundamentalists is almost risible when the party is taken into account. Other minority groups have good reason to remember the lack of generosity of conservative Protestants when they were themselves in the ascendant.

As such, fundamentalists of the conservative Protestant sort must stick to their majority claims, behaving as if they actually represent a largely silent but numerous section of the American population, if they are to justify their call for the imposition of their particular views (regarding school prayer, pornography, abortion, gay marriage, and so on) upon society as a whole, identifying the Other in this case as a small but powerful group of “liberals” or “secular humanists,” who are (systematically?) corrupting the morals and values of the (i.e., God’s) nation. Reacting to this threat (which has replaced the more concrete Red Menace), fundamentalists specifically decry the ill effects of moral particularism, seeking to reverse the privatization of values and beliefs that goes hand-in-hand with the pluralizing tendencies of late modernity.⁸

Critics contend that the New Christian Right errs in wildly overstating the threat against them (a not uncommon tendency of minority or protest movements). Moral pluralism, however widely held, is *not* an ideology imposed upon everyone; what pluralism involves is rather a “dogma of alternatives” (Bruce 50). Inevitably, problems arise whenever alternative value-systems, or faith-orientations, as the case may be, confront each other, and view their own truth-claims as superior to the truth-claims of others, or the previously-defined Other. Bruce is correct in stating that, whether humanism is, as some have claimed, a “functional equivalent” of religion, it clearly does *not* have the same consequences of religion, which provides a common direction to people’s lives and a shared world view. On the other hand, secular humanism *can* become “fundamentalist” in terms of exclusionism, gnosticism, and Manicheanism, but upon doing so it effectively forsakes the label “humanism.” In other words, it is the “humanism” that denies secular humanism a place as a functional equivalent to fundamentalist religiosity, *not* the “secular” aspect of such; this is an important distinction that will be developed shortly with respect to the emergence of modern Christianity *vis-à-vis* humanism and fundamentalism.

In addition, secular humanism is *not* (any longer) a movement in the sense that fundamentalism can be so termed—it is better understood as the “intellectual endorsement of what has already come to pass” (Bruce 52). Yet, although modernity does not directly challenge religion, it *does* subtly undermine it, though perhaps not in the way that is often assumed. Many fundamentalists recognize this, it would seem, but prefer to speak in terms of direct

confrontation, as an agonistic vocabulary has obvious rhetorical advantages. I agree with Bruce in his conclusion that American fundamentalism, as embodied in groups like the Moral Majority and the New Christian Right, *will* fail in their political intentions. But this failure will *not* be because of their religiosity, but rather because of their fundamentalism—their claims to exclusivity, gnostic pretensions, and selective but steadfast anti-modern stance—characteristics that are by no means concomitant with religiosity. Indeed, the NCR has been attacked not only by secularists and liberal theologians but also by several figures of a conservative theological bent who argue that Protestant fundamentalists actually hamper the cause of Protestantism, trivializing the faith and antagonizing Christians and non-Christians alike. Again, the issue comes back to the validity of rival truth-claims, with Protestant fundamentalists leaning on the Canon, i.e., the Bible as interpreted through the evangelist leaders, for justification.

Catholic Integralism: Use of Tradition

History is one long desperate retching and the only thing humanity is fit for is the Inquisition.

– Cardinal Umberto Benigni

Roman Catholicism is not free from fundamentalism. In fact, the Catholic Integralist movement of recent years exemplifies and highlights the discriminating reclamatory propensity of fundamentalists *vis-à-vis* history; i.e., the selective retrieval of tradition for the reinforcement of truth-claims, and for the legitimization of the Catholic cause against all attackers, real or perceived. Catholic fundamentalists generally overlook the murky theological issues that so engaged and bedeviled their medieval forebears, focusing instead upon issues most likely to generate emotion and spur controversy, e.g., the question of women priests, clerical celibacy, the use of artificial birth control, and the limits of ecumenism. Less likely than their Protestant counterparts to cite the inerrancy of Scripture, Catholic Integralists tend to lean on the authority of Tradition (i.e., Church history, as a lineal development) and Institution (i.e., the infallibility of the Pope). This sort of papal fundamentalism has been described as “a literal, a-historical, and non-hermeneutical reading of papal pronouncements as a bulwark against the tides of relativism, the claims of science, and the inroads of modernity” (Coleman 76). Yet Integralism is not entirely a-historical; it places a high value on history, but only on a very specific *transcendent* history. Like Scripture for the Protestants, the papacy (and Church tradition) ultimately stand above history, free from suspicion, containing a safe guide for all behavior—an open path along the King’s Highway, to borrow from Bunyan. Uncritical acceptance of papal authority becomes, as it were, the litmus test for orthodoxy.

In short, it is Christian history, embodied in the tradition of the Apostles and the Church fathers (and excluding of course the schismatics of the East and North) that holds sway, *not* history as such (Cardinal Benigni’s “one desperate retching” echoes, of all things, Marx’s “history as nightmare” or perhaps Henry Ford’s “history as bunk”); and so it is only the former which holds anything of relevance to the present and the future. When this authority was challenged by a modernist movement within the Church in the early twentieth century, one which sought to build a “true Catholicism of the future” based upon the role of religion rather than the demands

of an (“outdated”) scholastic theology, these modernist apostates were ostracized from the bosom of the one, true Church, and subsequently lumped together with secular anticlerical and “Masonic” enemies of Catholicism.⁹ In 1907, Pope Pius X condemned modernism as “the synthesis of all heresies,” and marshaled the full power of the Roman hierarchy to crush the enemy. (Coleman 82)

Catholic Integralists, like many fundamentalists, do not see themselves as “anti-modern,” a term which implies, they (quite correctly) argue, an aspect of world-renunciation or cenobitism espoused by monastics, millennial sects, and cults across the globe, but that is virtually nonexistent within fundamentalist groups. Fundamentalists seek to be *in* modernity, but not to be *of* it: confronting the world as it is, they seek to *transform* modernity into a new modernity, one that, somewhat paradoxically, will revive traditional values and ideas. Very much a vehicle of protest, Catholic Integralists binarize the world into two irredeemably hostile and antagonistic world-views (giving belated victory to the Manichean heretics they once excommunicated). Perhaps unsurprisingly, recent comparative treatments of fundamentalism have found marked similarities between theirs and the language of twentieth-century fascism as the incarnation of authoritative populism. It is perhaps unsurprising to learn that arch-Integralist Cardinal Benigni supported Mussolini because “the rise of fascism, by making a clean sweep of a political system into which the Church (increasingly) did not fit, speeded up the possibility of setting up a real party of Christian order which would usher in the final redemption of society” (Coleman 87). *A clean sweep*. Hardly muddle-headed ideologues, fundamentalists often show remarkable opportunism (the Mussolini-concord being an example of politicized religion at its best, or worst) by superimposing a political dimension on its conflicts with modernity, in the hopes that political change may entail the end of pernicious pluralism. In the 1930s, Integralism in Italy mobilized its weight around stock symbols and motifs of nationalist patriotism and xenophobia.

In recent decades, Catholic Integralism has faced the same sort of problems as the Protestant NCR, particularly with respect to the slow, but progressive liberalization of the Vatican and the papacy. Welded to their faith in Tradition is their adherence to the pope, who, if he becomes too reformist, may leave the Integralists (who maintain disproportionate but by no means absolute power in the Vatican) in a quandary of conflicting allegiances. The Vatican II Council of the 1960s was a significant setback, but stoked the movement to greater steadfastness. More recently the possible election of the potentially radical reformist Cardinal Martini of Milan to the papal throne after the twenty-year reign of the fairly reliably conservative John Paul II no doubt caused great concern among Integralists, who have reason to be pleased with the selection of Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI. Even so, with the very real threat of excommunication (as in the case of the Integralist Henri Lefebvre, perhaps the first in the long history of the practice to be excommunicated for being *too* traditional), Catholic fundamentalists may choose schism over acceptance of change.¹⁰ The retching of history, it seems, is far from over.

Monopolizing Truth: “Madmen” and Modernity

In what way can substantive content, be it a logical axiom or non-logical in its nature, so affect formal logic as to admit of variation of style of thinking while maintaining intact the invariability of form?... [T]his problem is no longer empirical and psychological, but methodological and metaphysical, for behind it stands in all its a priority the first question of all ethics: How can God permit error, how is it that a madman is allowed to live in God's world?

– Hermann Broch

As Hermann Broch penned the above lines, in an exposition called the Disintegration of Values in the European World (in his philosophical novel *The Sleepwalkers*), Cardinal Benigni and Pope Pius X were collaborating with Mussolini in a vain attempt to salvage the Church in a new age. *Pace The Guardian's* comment that fundamentalism has less to do with faith than with the moral basis of social behavior, the modernist controversy and the fundamentalist reaction of Catholic Integralism was *very much* about the nature of religious truth, the grounds for belief, and the implications of a particular faith-orientation, or “style” of faith in a transforming world. Against the scholastics, Vatican authorities and proto-Integralists, who contended that Christian Truth was universal and unchanging and that such could be properly interpreted and disseminated only through the teaching authority of the Church, the modernists suggested the possibility of a changing, transforming vision of truth, one which could be reinforced by ideas and traditions outside of the Church, and even outside the Christian tradition.

The holding of the truth is not solely a religious claim, although in postmodernist days religious gnosticism seems to be more of an option because of the diminishing need for rational or empirical justification. Robert Bellah made an interesting point at a 1988 conference on fundamentalism at Berkeley, when he spoke of “Enlightenment Fundamentalism,” suggesting that the recent global resurgence of religious traditionalist movements came about largely as a reaction not only to modernity but to the narrow scientific intolerance that frequently coincided with such—i.e., the “cribbed and confined” world view of the general academy, dedicated to an exclusionary tactic of eliminating anything beyond the purview of what Habermas has called the “technical-rational paradigm for understanding the world” (Coleman 79). This is an important point towards the realization that fundamentalism has roots in a particular understanding of *belief* in a *truth*, i.e., one that is transcendent, non-contingent, exclusionary, and even imperialistic; and in a *faith* that rises above what is rational and empirical—and ultimately beyond what is (merely) human.

According to Gabriel Daly, the phenomenon of fundamentalism gains support from a widespread anti-intellectualism that questions the validity of academic attempts to transform or reinterpret the purity and strength of faith. (Coleman 92) Daly insists that this protest cannot be simply dismissed as “irrationalism,” though it brings to mind Heidegger’s comment on Marx’s dictum—“philosophers interpret the world, but the point is to change it”—that the first part of the statement denies what is implicitly pre-supposed in the second half. The *protest* of fundamentalism poses an important question, not only to church-affiliated theologians (as Daly suggests), but also to anyone concerned with the ramifications of moral pluralism and the ongoing absolutism-

relativism debate, or interested in the effects of their faith and belief may have in a pluralized post-modern world. The question is: “How is it that when religious belief and practice are brought into harmony with reasonable requirements of the secular world, so often they lose their power to attract and satisfy?” (Coleman 93) This, indeed, is the crux of the matter: religion within the limits of reason alone, whether *à la* Kant, Comte, or John Dewey, seems to be little more than secularism disguised with the use of an abstract quasi-theological terminology. Moreover, rationalism and positivism neglect the non-rational element that appears in all religions, and that plays a vital role in conversion and religious experience. Daly has the (final?) word: “It sometimes seems that a church which squares up with modernity loses precisely the ‘Dionysian’ element which fundamentalism so often preserves.”

But must the rest be silence? Must we choose between Descartes and Dionysus, with Nietzsche’s hero being the only figure around which to center the revolt against the Kafkaesque world of late modernity? The Dionysian element, the most non-rational aspect of religion, is, in essence, faith. It seems safe to conclude that faith cannot be abjured nor vindicated by reason or logic. But then what are we to make of faith, and can there be any truth at all, except what resides within the individual? There can surely be faith without knowledge or proof, but can there be faith without foundation, without a Surety, a Certitude that excludes variations? Saying “I believe” is quite distinct from saying “What I believe is true/right,” which in turn is quite different from the statement “Since what I believe is true/right, then what you or others believe, insofar as it differs from what I believe, is wrong/false; and thus you who do not belong to my faith-group cannot, by virtue of this difference/opposition, share in the esteem/rights allocated to those who do belong.” Yet how often has a link been made between these assumptions, a sort of slippery slope from belief to exclusionism and beyond. Breaking down these associations, leveling the slope, as it were, is the task of any investigation that is both critical and humanist. If, as critical theologian Hans Küng has argued, truth and falsity are not monopolized by any religious tradition, and in fact have no “vertical” allegiance to any one conception of transcendence, but rather run “horizontally” across all faiths, then fundamentalism, as a horizontal phenomenon, stands before us as a possible “falsehood” *vis-à-vis* the particular faiths in which it is manifest. Fundamentalism has often been judged and criticized as dangerous to socio-political (and of course, economic) stability and to the liberal-democratic conception of “human rights,” but it may also be detrimental, antithetical even to its alleged cause, namely the spread and development of religiosity in the world.

Yet the alternative to fundamentalism cannot be conceived as a singularity; relativism is not an alternative option, but a prospective *ground* on which to imagine other options. A critical hermeneutical examination of that crucial and formative period for Christian faith, the Reformation, together with a brief analysis of several of its most prominent spokesmen and concepts opens up the possibility of other paths: belief without exclusionism, faith without gnostic pretensions, a different use and conception of history and tradition, an a recognition of the failures of Christianity and the possible contingency of its truth.

Excursus: Faith and the Dawn of Modernity

“The world-historical significance of the Reformation has not lessened with the passing of time. Not only does it mark a new epoch—the Protestant era—in the history of Christianity, but modern civilization itself may look back to it for its beginnings.”

– Richard Reardon

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the problems of modern moral theory emerge clearly as the product of the failure of the Enlightenment project, agreeing, in this regard, with many Christian fundamentalists. The individual moral agent is freed from hierarchy and teleology, becomes sovereign in her moral authority, yet the inherited (if partially transformed) “rules of morality” lose power in being deprived of their teleological or categorical character as expressions of divine law. (MacIntyre 62). Despite countless attempts to overcome it, this difficulty seems to be insolvable, and justifies a re-examination or exhumation of classical (for MacIntyre, Aristotelian) motifs of morality and the virtues. The focus of the present investigation is the meaning and use of faith in a socio-historical context rather than specific moral vocabularies, but the crisis of relativism has implications that span both realms. In order to trace the origins of the dominant conceptions of faith in the Christian context, it will be useful to re-examine that critical and formative period in Western history in which two grand revolutions almost simultaneously transformed what Foucault would call the modern “episteme”—the Renaissance and the Reformation.

The European Renaissance contested, for the first time since Constantine, the supreme unity of values embodied in the hegemonic Christian tradition. While it is otiose in the twenty-first century to view the Middle Ages as a period of darkness and decay or, alternatively, as a mythic golden age, in terms of religious faith it is fair to say that matters were relatively untroubled.¹¹ For the modern Romantic, of course, the notion of a single overwhelming value-system renders this period a positive archetype:

[T]he faith was the point of plausibility in which every line of enquiry ended, the faith was what enforced logic and gave it that specific colouring, that style-creating impulse which expresses itself not only in a certain style of thinking, but continues to shape a style characterizing the whole epoch for so long as the faith survives. (Broch 447)

Yet, if the faith was pure and simple, the keepers of the Truth had grown corrupt, and scholastic theology, by introducing an abstract Aristotelian God, dared to make of the highly personal God of the Middle Ages “an entity whose name could no longer be spoken and whose image could no longer be fashioned,” one that ascended into the infinite neutrality of the abstract and was lost to sight, no longer imminent but utterly beyond the reach of humanity. The combination of the scholastics removal of the point of plausibility to the plane of the infinite, the effective withdrawal of faith from concrete life (destroying what Broch called the “simple sufficiency of existence”), and the blatant corruption of the worldly papacy could not but provoke a reaction of some sort.

Yet medieval culture, “insofar as it was a unity at all, was a fragile and complex balance of a variety of disparate and conflicting elements... it is necessary to recognize a number of different and conflicting strands in medieval culture, each of which imposed its own strains and tensions on the whole” (MacIntyre 166). One particular reaction to the scholasticism of Aquinas began not long after his own time, and by the fifteenth century had emerged as the *via moderna*, which, under the influence of thirteenth-century English nominalist William of Occam, drastically limited the role of reason in human knowledge of things divine.¹² In the “modern way” truth cannot be rationally or empirically understood, but can only be found via a higher authority, which for Occam was to be found in biblical revelation. Thus *fideism* was born, as a form of dogmatic positivism with roots in a thoroughgoing skepticism.¹³ Occamite fideism was to have no small impact on Martin Luther, who absorbed it in his days as an Augustinian cenobite. By the fifteenth century, the bankruptcy of scholasticism was becoming increasingly evident, and the tide turning with the Renaissance from the centralization of an ecclesiastical *organon* to the multifariousness of direct experience—from the Platonic pattern of medieval theocracy to the positivist contemplation of the empirically-given and endlessly changing world. Atomization of the world had begun, and the atomization of value-systems was soon to become a possibility for the first time.

Reaction to the institutional Church itself arrived somewhat later, and with much greater consequences. The Reformation, often dated from All Saints’ Day 1517, that fateful afternoon when Martin Luther tacked his ninety-five theses onto the unsuspecting door of the Wittenburg Cathedral, was in part a *continuation* and in part a *reaction* to the flowering of the Renaissance. On the one hand, the inward turning of the eye allowed for a more immediate and personalized apprehension of the divinity, freed from the middlemen of the Church hierarchy. Yet the atomizing of value-systems had to be checked by a reaffirmation of Christian values, based on a purified (re-)espousal of the inerrancy of Scripture, the Gospel. Protestantism borrowed Renaissance immediacy and reinforced its glorification of action—of the *deed* that is so conspicuous in Renaissance expression. Partly by virtue of its origin an active faith, Protestantism “presupposes a religiously active man, endowed with the same positive activity as the... scientific researcher... soldier, or politician (of today)” (Broch 485). Yet even in the midst of this call to action lay an unrelenting severity, a categorical imperative of duty, an exclusion of all other value-systems; in short, a reaffirmation of pre-Renaissance absolutism.

Luther: God’s Lasquet

[T]hey who do not rightly estimate the Reformation cannot rightly understand Luther, since Luther apart from the Reformation would cease to be Luther.

– C. J. Hare

The Reformation can hardly be discussed without mention of Martin Luther, whose towering figure embodies the power as well as the contradictions of the reformulation of Christian faith which took place five hundred years ago, and whose words and deeds may shed some light on the historical and philosophical roots of a certain vocabulary of faith that we

find embodied in modern fundamentalism. If fundamentalism seeks to remake the world, intent on the restoration of all things to the divine, then Luther is a kindred ancestor, a proto-fundamentalist both in spirit, and in deed. A born fighter, Luther not only rejected the (worldly and spiritual) claims of the wayward Church of Rome, but denounced, with at least equal fervor, his humanist peers for daring to put human affairs above, or even on the same level as divine things. Moreover, Luther eschewed skepticism and doubt (reborn with the Renaissance and to become prime motifs of the Enlightenment): “Without certitude,” he wrote to Erasmus, “Christianity cannot exist... [a] Christian must be sure of his doctrine and his course, or he is no Christian” (Zweig 38). “God’s lasquet” (as Stefan Zweig calls him) insisted on the *literal rendering* of the sacred text, placing particular emphasis on Christ’s enigmatic dictum: “I came not to send peace, but a sword” (Matt 10:34). As is the case in most revolutions, it can be said that Luther’s sword escaped his control before long, and he was forced to condemn those “radical reformers” who were instigated by his teachings and deeds. Protestantism began as a partial system of values that needed to claim absoluteness in order to survive. Broch calls this “that remarkable ambiguity” that characterizes every partial system, an ambiguity that “amounts to dishonesty, epistemologically-speaking:

on the one hand the partial system adopts the attitude of a total system towards the process of advancing disintegration and stigmatizes the irrational as rebellious and criminal, while on the other hand it is compelled to distinguish among the homogeneous mass of irrationality and anonymous wickedness a group of ‘good’ irrational forces which are needed to help it in checking further disintegration and in establishing its own claims to survival. (Broch 636)

Luther’s trump card was his notion of justification by faith—*by faith alone*—a specifically religious (as opposed to ethical) conviction, which implies that a person’s standing with God is far more important than any moral end she hopes to achieve, even *with* God’s help. For Luther faith is neither mere intellectual assent nor a formal theological concept, but is primarily an *experience*, an experience that makes a “new man,” who nevertheless will always remain a sinner in the eyes of God. Richard Reardon claims that this justification by faith alone principle was of epoch-making significance: discrediting the “works-righteousness” of traditional religion, salvation becomes God’s gift, not humanity’s labored achievement. (Reardon 60). The sinner is but a passive recipient of divine grace, yet he gains his freedom *vis-à-vis* the church with its rules and legalistic procedures. A cynical view of Luther’s victory in this regard is put forth by Bernard Shaw, who admits that, though it may be said that pre-Reformation Christianity involved very real sacrifices, “Luther delivered us from all that. His reformation was a triumph of imagination and a triumph of cheapness... [bringing] you complete salvation and ask[ing] you for nothing but faith.”¹⁴

Some implications of this shift: since there is no longer any real clergy or priesthood except the baptized, there is no longer any difference between the spiritual estate and the temporal; with regard to Scripture, it is, as the Gospel, self-authenticating, when received with an open-heart. In a stance

reminiscent of the Islamic rigorists who brought about the destruction of the “superfluous” knowledge at Alexandria, what cannot be proven out of scripture, or at least supported by its *clear indications*, is either irrelevant or false. Luther recognized, it seems, the danger of literalism and “illumination” giving free reign to idiosyncratic readings of the Word, and fought against such cases that sprung up even in his own lifetime (e.g., Thomas Müntzer being), yet he could only claim that such were not evocations of the *true* gospel as he himself claimed. For Luther was insistent that his convictions, though revolutionary, were meant to *cleanse*, and not to *destroy* the Church: “the reformed Church he envisaged and sought to bring about would be not simply a return... to the church of the New Testament, but a continuation of that whose life and fundamental witness to the truth in Christ Jesus had persisted through the centuries” (Reardon 76).

Of course, the elites and scholastics of the sixteenth-century Church were not to be easily convinced by the rhetoric of this upstart monk from Germany. Fiercely traditional, in the literal sense of preservation of a direct line of revelation and concomitant way of life, the defenders of Christian orthodoxy could honestly feel themselves justified in obtaining recantations from heretics by the employment of the most extreme forms of physical torture, because it was there unspoken conviction that only *faith*—which they identified with an orthodoxy built up through a millennia and a half of Church history—could open the way to salvation.¹⁵ Faith was a matter of unswerving commitment to dogma codified by the one, true, holy and apostolic Church of Rome. Although Luther rejected these norms, his views were couched in a similar (i.e., gnostic-Manichean) language, except that it was Scripture that was to be the new and final standard of Christian orthodoxy, not the Catholic creed. Like the fundamentalists of today, Luther fought a two-front war, and was largely successful in calling forth a purified retrieval of the past while disclaiming the orthodoxy of unbroken tradition professed by his enemies in Rome.

Thus, the Reformation led by Martin Luther was a reaction, medieval in ethos, against certain tendencies of the contemporary world, which at the same time, by breaking the hegemony of unified ecclesiastical power, paved the way for the gradual secularization process that overwhelmed modernity through the Enlightenment to modern times. Unwittingly, the breach opened up by the reformers rendered it possible for new intellectual and social forces to gradually secure the emancipation of secular life from ecclesiastical tutelage. Yet this process was an unintentional one, surely; Luther aimed to *purify* Christian practice in order to save it from what he saw (perhaps rightly) as eventual dissolution, and he certainly had little sympathy for the spirit of the age which was dawning, that of the Renaissance. In fact, it can be argued that, despite his opposition to the papacy, Luther’s medievalism ensured a shared understanding between himself and his Roman foes, and thus he was in some sense less of a threat to the established Church than his erstwhile mentor and eventual foe: Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Erasmus: The First European?

It would show a far more Christian spirit if every man would set argument aside and make what voluntary contribution he can to the common interest, acting in all sincerity; putting off

his pride to learn what he does not know and ridding himself of jealousy to teach what he knows.

– Erasmus Desiderius

The Roman Church and Luther shared a common-ground of presuppositions, as well as a common vocabulary based upon a distinctively medieval world-view; Erasmus Desiderius spoke a quite different language altogether, one which, though agreeable to modern ears, was often difficult for his enemies (on both sides) to comprehend. Erasmus (called “the first conscious European” by Stefan Zweig) was as much a product of the Renaissance as he was a spark to the Reformation; he stood for “the freedom of the questing human intelligence in a manner that (both Rome and Luther) sensed as a threat to supernatural authority, however mediated” (Reardon 11).

Erasmus sought to reform Christianity on an *ethical*, as opposed to a *theological* level, using the newly formed vocabulary of humanism which, beginning in fourteenth-century Italy, had rediscovered the literature of classical antiquity (Lat. *litterae humaniores*), and had introduced a standard of human achievement by which civilization might be judged, a set of criteria *other* than the specifically Christian one. Though prone, particularly in Italy, to a somewhat naïve, posturing classicism, the humanist movement infused European thinking with a new critical spirit that contrasted sharply with the narrow formalism of the theological tradition, especially in its rigid scholastic forms. The central concern of Erasmus is one that remains relevant, perhaps more so now than in his own time: *How can one in all honesty be at once a man of culture and a Christian?* or, more generally, *How can one be simultaneously a free human and a servant to divine truth?* (Küng *Theology* 20) The answer for the Dutch humanist was to be found in the linking of education and piety, culture and religion, antiquity and Christianity, and, most importantly, *the human and the divine*. One could, he concluded, be authentically human by being a Christian and be a Christian by being human—Christian faith being couched in terms of human freedom and hope.¹⁶

Wary of venturing into the airy realms of dogmatic theology, not only from a sense of incompetence in matters so abstruse but also from a conviction that Christian doctrine is essentially simple and practical, Erasmus’s innovation lay in bringing the speculative intellect to expose the superfluities and absurdities of much of what made up Christian tradition, stripping Christianity to its roots in what he called the “philosophy of Christ.” He neither shunned the use of reason (like the early fideists and Luther) nor attempted to justify faith by reason (like the Thomists). Yet in one sense Erasmus was closer to Occam and Luther than to Aquinas, i.e., in his fideism; though his was a fideism of a minimized, or undogmatic sort. Preferring the *via moderna* when it came to the essentials of faith (i.e., matters that could neither be explained nor falsified by reason), he did not go so far as to discard the use of the intellect and the benefits of knowledge in explicating and justifying the more mundane (but perhaps most significant) aspects of the religious life, namely the *living* of such. Erasmus’s humanistic fideism cannot be called dogmatic positivism, as not everything can be justified on the grounds of faith alone. Again, his intent was to delineate a true philosophy of Christ, which required little in the way of theological intricacy, but which, starting from a minimized faith in Christ would make full use of humanity’s gift of

knowledge and introspection. Moreover, for Erasmus the end of such knowledge should not be the growth of the speculative intellect but rather the *enlightenment of the moral conscience*.

The philosophy of Christ was, in essence, nothing more or less than the meaning of Christ himself, the *living Christ*: simplicity, patience, purity, humility.¹⁷ Christ's ethical precepts, says Erasmus, are not to be explained away or glossed over in favor of (Pauline) "salvationism," but are to be taken literally, though in the spirit no less than the letter. This is particularly true of the virtue of *charity*:

Edifying your neighbour, counting all men members of the same body, thinking of them all as one in Christ, rejoicing in the Lord over your brother's good fortune as over your own, relieving his misfortunes, correcting with gentleness such as err, instructing the ignorant, lifting up the fallen, consoling the dejected, helping those who toil, succouring those in need.¹⁸

Above all, *pride*, the worst of all vices, must be assiduously countermanded, including the pride of knowledge that can lead to arrogance and disdain for others. In this picture, Jesus in neither a judge nor a mediator, but a model; the externals of the religious life are relatively unimportant compared to the way in which one actually lives one's life. Erasmus can in no way be deemed a "radical" if by such is meant a literalist return to scripture and New Testament patterns. In fact, a central tenet of his Christian humanism is the treatment of the Bible as an inordinately valuable yet ultimately human and literary work—to be interpreted with all the external knowledge that can be brought to bear upon it.¹⁹

Erasmian reformism was swept away by the flood-tides of the Reformation, in which he was upstaged by Luther, who turned from his early reverence of the Dutch scholar to an eventual disdain for the latter's "betrayal" of Christian reform. Erasmus never condemned Luther for heresy, yet he was terrified of the younger man's "German consistency" and his willingness to overthrow much of what, in Erasmus's eyes, should have been left standing. "I laid a hen's egg," he is reputed to have said, "but what Luther hatched was a bird of a quite different sort" (DeMolen 32). Luther's criticism of Erasmus, ("human affairs mean more to him than divine things") is just, but makes a distinction that Erasmus himself would not have made. Human affairs, by virtue of being human, were in some sense already "divine," and divine things were best exemplified in human beings living the philosophy of Christ. Gradually, argues Zweig, out of this essential difference arose a far greater contrast, a split between two very different conceptions of the nature and meaning of the Christian message, as well as the meaning of faith and the use of knowledge more generally.

For the humanist, Christ was the messenger of everything human—the divine being who had given his blood in order that the shedding of blood might disappear from the world, together with discord and quarrelsomeness. To this the inflexible Luther responded that the true Christian must never yield an inch of ground when God's word is at stake, even if, in so doing, the world should have to be demolished. Erasmus confessed, on more than one occasion, that he was temperamentally opposed to dissension in addition to finding it contrary to the principles of Christ: "I see," he concluded

with some prescience, "how much easier it is to start than to assuage a tumult." When confronted (by Hutten) on his "defection" from the reformers camp and his seeming refusal to die for the Gospel, Erasmus replied that he would not refuse to do so if the need arose, but he was "in no mind to die for the paradoxes of Luther."²⁰ Moreover, to Erasmus's mind, the sorts of questions dividing the reformers and Rome were essentially theological problems of the sort that were best left to discussion in the schools, and were certainly not principles of faith demanding martyrdom. Here Erasmus seems to have underestimated the importance of a cognitive shift that was taking place with regard to the essentials of faith, one that was, essentially, a revived medieval way of thinking and of speaking about truth.

Theological dogmatism, or dogmatism of *any* sort for that matter, was naturally repellent to Erasmus; too many things had been defined and (acrimoniously) debated on which it would have been better to confess ignorance. If religion (as he envisaged) was to bring peace and reconciliation, rather than cause strife, hatred and discord, then theological definitions would have to be kept to a minimum, and personal opinion given more allowance. Faith is, at heart, a personal choice, and cannot be created by coercion, or even by persuasion. Of infallibility, whether papal, conciliar (traditional), or scriptural, what evidence was there? Nor indeed, Erasmus might say, is reason infallible, and one must refrain from judging matters as though one thought it was. "Circumspect and clear-sighted, and ever aware of the obscurity pervading so many things on which men feel deeply, [Erasmus] could always appreciate the strength of opposing arguments, knowing that truth and justice are rarely an exclusive possession" (Reardon 39). To acquire knowledge, the humanist realized, demands application and patience, and sound opinions can be reached only after much reflection and self-critical candour (cf. "ironism," below). Erasmus understood well enough the need for change, perhaps far-reaching change, in societies embedded in a long and relatively unified Christian tradition, but he also saw the benefits of the single value-system, and the importance of retaining some aspects of a culture that had been so long in the making and that may be useful in the face of a future uncertain.

Many thinkers—writers, philosophers, and theologians—in recent times have looked to Erasmus as a rather tragic figure in a formative age; as perhaps the voice of a possible *tertium quid*, a third way between the absolutist vocabularies of the warring and increasingly polarized sides of the Reformation; and as a "paragon of rational amenity in a violent and vociferous age."²¹ Though by all means a Berlinian fox, Erasmus was no penetrating thinker of the Nietzschean sort, able to expound provocative ideas in the confines of an epigram, yet his breadth of knowledge was never circumscribed into systematic form, and his skepticism and intellectual tolerance, which may have been the reason for his "defeat," can now be looked upon as a beacon for writers of all sorts, especially theologians. No traditionalist, Erasmus sought, like Luther, to "purify" Christianity, but to do so by appealing to reason as well as faith, particularly by revealing the superfluous absurdities of the Church while emphasizing the oneness of Christianity with humanism, which shared a quintessence of "peace and unanimity." His reform was to be sought and manifested on the level of ethics—the ordering of

one's life in the spirit of Jesus.²² As far as he was concerned, *nothing* of great moral meaning or ethical significance to humankind should be excluded from what is considered Christian. Certainly Erasmus had his weaknesses, not least of which is his refusal to debate and make the effort of conciliation when events required his (profoundly influential) voice. His was not a spirit to inspire martyrs, but after fifteen hundred (or two thousand) years of Christianity, who needs more martyrs? Erasmus realized MacIntyre's point that "it is not how to die a martyr but how to relate to the forms of daily life that a Christian must learn" (MacIntyre 107).

In sum, the message of Desiderius Erasmus, and the break between he and Martin Luther, have no small importance not just to an understanding of the development of modern Christianity but also to the development of the modern vocabularies of faith, belief, and values. Their split resulted not simply from theological differences, but more so from their contrasting temperaments and world-views: Luther's resting on the theocentricity of traditional belief, Erasmus's on a sense of the inherent capacity of human beings to fashion their own destiny, to write their own story in the form of a narrative quest, albeit one that is informed, guided even, by the "philosophy of Christ" and by the knowledge and reflection gleaned from experience of "men and letters."

Fideism: The Sublation of Modernity

Truth? Perhaps the word should always be attended with the question mark to which it so often leans; or, would it be simpler to drop the term altogether, as many thinkers of our epoch have done? What is truth? Who can claim to hold the truth? What does it *mean* to hold the truth? The Roman Procurator Pilate was by no means the first to puzzle over these issues; nor was he the first to leave off before waiting for answers. Such puzzlement and obfuscation results from attempts to discuss truth that it has been, for the most part, relinquished of its importance in much of recent philosophy and theology; issues of freedom, rights, and solidarity/communality have a more significant place in contemporary thought, as these seem to have actual concrete application to human lives. Imbued as we are with post-Enlightenment skepticism and postmodern relativism, not to mention the force of political correctness, few beyond the religiously devout claim to know or even attempt to know what is "true" in some transcendent, absolute sense. But does relinquishing truth mean giving up, as some have argued, any notion of standards, of criteria with which to govern our lives?

The point of the preceding historical excursus was to illumine how Christianity was reshaped by encroaching modernity (the Renaissance), and vice versa. As we have seen, Luther's victory not only sparked the dissolution of Christendom into breakaway sects (a process which could not be stopped by the original reformers, even Luther), it also carried within it an orientation of values that can be called medieval in orientation. It can be argued that, since values, as Broch says, "consist only in the effective will to value unconditionally," this carry-over was inevitable. What was new, however, was the appearance for the first time of "relative absolutes."²³ Thus the Reformation ultimately perpetuated a state of confusion brought about by the atomizing tendencies and conflicting priorities unearthed in the Renaissance. The Roman Catholic "counter reformation" can be seen in this light as an attempt to return, under the

banner of the new (Jesuit) scholasticism, to that lost medieval wholeness in which the Church would maintain for eternity its divine position as the source and interpreter of meaning and values in the world.²⁴ Protestantism had to accept division, but maintained the Lutheran sense of severity, despising extraneous aids to salvation and insisting on the radical inwardness of religious experience and on strict devotion to the Gospel above all else. In large part, this radical form of religiosity, dumb and stripped of ornament—this "conception of an infinity conditioned by severity and by severity alone"—determined the style of thinking characteristic to the modern epoch as a whole.²⁵ An abstract, hidden God; a world of many competing values and value-systems, each one claiming absoluteness; an emphasis on severity and rigor in understanding—these are elements of the new worldview that has only just come undone in the twentieth century, but whose cracks had been evident for a long time.

Emotivism: The Style of the Times

Emotivism is the name often given to the particular moral vocabulary that in many ways dominates our epoch, and that emerged out of the breakdown of the modern paradigm: the doctrine that all evaluative judgments (and, more specifically, all *moral* judgments) are nothing but expressions of preference, attitude or feeling.²⁶ Thus moral judgments are *neither* true nor false, and moral agreement *cannot* be reached by any rational method. Rather, we use moral judgments to express our own attitudes, and also to produce effects upon others; i.e., moral judgments are both *expressive* and *persuasive*. As a theory of *use* rather than *meaning*, emotivism has been widely conceded as the vocabulary that most befits our post-modern and pluralist world.²⁷ According to MacIntyre, who frames his own thesis in *After Virtue* in terms of a confrontation with emotivism, to a large degree "people now think, talk, and act *as if* emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be" (MacIntyre 22). For MacIntyre and many others such blithe acceptance marks a degeneration and a grave cultural loss, as all faiths and evaluations henceforth become nothing more than subjective directions given to sentiment and feeling.

Simply put, emotivism derives from the failure of the Enlightenment project to establish a rational basis for morality. Max Weber was, in some sense, an early emotivist,²⁸ and Nietzsche's perspectivism radically questioned the possibility of a Truth to which morality could be conjoined. Yet it is clear that emotivism has found its most comfortable home, its most fitting epochal embodiment, in post-modernist times. MacIntyre makes the (Brochian) point that any moral philosophy presupposes a sociology, i.e., "offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions, and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be so in social world" (23). For MacIntyre, emotivism is embodied in *characters* of a social and psychological type, who share the emotivist view of the distinction between rational and non-rational discourse, but who represent the embodiment of that distinction in very different social contexts. Whereas in the domain of fact there are rational, empirical, or scientific procedures for eliminating disagreement, in that of morals the only procedure seems to be a recognition of the lack of procedure, a situation dignified by

terms like “tolerance” and “pluralism.” Ernest Gellner is harder on such a moral stance, which amounts to little more than relativism, and which he equates with a normative post-modernist “movement” in the Western academy, one that indulges in subjectivism “as a form of expiation for the sins of colonialism” (Gellner vi). Although relativism has and will be with us for some time, post-modernism, says Gellner, is an ephemeral cultural fashion of subjective hermeneutics fused with a self-righteous promise; one that claims a monopoly on liberation but ultimately reinforces relativism and gives it an air of inevitability.

Although Gellner is correct to condemn the claims of a self-consciously postmodern movement, one that has tended towards abstruseness and epistemological (if not moral) nihilism,²⁹ he falls into the fundamentalist error of ascribing clear intent and consistency of vision to one’s foe. As a mode of description, post-modernism is a useful way of describing the present situation in the West, in its fragmented and pluralist form. It is interesting that the proposed solutions of both MacIntyre and Gellner are retrogressive, yet very different: the former tries to draw a new Aristotelian conception of the virtues, the latter a revived Enlightenment rationalism. Of these two projects, MacIntyre’s is the superior one, as it does seem that the Enlightenment project has failed on its own accord, and would be exceedingly difficult to revive in any form. Both of these thinkers, however, have narrow conceptions of religious faith: MacIntyre virtually neglects the issue of religious virtues, adding only his praise for the theological virtue of charity³⁰; Gellner limits the possibilities for faith to a stark either/or—i.e., intolerant fundamentalism or a wishy-washy “constitutional religion,” confined to the realm of aesthetics and matters of “taste.”

Without Fear or Trembling

If I wish to preserve myself in faith, I must constantly be intent upon holding fast objective uncertainty, so in the objective uncertainty I am swimming in deep water—and yet believe.

– Søren Kierkegaard

Fundamentalism is clearly a reaction against the limits of both modernism and post-modernism. Both Gellner and MacIntyre cite Søren Kierkegaard as an anti-fundamentalist hero; a figure who delivered religion from its essence as persuasion of the truth of a particular doctrine to a something that is not only inherently absurd, but that actually gives offence. The son of a Lutheran minister (like Kant),³¹ Kierkegaard picked up as his starting-point Kant’s failure to revoke Diderot and Hume and justify morality by reason alone, the Dane calling in the act of choice to do the work that Kantian reason could not accomplish. Steeped in Lutheran morality, Kierkegaard attempted to establish a new practical and philosophical underpinning for an older and inherited way of life, relying to some extent upon the tradition of fideism dating back to Occam. In short, Kierkegaard sought to found morality on criterion-less fundamental choice, because of what he saw as the compelling nature of the arguments that excluded both reason (Kant) and the passions (Hume) as grounds for morality.

Kierkegaard may have been the first to counter the illusions of objectivity made manifest in the tendency “to smother the vital core of subjective experience beneath layers of historical commentary and pseudo-scientific

generalizations,” and in a concomitant “proneness to discuss ideas from an abstract theoretical viewpoint that took no account of their significance for the particular outlooks and commitments of flesh and blood human beings” (Gardiner 2). Reacting against Kant in a similar fashion that Erasmus reacted against both Luther and the Church, whereas Kant wanted to make room for faith—albeit a faith of pure practical reason securely founded in the authoritative deliverances of the moral consciousness—for Kierkegaard there was much more at stake than a particular set of cognitive claims. Faith is a pervasive way of looking at things that color one’s world, and has its source in a particular *attitude* to life from that cannot be dislodged by logical or rational argument. Yet *pace* Luther, faith cannot be left entirely on its own, to justify the whims of its beholder, but must be accompanied by an enlargement of an individual’s self-understanding and critical self-awareness, which Kierkegaard found could best be achieved by the “ironic” method and the use of literature, rather than by abstract instruction, the inculcation of salutary precepts, or the reaffirmation of tradition.

Thus, if Kierkegaard is a Jamesian pragmatist in his conception of truth and belief, he is also an ironist of the Rortyan neo-pragmatist sort, seeking to enable his readers to acquire a more perspicuous insight into their own situation and motivations, but *sans* the didacticism of “objective” modes of discourse, whether scientific or theological. His program is a distinctively literary one, eliciting, with the help of the imagination, the emotional foundations and practical implications of one’s beliefs and behavior, while at the same time revealing the differences in contrasting outlooks and approaches. This is the only path open to the emotivist self, who, is effectively without *telos* (having lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end upon the acquisition, as it were, of personal sovereignty). (MacIntyre 34) As suggested above, the emotivist self has its own kind of social definition *vis-à-vis* the definition of those characters that inhabit and present the various social roles of the epoch. Ethics become a somewhat quixotic, yet still vital and necessary, quest for identification.³²

Ultimately, Kierkegaard represents another step in the development of fideism: whereas both Kant and Hegel (in different ways) sought to assimilate and subordinate the notion of religious faith to other categories of thought, Kierkegaard (e.g., *Fear and Trembling*) puts forth a form of faith that possesses a wholly independent status, lying beyond the province of ethical thinking and resisting elucidation in universal or rational terms, but nonetheless consistent with critical thought and development of self by means of archetypal characters.

Belief against Belief

*To believe in God is to long for His existence and, further, it is to act as if He existed; it is to live by this longing and to make it the inner spring of our action.*³³

– Miguel de Unamuno

Belief may be as difficult a term as *truth*. For the fideist, belief must involve a “leap”—a willful longing rather than an assumption based upon an avowed proof or given evidence.³⁴ For Kierkegaard, it is to be understood not so much as a *conclusion* as a *resolution*—a voluntary act that, although originating from doubt, must strive to overcome doubt.

Though it is of course impossible to know *why* people believe what they believe, it seems plain that religious *belief* is quite different from a belief in, say, trees, people, or even black holes or quarks. Belief in God, or in Scripture, or in Revelation through a particular transcendent referent or tradition is not based upon (and does not claim to require) evidence of the sort that natural science requires. As Paul and Tertillian knew, Christian belief, in particular, requires the professor to accept something that is not only improbable but *offensive* to reason and the understanding, namely the Christ-event and its cosmic redemptive significance. Thus Christian belief requires not just a mere “leap of faith,” but a headfirst dive into the rationally unthinkable. Miguel de Unamuno, a Spanish disciple of Kierkegaard, found the motivation for this leap in the hope of transcendence, not least because of a dread fear of the nothingness that would entail without immortality.³⁵ For the Dane (e.g., *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), Christianity only has truth as a subjective phenomenon; objectively, he argues, it has none whatsoever: “its basic tenets being more properly taken to be expressive of a moral vision or to embody spiritual values than as constituting assertions that purport to be true in some literal or specifically factual sense” (114). As terrible as this pronouncement may sound to traditional ears, Kierkegaard’s formulation can serve as the basis for a revived Christian humanist ethic of the Erasmian sort, one that bypasses the rigorism of fundamentalism yet need not founder upon the rocks of Kierkegaard’s own existentialist subjectivism.³⁶

As William James noted, we cannot will ourselves to believe what is *contrary* to the facts at our disposal. Belief in God, however, is and must be a transcendent belief, and thus is quite different from belief in, say, flying goats, not just because belief in the latter serves no purpose, but also because it is so clearly *contrary* to the evidence we possess with regard to sedentary and avian mammals. Clearly, our creeds are not produced by our intellectual nature alone. But does this justify any and all beliefs with religious content? No, for just as we cannot affirm that there is Truth, neither can we deny the possibility outright, and in the meantime we must deny those beliefs whose particular manifestations run contrary to—as Stout would have it—the shared pidgin moral and ethical vocabulary we now possess.³⁷ Truth may be best reconceived in terms of *possibility*, in an empiricist and not an absolutist sense.³⁸ Moreover, this brings up the oft-neglected issue that is of vital import to a consideration of faith, belief, and truth—namely, the assumption that our human minds are equipped to know the Truth if and when it comes to us. This conceit, perhaps itself borrowed from the (fundamentalist) religious impulse, is based on the notion that we are somehow “made for” the Truth. As the French poet Lautrémont once proclaimed (perhaps being unaware of the paradoxical nature of his claim): “I know nothing which is beyond the reach of the human mind except truth.”

Furthermore, as Borges put it: “It is venturesome to think that a co-ordination of words (philosophies are nothing more than that) can resemble the universe very much” (243). Thus we are at several removes from what Heidegger would call the *earth*: not only may we not be fitted to receive the truth, but our words may not be able to adequately express what is beyond our purview, even if it can be glimpsed in silence. Yet giving up objective certitude does not require giving up entirely the quest or the *hope* of truth. As James and Borges

would agree, it is also venturesome to think that of all the attempted illuminations of truth, of all those “illustrious co-ordinations” of words and phrases, that one of them, “at least in an infinitesimal way, does not resemble the universe a bit more than the others” (Borges 243). “Science says things *are*; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things: 1. The best things are the more eternal (transcendent) things; (and) 2. We are better off if we believe the first affirmation to be true” (James *Will* 25). In the end, of course, faith can only be judged by the manifestation of such in an interpersonal or social situation, and this is where fideism leads—to the action of the everyday believer.

Like Erasmus before him, Kierkegaard sought to bring Christianity down to earth by virtue of centralizing its practical ethics and mode of behavior—one based upon, though not *justified by*, the priority of faith. For several centuries now, philosophers and critics have successfully discredited attempts at substantiating religious predispositions (concerning the nature of God, immortality, and so on). But these objections need no longer (as Schleiermacher may have been the first since Occam to realize) be considered as damaging to religion as they may have once been; they may in fact, by sweeping away such superfluities, have indirectly helped to draw attention to the core of the Christian message as conceived by the humanist Erasmus, and the existentialist Kierkegaard. Truth in this sense is a modest, but vital claim, which involves *moral action* as its last result. It has been suggested (by Buckminster Fuller) that God is not, in fact, a noun, but a verb, and for the fideist truth must be conceived in the same way. Rightly understood, human existence takes the form of a constant striving—a seeking after fulfillment, “which is attainable by our fiercely committing ourselves to a power that transcends objective knowledge and rational comprehension” (Gardiner 109). This, for Kierkegaard, is, in so many words, the *formula of faith*. There can be no faith, no belief, without prior skepticism, without doubt; but it may be possible for the anxiety of doubt and uncertainty to issue in a qualitative leap that takes the believer neither into a state of alienation nor into one of dogmatic certitude, but into an absurd but strong sense of *hope*: “Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible, and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance” (James “Sentiment” 90).

Immanence and Transcendence: Christian Praxis

Modern religion tends (since James) to be highly individual, ‘privatized’, in the jargon of the sociologists, a private affair of ‘personal choice’.

– Martin Marty

For all the talk of the privatization of religious conviction in the modern West, the fact remains that an individual’s understanding of truth, her personal beliefs and convictions, and her faith will affect, if not *define*, how she will act interpersonally, socially, and politically. Though the roots and basis of faith can only be, as Kierkegaard was so adamant about getting across, subjective, the results of such, when made manifest on the more than private level, can and must be measured accordingly—and this measurement, being a critical

reflexive one, may in turn transform or develop one's beliefs. Simply put, though God, as the wholly Other, the transcendent point of reference is, by definition, *transcendent*, the fruits of faith are necessarily *immanent* and thus "anthropological." Religion cannot be a separate realm (as, say, are poetry and physics) into which one assumes a role when necessary; for most people religion is manifest on the level of daily activity, most particularly and forcefully in the sphere of daily human interaction.

Thus *practical* religion can be best conceived in terms of *ethics*.³⁹ As Martin Marty states, in our age we need hardly (as James, and Kierkegaard before him tried to do) legitimize the private aspects of religion, particularly in a culture and a world that finds criticism of its socialized forms rather easy. (xxv) Surprisingly, however, outside the rather confined sphere of dogmatic theology (and perhaps psychology), there have been few serious attempts to find out exactly where religion, and Christianity in particular, may have "gone wrong," and lost its claim on many modern folk as a guide to a better life. Tolstoy conceived of religion in these terms: Religion is not, he says, "as some scientists may imagine, a manifestation which at one time corresponded with the development of humanity, but is afterwards outgrown by it, [i]t is a manifestation always inherent in the life of humanity, and is as indispensable, as inherent in humanity at the present time as at any other" (Tolstoy 87). Second, says Tolstoy, religion is always the theory and practice of the future, and not of the past, and thus must be continually renewed.⁴⁰

In developing this notion of humanist Christian praxis, we may learn from that philosophical tradition known as pragmatism, shaped in large part by James, who avowed his lifelong debt to both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Though the pragmatist interest in religion was virtually discarded by James's heir John Dewey, it re-emerged in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, who utilized theology and religious symbols in dialectical concert with an acute historical consciousness and a feeling for the "signs of the times." Niebuhr was most interested in the relation of God and the self, and both of these to history, as well as what the relationship means (or could mean) for human possibilities, and how it sets the direction for relevant public action. His "theological anthropology" had as its aim the ethical reconstruction of society (i.e., *bricolage*) by forging a religious imagination that sustains a strong commitment to public life and gives, by way of faith, *hope* in the very moment of despair. Christianity, therefore, must wage constant war on the one hand against "political religions" (such as fundamentalism) that imagine some proximate goal and some conditioned good as humanity's final good (*telos*), and on the other hand against forms of otherworldliness that give these political religions seeming validity. Yet, for all these aspects of fideism in his work, Niebuhr lacked a clear sense of the interpersonal imperative of religion, its implications for ethics and for a transforming way of life in dialogue with not only political theory and philosophy but also with literature and poetry. It was a poet, Gottfried Lessing, who said, two centuries before Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, and three before Niebuhr, Christian faith *proves itself* not in reasoning, nor even in believing, so much as in right praxis.⁴¹

The Narrative Quest: Quixote and the Birth of the Modern

In a liberal utopia there would be a recognition of the importance of narrative (over theory) in giving detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like.

– Richard Rorty

Pre-Enlightenment moral thinking, whether of the Greek, medieval, or Renaissance variety, inevitably invokes the telling of stories. Adopting a stance on morals and ethics is to adopt in some sense a stance on the narrative character of human life. (MacIntyre 144) Such a motif is not unfamiliar to the Western mind, but is in less evidence since the Enlightenment and the birth of "fiction" as an autonomous category of writing.⁴² The platitude that one can only learn by doing, by experiencing, is at once confirmed and countermanded by the narrative conception of life, which, while emphasizing the questing and experiential element of the life itself, is often revealed in the text, which is on the one hand at one remove from direct experience, but on the other the most potent and direct way of learning about the quests of *others* who exist in distance of space or (especially) time. A play by Lessing illustrates this idea nicely. The plot of *Nathan the Wise* revolves around a parable of a ring, in which a ring of great power is to be bequeathed to a person, with the catch that it is not the attainment of the ring itself that reaps rewards, but the *way* it is acquired; not in the possession, but in the striving to show oneself worthy of the gift, is the true gift revealed.⁴³ Of course the notion of the pilgrim journeying on the questing life had a place in Western literature long before Lessing, most notably in three paradigm figures: The pilgrim of Dante's late medieval poem, entrenched in the concentric spheres of an uncompromising Catholic worldview; Bunyan's Pietist Christian, enduring personal trials and overcoming all by his simple faith and his "valiance for Truth"; and, finally Cervantes's knight of the sorrowful countenance, emerging from the medieval world of chivalry to find that the unity of standards and values had disappeared, and life lamentably no longer imitated art.

It has been said that the modern world began, not in front of the Wittenburg cathedral doors in 1517, but rather in 1605 Spain, when the Hidalgo of La Mancha left his village to explore the world, only to perceive, for the first time, "the rupture of a world based on analogy and thrust into differentiation" (Fuentes vi). Quixote's challenge remains ours, now that the world Cervantes saw beginning has come, with Dostoevsky, Kafka and Broch, to a close. How to accept the diversity, plurality, and changefulness of the world, while retaining the minds power for analogy, unity and coherence so that the world, and our lives, do not become meaningless? *Don Quixote* tells us that being modern is *not* a question of sacrificing the past in favor of the new (and not of re-invoking a mythical purified past); but of maintaining, comparing, and remembering values created by our forebears, *making* them modern so as not to lose the value of the modern. Thus, not only, as Lionel Trilling has said, is all prose fiction a variation on the theme of *Don Quixote*, so is, in essence, modern life in large part based upon the fundamental Quixotic problem of appearance and reality, of belief and truth. It is of no coincidence that Cervantes was a dedicated Erasmian, sharing with the Dutch scholar at least three themes: 1) a sense of the duality (or, multiplicity) of truth; 2) the illusion of appearance; and 3) the (often ironic, but at times sincere) "praise of folly."

Cervantes borrows the Erasmian method of comic debunking to show his unorthodox vision of the double truth: the learned but “mad” Quixote speaks the language of universals, of belief, which seems to be outdated; the simple but “sane” Sancho Panza speaks that of particulars, of doubt. Yet neither is vindicated: each character’s appearance is diversified, obscured, and opposed by the existence and persistence of the other. This point Cervantes shares with Erasmus, in *Praise of Folly*, the latter attempts to head off the danger of making reason absolute: if reason is to be reasonable, it must see itself through the eyes of an ironical madness (the eyes of Quixote). As the great LaRoche foucauld put it: “Sometimes in life situations arise which only the half-crazy can get out of.” This has implications on the personal level: “If the individual is to assert himself, then he must do so with an ironical conscience of his own ego, or he will flounder in solipsism and pride” (Fuentes xii). Quixote, the knight of unwavering belief, meets a faithless and lawless world, and neither knows any longer where the truth really lies. At heart, as Carlos Fuentes suggests, *Don Quixote* outlines a possible reunion of love and justice, a utopia found not in a nihilistic sweeping away of the past, nor of the present in favor of the past, near or remote, but in a fusion of the values that come to us from the past and those we are capable of creating in the present. Specifically, in Cervantes’s case, the values of an age of chivalry acquire a democratic resonance, while the values of democratic life acquire the resonance of nobility.

Integrity, or constancy is a central virtue for the questing knight, perhaps *the* virtue, and is recognized by MacIntyre as the virtue that reinforces his argument that “unless there is a *telos* which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life... conceived as a unity, it will *both* be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life *and* that we shall be unable to specify the content of certain virtues adequately.”⁴⁴ Integrity cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of life. The narrative form counters the post-modern trends of relativism and the analytical atomization of human behavior, as well the deconstructive emphasis on the text in its isolation. Yet again we are dealing more with *use* than *meaning*: “It is because we understand our own lives in terms of the narrative that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.”⁴⁵ The narrative concept of selfhood requires two things: first, that I am the subject of a history that is my own and no one else’s, one that has its own peculiar meaning; and second, that I am not only accountable to others, I can also ask others for an account, as I am as much a part of their story as they are of mine. This is the sociological aspect of “intertextuality”: “the narrative of any one’s life is part of an interlocking set of narratives.”⁴⁶ Though we have no apparent, revealed, or consensual *telos*, no final Good to be reached, it is the quest for a conception of the good that,

will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of the good which will extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of the good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good. (MacIntyre 219)

To paraphrase Dio Chrysostom, *a fully comprehended Good is no Good at all.*⁴⁷

Even the paradigm medieval quest was not a search for something already adequately characterized. If such were the case there would really be no need for a quest at all, if the Truth were in full view. Rather, it is in the course of the quest and only through facing and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. (Goethe: “What is important in life is life and not a result of life.”)⁴⁸

Canon and Tradition: Art and History

Modern aesthetic theory has seen a multitude of opinions as to the place and meaning of art in modern society, running the gamut from the propagandistic misomusy of socialist realism to the social irresponsibility of the *l’art pour l’art* movement. If anything, post-modern aesthetics, under the semiotic-deconstructionist hegemony, has swung back to a conception of the ultimately isolated and complete work-in-itself, freed from author, history and society, and left to the deconstructive talons of the all-powerful critic.⁴⁹ Art is perhaps best conceived somewhere in the middle; like religion it is ultimately a mode of expressing otherness, a form of circumstantial pedagogy. Here we can follow Proust over Kierkegaard (who conceived of the *aesthetic* life as a dissolute and disunified one, contrary to the *ethical* life): “The only true voyage of discovery,” the former relates in the waning pages of *Remembrance of Things Past*,

the only really rejuvenating experience [remaining to our world, is] not to visit strange lands but to *possess other eyes*, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we can do with (the help of the artist, the writer, the musician). (259-60)

Art can be pedagogical without being didactic; this is especially true of literature, which unfolds other narratives. The ironic mode of writing, favored by Erasmus and Kierkegaard, as well as by many writers including Austen and Joyce, can be identified by the use of characters who see and say more and other than what they intend to, the purpose being, in some sense, revelatory: the reader may appropriate or dismiss the values and actions of the characters’ performances. Literature grew largely out of the humanist movement, who placed great emphasis on creative thought.⁵⁰ Erasmus was himself a master of “redescription” in the Rortyan sense; his *Praise of Folly* is a work that, in the author’s own words, does not seek the Truth but rather *to speak with ingenuity*, to describe things in novel and possibly enlightening ways. This is the crux: Erasmian Christianity is based upon more than a lofty morality of the secular humanist sort (for then the term Christianity would be superfluous); rather it is based upon a particular mode of faith (what I have been calling *fideism*), as well as a recognition of the power and importance of ameliorative redescription, edification and the narrative concept of human life.

Literature and Religious Truth

Truth must not be reduced to formulas and axioms; it should only be moved into purview, parables, and images, as a good to be striven for but never possessed.
– Gottfried Lessing

What we might call the fideist orientation, as it evolves out of Erasmus, Lessing, and Kierkegaard, is one that is sympathetic to art and literature, believing in the moral possibilities of both and in the significance of storytelling to the fashioning of the narrative self. A self-conscious fideist would never resort to book burning, keeping in mind the words of the German Jewish poet Heine—now posted at a concentration camp/museum in Germany—that “once they begin burning books, they end by burning people.” In contrast, in December of 1520 Luther effectively and dramatically sealed his breach with Rome by publicly burning the latest papal bull along with copies of canon law and scholastic theology, defiantly proclaiming: “Since they have burned my books, I burn theirs.” And, as Heine predicted, it was not long before, at Munster, much more was burned—the radical Anabaptists facing the fate of Savonarola, Thomas More and Giordano Bruno. The more recent pronouncement (and later reaffirmation) of the religious leaders of a certain Middle Eastern nation with regard to not only a book but also the book’s author, along with threats to publishers and the firebombing of bookstores, underscores the danger felt by fundamentalists with regard to subversive literature. In *Don Quixote*, the knight’s well-meaning friends burn his library in order to put an end to the madness of his impending quest.⁵¹

Richard Rorty’s “ironist” is also a book-lover, and a fideist who refuses to make the Kierkegaardian leap of faith: she is rather the sort of person who “faces up to the contingency of her own most central beliefs and desires, someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance” (Rorty xv). Rejecting theological as well as scientific or metaphysical certainties, Rorty’s ironist hopes to *create* solidarity by increasing our (individual and collective) sensitivity to the particular and very specific details of the pain and humiliation of others, best revealed in the narrative of a story, in literature. In the absence of a single meta-vocabulary, we must settle instead for narratives that connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other. Most importantly, the quest for utopia is and must regard itself as an endless process: “an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth.”⁵² Though we need not go so far as Nietzsche, whose “inverted Platonism” asserts that a life of self-creation can be complete and autonomous, we *can* think of any human life as the always incomplete, and in this sense somewhat comic, quixotic, yet sometimes tragic and heroic, reweaving of a web in which we are continually connecting and confronting other worlds.

Yet Rorty’s neo-pragmatist vision of an ideal liberal ironist community is one that is “secular through and through”; one “in which no trace of divinity remain[s]—either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self.”⁵³ He thinks it imperative that the notion of God should go the way of Truth: the process of de-divinization would culminate in “our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might

derive the meaning of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings” (Rorty 65). Here Rorty makes a clear rejection of William James in favour of John Dewey as pragmatist muse; his steadfast reliance on Deweyan secularism refuses to acknowledge both the prevalence but the potential latent in conceptions of transcendence and the faith impulse.⁵⁴ Like many thinkers of today, Rorty is only able to see religion as an (institutionalized) crutch that enlightened men and women can and should finally discard in order to live by their own authority.

Rorty might well accept a compromise with religion (as does Gellner, and as Rorty himself does with the self-creative yet socially limited impulses of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Foucault), relegating such to the strictly personal level to ensure that one does not “slip into a political attitude which will lead [one] to think that there is a social goal more important than avoiding cruelty.”⁵⁵ There are two problems with this conception: first, unlike aesthetic self-creative tendencies, which can perhaps be privatized with little effort, religious impulses are *by nature* interpersonal—i.e., they manifest themselves in human interaction; and second, there is no fundamental or necessary discrepancy between mainstream religious values and the liberal invective against cruelty; in fact, Erasmus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King have shown that just the opposite can be the case.

Erasmus would no doubt agree with the first two Rortyan ironist’s principles: 1) she has radical and continuing doubts about her own vocabulary, impressed as she is by the vocabularies taken as final by others, whether encountered in people or in books; and 2) she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve the doubts of others, or vice versa. Yet the third principle is one that fideists would have some difficulty accepting in its entirety (one that does not necessarily result from or correlate with the first two): though a fideist may not think that her vocabulary is “superior” to another’s, in the sense of it being closer to a transcendent truth, she will quite probably believe that her own vocabulary *is* in touch with a power greater than her own. There is no such thing as faith in immanence. Yet such does not preclude the awareness of the (possible) contingency of one’s vocabulary, and, ultimately of one’s own being.

Ironists may employ Occam’s razor against the so-called “metaphysicians” who, in ostensibly preaching “common sense,”⁵⁶ fail to question their own assumptions. An ironist is, like the fideist, ultimately a *nominalist*: since nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary, our doubts about our own character and culture can be resolved *only* by enlarging our acquaintance; for the fideist this comes about in part through a particular orientation of faith. Literature, with its multiplicity of visions (Proust’s “hundred universes”) of peace, freedom and humanity, as well as of pain, humiliation and cruelty, offers descriptions of alternative future(s). But literature cannot stand on its own. As George Steiner points out, “[t]he simple yet appalling fact is that we have little solid evidence that literary studies do very much to enrich or stabilize moral perception, that they *humanize*” (Steiner *Language* 156). In the “poetry after Auschwitz?” vein, it would be starry-eyed to posit that aesthetics can, in and of itself, *replace* not only reason but also religion as the basis for morality. Yet, Steiner sees a need for

literature, as a realm of non-neutral description that awakens us to greater vision, as it were. Following Kafka, he says, a book must be not a comfort, but rather “an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside is;” altering our personal and communal existence, and reshaping “the landscape of our being.”

Tradition: The Use of History

It is not worth while remembering that past which cannot become a present.

– Søren Kierkegaard

A recognition of contingency is one thing, and the appreciation of the moral possibilities of art another, but what of *tradition*—what of the trump card offered by Catholic Integralists and voiced by fundamentalists as the missing embodiment of Unity and Truth? What is the fideist to make of the authority embedded in a shared past or in socio-cultural memory? The narrative self is steeped in history (unlike, says MacIntyre the selves of Sartre or Goffman): I am born with a past, and to try to cut myself off from that past in the individualist/subjectivist mode is to deform my present and future relationships with others. The possession of a historical and a social identity coincide. In fideist terms, tradition must neither be contrasted with reason (as in Burke) nor used to justify stagnancy or stability. Tradition, as history, always embodies continuities of conflict; what is required is a *traduttore traditore*—a translation of tradition that is both a frank acknowledgment of “cultural baggage” and a attempt to relativize this past through comparison and criticism. As Walter Jens remarks *vis-à-vis* Lessing, these two things do not exclude but rather *presuppose* each other, and *must* if humane behavior is to become the law of the world. (Jens “Lessing” 97)

Yet, as Tolstoy observes, history is a realm of disappointment. One gets the feeling, he says, “that history, as it is written by historians, makes claims which it cannot satisfy, because like metaphysical philosophy, it pretends to be something it is not, namely a science capable of arriving at conclusions which are certain” (Berlin 14). Again, the quest for Certitude is ultimately doomed. History does not and cannot reveal “causes” in the strict sense; it will never reveal the connections between good and evil, between science and morality, and so on. History *can* be an important guide to the future; like art, it reveals, or presents worlds, but that is all; it can neither be disdained as meaningless (“bunk”), frightening (“nightmare”), nor worshipped and sanctified under the exclusionary rubric of tradition, for the true *reality* of history is only what is made of it in the present. In order to keep up with the changing epoch, history must be *sublated*.⁵⁷ In another sense, history is a stockpiling of values, since life can be comprehended only in the category of value, “yet these values can only be thought of in reference to an ethically-motivated value-positing subject” (Broch 501).

Culture is, in some sense, a value-formation; it needs the assumption of a style- and value-producing *Zeitgeist* that brings the values together. But what does this tell us about history, and the relativity of values? Only that the immanence of values, their “in-the-worldness,” points away from an a-historical, transcendent, and absolute value-system. If at bottom truth is conceived as *transcendent* then it cannot be equated with a particular historical (or mythical) epoch, but

must be eternal, beyond time and chance; if it is *immanent* (which, for fideists truth *is*, unlike faith), then it is *contingent*, in the sense that it must evolve with the changing vocabularies and styles of an epoch. Truth is, in a sense, both made (in the living quest) and found, gradually, through the living of the life reinforced by hope.

Conclusions

Fendrich said: ‘It would be all very fine if one could believe.’

Esch said: ‘I’ve discovered something; religion has to renew itself too, and get a new life’.

– Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers*

As the events of September 11, 2001, showed all too well, fundamentalism is not simply a passing phenomenon, but rather one that has roots in a powerful form of faith-orientation that has dominated western thought for centuries, even to some degree within the secular and scientific spheres. The recent prominence of *religious* fundamentalism developed largely out of the demise of the modern project of *rational* justification, coupled with the liberalization of religion following the weakening of *faith* justification. As a form of faith-orientation, fundamentalism can be dangerous to the values of not only secular liberalism, but also, though less obviously, to alternative styles of faith. Fideism is an alternative form of faith, one that seeks to *sublate* rather than *reject, sustain, or overcome* modernity. The sublation of modernity must involve: a) the preservation of the critical spirit of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, particularly with regard to the opposition to socio-political exploitation and intellectual/theological obscurantism; b) the denial of the reductionist ethos of modernity, as well as its often exclusionary faith in reason, science and progress along with the self-destructive forces unleashed by this faith (nationalism, colonialism, imperialism); and c) a willingness to explore the capacities of religion (in concert with the illuminating capacities of art and history) as a possible area of enrichment and edification, particularly on the interpersonal level. For religion, like moral philosophy according to Jeffrey Stout, “benefits from thick description—from dredging up old documents, from long visits to strange places, from flights of artistic imagination, from all the ways in which new possibilities of moral observation, inference, and action can be brought into view” (Stout 73).

Every significant transformation of religious ideas has arisen, in some sense, in response to the challenge of changing times; yet, as in art, in religion too every form may not be absolutely appropriate to every age. Religion at these times of transformation must change or die. Fundamentalism professes to reject modernity, but it actually continues modernity in several ways: in the use of modern technology, and in the usurpation of the vocabulary of absolutism. Christian fundamentalism is not simply a backward form of faith, it is in fact a continuation of Lutheran and later, positivistic severity and inflexibility in an age of perceived moral laxity. What is most significant is not the purported “retrieval” of values, but the way, the *style* in which these values are spoken of, with respect to an essentialized and transcendent truth—a style that ill-befits the new world situation, and indeed the world situation since the Renaissance, when new possibilities were first explored in the West. Fundamentalism is a style of faith that denies possibility, and this is its danger.

As Stout says, “[i]t is becoming increasingly clear that the real ‘philosophical’ action is going to occur... not in debates over the logical status of religious ethics or the Kripkean metaphysics of ethical wrongness, but rather in whatever forces, rational or non-rational, incline people toward religious faith or against it in the first place.”⁵⁸ As we know, perhaps all too well, “[r]eligions have a way of getting to the parts of the human psyche that secular ideologies no longer reach” (Stout 175). Hans Küng foresees an imminent “rebellion against the Kafkaesque world” of late modernity and the opening of a new horizon of meaning in post-modernity, a world in which religion can be more than a solace from the storm, but can have an eminently humanizing, liberating function. *Immanence*—the immanence of fideist truth as conceived in the form of the narrative quest—must be bound up in a humanly liberating way with *transcendence*—a non-rational but not absolute faith in the possibilities of divinity and the transcendent *vis-à-vis* the world of humanity.

Notes

1. “There is a tendency for the major intellectual conflicts in human history to be binary. Great issues polarize mankind” (Gellner 1992, 1).

2. In whose company Berlin includes Shakespeare, Herodotus, Aristotle, Montaigne, Erasmus, Molière, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac, and Joyce, and with whom he might have added anti-systematicians like Baudelaire (“Un système est une espèce de damnation qui nous pousse à une abjuration perpétuelle; il en faut toujours inventer un autre, en cette fatigue est un cruel châtement.”), as well as Nietzsche, to whom Walter Kaufmann attributes the following attitude: “The thinker who believes in the ultimate truth of his system, without questioning its presuppositions, appears more stupid than he is: he refuses to think beyond a certain point”; and this, according to Nietzsche, is a “subtle moral corruption.” Moreover, in the absence of a clearly knowable Truth or realm of Certitude, the sure-footed systematician, without a hint of the paradoxes and contradictions of which life seems to be so largely composed, may be one who lacks the open-mindedness requisite for the coming age. The difficulty lies, of course, in drawing the line, as T.S. Eliot once said, between healthy skepticism and unhealthy pyrrhonism; and, one might add, between consistency and constancy.

3. Mannheim 187. “Even though,” Mannheim continues, “he does not discover ‘truth itself’, he will discover the cultural setting and many hitherto unknown ‘circumstances’ which are relevant to the discovery of the truth. As a matter of fact, if we believe that we already **have** the truth, we will lose interest in obtaining those very insights which might lead us to an approximate understanding of the situation. It is precisely our uncertainty which brings us a good deal closer to reality than was possible in former periods which had faith in the absolute.” Cf. Renan: “*In utrumque paratus...* [b]e ready for anything—that perhaps is wisdom. Give ourselves up, according to the hour, to confidence, to skepticism, to optimism, to irony, and we may be sure that at certain moments at least we shall be with the truth” (cited in James *Varieties* 37).

4. Indeed, in recent decades the Indian subcontinent has erupted in battles between competing religious factions, most notably between Muslim and Hindu extremists, the latter of whom are centralized in the BJP Party, a fiercely fundamentalist group led by the rather enigmatic figure of the Dowager Maharani of Gwalia, Cajmator Vijayaraje Scindia. See Dalrymple 1993.

5. Clifford Geertz calls this reliance on a sacred text as transcendent referent “scripturalism.”

6. In terms of political pressure, fundamentalists invariably shift the political agenda to the right, a fact worrying to liberals and feminists alike. The (rather undeveloped, as of yet) studies of women and fundamentalism reveal a generally reactionary androcentrism that ranges from mild sexism to overt misogyny. For the Islamic Scripturalist, women are insatiable beings whose licentious behavior must be both strictly surveyed and rigidly controlled. Echoing, quite remarkably in some respects, the sexual paranoia exhibited in much of early modern European society, if a woman is not closely monitored and supervised, it is thought, she will waste no time in leading the unsuspecting male down the road of perdition, beginning with the destruction of the family, the very foundation of the Muslim community. Indeed, a patriarchal discourse seems to be common to most, if not all, fundamentalist movements; their “antifeminist” attitude is cited by Lawrence Kaplan as a central feature of their anger at modernist patterns.

7. One example being the Moral Majority’s dual claim that, on the one hand, *anomie* is rife and spreading throughout the nation, *yet* America is still, and will remain, “God’s land.” See Kaplan 11-12.

8. Ironically, the Protestant Reformation was in large part a reaction that *favoured* the privatization of faith against the elitist and removed hierarchy of the Vatican.

9. Recent scholarship has seen interesting arguments regarding the dangers of proximity. Lester Kurtz (*The Politics of Heresy*) notes that the principal enemy of fundamentalism often tends to be less an external enemy than a deviant insider like “liberal religiosity”—a “stalking Trojan horse that brings the values of secular modernity into the midst of the religious camp” (Kurtz 22). Thus, American Protestant fundamentalist invective is as strong, if not stronger, against the National Council of Churches than anyone else, and Catholic Integralist polemic is turned more towards progressive Catholic theologians (“modernists,” and recently, “postmodernists”) than against secularists. Proximity in space and in shared history, tradition, and aspects of life is considered dangerous by many fundamentalists, who believe that dissidents working *within* an organization are more likely to attract followers and affect schism than external critics who, by virtue of their exteriority, speak a different language altogether, and can make no legitimate claims. Lewis Caser, writing about the “scapegoating” of deviant insiders, notes that “the search for or invention of a dissenter *within* may serve to maintain a structure which is threatened from *outside*” (see Coleman 82).

10. Lefebvre has this to say about the disastrous effects of modernism in the Church: “*Liberté* was embodied in the pernicious doctrine of religious freedom; *égalité* was expressed in ‘collegiality’, the idea that all bishops of the world formed a team with the pope, thus undermining the papal monarchy; while *fraternité* took the form of ecumenism

which allegedly masked the differences between Christians” (see Coleman 84).

11. Broch: “[As] a world founded on being, not on becoming...its [i.e., the medieval world’s] social structure, its art, the sentiments that bound it together, in short, its whole system of values, was subordinated to the all-embracing living value of the faith” (447).

12. William of Occam (or Ockham, ca. 1285-1349) gave the “modern way” the alternative appellation “nominalism.” Shaking the theological assumptions of the edifice of scholasticism, rejecting the narrow premises on which such was erected, and proclaiming (often under heavy persecution) the infinity of the universe, the plurality of worlds, and the arbitrary (non-central) position of the earth in the universe, Occam was an early critic of the papacy, and is cited, though not always without irony, by Luther as “my dear master.”

13. The term “fideism” will be used in this essay as an umbrella term for a form of faith-orientation extending from Occam, through Erasmus (and tempered by his humanism) to Kierkegaard and Unamuno in the nineteenth century. See Gardner.

14. Shaw 21. He continues: “Luther did not know what he was doing in the scientific sociological way in which we know it; but his instinct served him better than knowledge could have done; for it was instinct rather than theological casuistry that made him hold so resolutely to Justification by Faith as the trump card by which he should beat the Pope, or as he would put it, the sign in which he should conquer. He may be said to have abolished the charge for admission to heaven” (27).

15. “The way to salvation was through the acceptance of norms of beliefs and behaviour extrinsic to the mind’s need to understand its experience and to the moral aspirations of the individual” (A.H.T. Levi, in Erasmus 25).

16. “[A]nd the Christian faith and the grace of freedom [will] be ours again. Then we shall be able to say: ‘A Christian is a faithful servant of all things and subject to every man’, no less than: ‘A Christian is a free master over all things and subject to no man’ for both will be true, and that is how we should think of true freedom” (Broch 421).

17. This emphasis on the living Christ, evident as it may seem to non-Christians like Shaw, is in fact rarely considered by most Western Christians. Anecdotal evidence indicates that most contemporary Christians emphasize the “Christ-Event”—i.e., the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ the Messiah. Shaw would call this yet another victory for Paul, and Salvationism over what may have been the message of the man Jesus.

18. Reardon 36. Compare this with the effusions of Walt Whitman (“This is what you should do...”), and Don Quixote’s speech on the virtues of chivalry: “[N]ow, a poor knight has no other way of signaling his birth, but, the practice of virtue, being affable, well bred, courteous, kind, and obliging, a stranger to pride, arrogance, and slander, and, above all things, charitable” (Cervantes 457).

19. Küng *Theology* 22. Erasmus denounces the Lutheran mode of biblical interpretation: “Whatever men read in the Bible they distort into an assertion of their own opinion, just as lovers incessantly imagine that they see the object of their love wherever they turn” (cited in Reardon 82). According to Wallace Ferguson, “Erasmus introduced a new note into biblical interpretation by demonstrating the part played by human authorship and error. He insisted on treating the Bible

as a human document to be studied in the light of modern historical and philological knowledge.”

20. “Luther’s abusiveness can be condoned only on the ground that perhaps our sins deserved to be scourged with scorpions” (Erasmus, cited in Reardon 1981, 39).

21. Reardon xv. Also see Zweig: “The tragedy of his life, and one which binds him to us in closer brotherly affection, was that he sustained defeat in the struggle for a juster and more humanized shaping of our mental world” (1). Küng laments: “Poor Europe, how much trouble it would have spared if people had listened more to Erasmus instead of to Martin Luther” (*Theology* 34). But history followed Luther, the Jesuits, Descartes and Machiavelli, bypassing Erasmus, Pascal, Lessing.

22. Here Erasmus can be viewed as a direct ancestor of Tolstoy; and through him Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

23. “[H]itherto the intensity of human aspiration towards the absolute had been concentrated on the total value of the Christian organon; now, however, all the radicality of a self-dependent logic, all the severity of autonomy, was directed to each system of values separately, each value-system was raised to an absolute value of its own, and that vehemence was engendered which was to maintain these absolute values side by side in isolation without reference to each other, that vehemence which gives the age of the Renaissance its characteristic colouring” (Broch 485).

24. “The defence of Catholicism against a progressive disintegration into sects was organized by the Jesuits of the Counter-reformation in a dramatic, even a military, centralization of values... aspiring towards and achieving an ecstatic unity which was no longer, indeed, the mystic symbolical unity of the Gothic, but none the less was its heroic-romantic counterpart” (Broch 523).

25. Alfred North Whitehead lamented the ascetic anti-iconic, anti-aesthetic, anti-ornamental fervor of the reformers, saying that the Reformation was, in fact, one of the most “colossal failures” in history, precisely for having thrown overboard “what makes the Church tolerable and even gracious; namely, its aesthetic appeal; [and keeping] its barbarous theology.” For Broch, the “immolation of all sensory conduct” is to be regarded as the root cause of the modern disintegration of values.

26. Two early proponents of emotivism were C. L. Stevenson and G. E. Moore, though the latter’s theory was known as “intuitionism.”

27. “I therefore take it that we have no good reason to believe that analytical philosophy can provide any convincing escape from an emotivism the substance of which it so often in fact concedes, once that emotivism is understood as a theory of use rather than meaning” (MacIntyre 1992, 15).

28. At least according to Raymond Aron, who, in characterizing Weber’s thought says that all faiths and all evaluations are equally non-rational; all are subjective directions given to sentiment and feeling. (see MacIntyre 26).

29. Gellner says that postmodernism effectively reduces itself to silence and therefore absurdity; a really good postmodernist, he claims *must* be silent. “If everything in the world is fragmented and multifiform, nothing really resembles anything else, and no one can know another (or himself), and no one can communicate, what is there to do other than express the anguish engendered by this situation in impenetrable prose?” (45)

30. “One virtue of which Aristotle knew nothing, the theological virtue of charity. Charity is *not*, from the biblical point-of-view, just one more virtue to be added to the list—its inclusion *alters* the conception of the good for man in a radical way, for the community in which the good is achieved has to be one of reconciliation” (MacIntyre 174).
31. Broch considers Kantian philosophy the belated formulation of Lutheran theology, developed in connection with Platonic and idealistic forms: “Kant’s attempt to establish a retrospective Protestant theology did indeed wrestle with the task of transferring the substance of religious Platonism to the new positivistic science, but it was far from seeking to set up a universal theological canon of values on the catholic pattern” (Broch 485, 523).
32. It is ultimately up to the individual, as a free and autonomous being capable of choice, to decide on her way of life and what course to follow to perfect or improve herself; yet the underpinnings and implications of contrasting life-views must be presented and explored before this choice can be made, and this is what Kierkegaard sought to portray in *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling*, and *Stages on Life’s Way*.
33. Unamuno continues: “This longing or hunger for divinity begets hope, hope begets faith, and faith and hope beget charity. Of this divine longing is born our sense of beauty, of finality, of goodness (Unamuno 187).
34. For all that the fideist can say about faith, the satirist Ambrose Bierce may have hit the mark when, in his *Devil’s Dictionary*, he defined faith as: “Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.”
35. Unamuno was an early follower of Kierkegaard. He was also obsessed with his own mortality and the dread, not of death, but of non-being, and extremely skeptical about claims of religions to certainty and truth. His most famous character San Manuel Bueno, says “The truth? The truth... is perhaps something so deadly, that simple people could not live with it”; and “as for religion, all religions are true as long as they console [the people] for having been born only to die” (60-61).
36. Cf. William James’s *Will to Believe*.
37. “Everything in life is so diverse, so opposed, so obscure, that we cannot be assured of any truth” (Erasmus, cited in Fuentes xv).
38. James recognizes the difficulties in such; with Santayana he saw that even the greatest empiricists are only empiricists upon reflection; when left to their own instincts they “dogmatize like infallible popes” (James *Will* 13; also see Santayana).
39. “Who is truly Christian?” asks Erasmus—“Not he who is baptized or anointed, or who attends Church. It is rather the man who has embraced Christ in his innermost feelings of his heart, and who emulates him by his pious deeds” (cited in DeMolen 5).
40. “The essence of religion,” Tolstoy continues, “lies in the faculty of men of foreseeing and pointing out the path of life along which humanity must move in the discovery of a new theory of life, as a result of which the whole future conduct of humanity is changed and different from all that has been before” (Tolstoy 87-88).
41. Lessing’s motto: “Denique nemo est barbarus, qui non inhumanus et crudelis est” (No one is a barbarian except for those who are inhuman and cruel) would stand as well for Rorty’s liberal ironist.
42. “Each life will then embody a story whose shape and form will depend upon what is counted as a harm and danger and upon which his success and failure, progress and its opposite, are understood and evaluated” (MacIntyre 144).
43. A parable Lessing borrowed from Boccaccio, though with some revisions, as he worked it into his larger story.
44. MacIntyre 204. *Constancy* is not quite the same as *consistency*, the latter being judged by results, the former by intent. Sometimes a constancy of faith may imply an inconsistency in action, particularly when the contingency of truth is taken into account. No one can be absolutely consistent, as Douglas Hofstadter (perhaps paraphrasing Oscar Wilde) has said, “[t]he world is just too complicated for a person to be able to afford the luxury” of such.
45. MacIntyre 1992, 212. According to Barbara Hardy, “we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative” (cited in MacIntyre 211).
46. Thus, for MacIntyre, the unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest; and though quests sometimes fail, the only criteria for success and failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or a “to-be-narrated” quest.
47. His words were: “A comprehended God is no God”.
48. George Steiner connects Tolstoy with Goethe, in discussing the close of *Anna Karenina*: “Here,” he says, “as at the close of Goethe’s *Faust*, salvation lies all in the striving” (Steiner *Tolstoy* 103).
49. Steiner laments the growth of “new criticism”: “The interpreter who exploits his text for self-display is betraying his sole function. Great literary texts are not self-contained word-games. They are life-forms embedded in the person of their authors in the entire physical, spiritual, social realities of the age” (Steiner *Tolstoy* viii).
50. Zweig 71. The danger, of course, remains, and in fact pragmatism has been criticized throughout its hundred-year history for a certain air of intellectual detachment, despite the rhetoric of engagement and praxis. According to Stout: “Without being supplemented by detailed social and political reflections, Rorty’s remarks are apt to have the effect of encouraging everybody to share the rich aesthete’s complacency and insensitivity” (Stout 231).
51. One of the conflagrants, the curate, is said to be “such a good Christian, and so much a friend of truth, that he would not be guilty of an equivocation for the entire universe” (Cervantes 1986, 54)—thus the irony of Cervantes.
52. Rorty xvi. As Oscar Wilde once said, “[a] map of the world which does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country to which Humanity is always heading. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail.”
53. Rorty 43. He goes on to say that “[a] postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable.”
54. “Religious fermentation is always a symptom of the intellectual vigor of a society; and it is only when they forget that they are hypotheses and put on rationalistic and authoritative pretensions, that our faiths do harm” (James xx).
55. Elsewhere, Rorty admits that, “for a few people (Christians) for whom the search for private perfection coincides with the project of living for others, the two sorts of

questions ('What shall I be?', 'What can I become?', 'What have I been?', and 'What sorts of things about what sorts of people do I need to notice?') come together" (Rorty 143).

56. Which Rorty defines, in seeming homage to Ambrose Bierce-, as "the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated" (Rorty 74).

57. As Jeffrey Stout has put it, to find oneself in a cultural tradition is the *beginning*, not the *end* of critical thought. Cornel West proposes a "prophetic pragmatism" which acknowledges the "inescapable and inexpugnable" character of tradition—the "burden and buoyancy" of that which is transmitted from past to present. The present is intelligible only as a commentary upon and response to the past, in which the past is transcended, "yet in such way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point-of-view."

58. Herbert Marcuse made a similar point when he said: "The liberation of man depends neither on God not upon the nonexistence of God. It is not the idea of God which has been an obstacle to human liberation, but the use that has been made of the image of God."

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