

Chapter 25

The Primal Metaphor of Europe

When I speak of the primal metaphor of Europe, I am thinking of the Greek or Athenian-impacted Europe. Europe has now become the home of many primal metaphors, so I am really focusing upon the Helenism that drove the Alexandrian and Roman Empires. In the ancient Athenian city state, this primal metaphor had already reached sophisticated expression in the teachings and writings of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Greek Playwrights, and others. Like all primal metaphors, this metaphor has roots that disappear into antiquity. The Homeric and pre-Homeric literature were evolving this metaphor. When we look carefully into this emerging flurry of creativity, we find a primal metaphor that has most to do with order and chaos, with reason and mystery. I will name it **Ordering the Absolute Wonder**.

The Westward spread of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam carried the Arabian primal metaphor into Europe and combined it with the European metaphor to such an extent that it is not easy to sort out the ancient European metaphor in its pure form. Also, Plato and Aristotle wrote sophisticated philosophies that may cloud the simplicity of the ancient metaphor that these philosophers assumed. Nevertheless, the following description will surely resonate with European people and with European migrants to the Americans. For all these lands are now deeply characterized by this basic way of relating to Final Reality. The explosion of contemporary science was spawned and nurtured by a society rooted in the ancient primal metaphor described in this chapter.

The key dynamic we need to notice here is the tension between chaos and order. Does Final Reality have an order, or is chaos the essence of things? And what do we mean by order? And what do we mean by a lack of order? Clearly the human mind has evolved with a capacity to conceive patterns in our experience of nature and use our awareness of those patterns to enhance our survival potential and our well-being. So there is, we might guess, a Final Pattern toward which our human patterning may be trending. Scientists like Newton and Einstein have thought so. Einstein's patterns were seen by him and by the generations that followed him as a more valid approximation of the way physical things work than what was previously envisioned in the Newtonian system. In spite of such vast changes in scientific knowledge, it has seemed to most scientists, as well to Plato and Aristotle, that the cosmos is intelligible or is in large measure intelligible. So many people have postulated a Final Intelligibility toward which obedient, thoughtful, human inquiry can trend.

Yet there has always been a minority report, currently stated in this sentence endorsed by many contemporary physicists: "The more we know about nature, the more we know we don't know." Thomas Aquinas, that great synthesizer of Aristotelian and Hebraic wisdom, posited an Eternal Law, but went on to claim that this Eternal Law was beyond the capacity of the human mind to grasp. This implies that Mystery or Chaos is the real essence of things and that order is simply what the human mind can put together as wisdom about an overwhelming Reality that the human mind can never hope to encompass.

But whatever has been the optimism or pessimism about the human mind's capacity for some sort of Universal Intelligibility, chaos and order, mystery and reason have been the preoccupation of this segment of the planet.

Europe and Arabia, Athens and Jerusalem

Through the centuries, Christians as well as Jews and Muslims have sought to synthesize the Arabian metaphor of **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator** with the European metaphor of **Ordering the Absolute Wonder**. Christianity arose in a sea

of Hellenistic Judaism. By the end of the first century New Testament writings like John's gospel and letters were using Greek metaphors and addressing Greek culture directly. Toward the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, Augustine synthesized the "ordering" of Plotinus' Platonism with the historical import of the I-Thou dialogue emphasis found in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Thomas Aquinas constructed another synthesis in the 12th century, when his religious order was learning Aristotelian-impacted philosophy arriving from the Muslim world. At that time Europe had forgotten Aristotle and followed Augustine's preference for Plato and Plotinus. Thomas was attracted to Aristotle's manner of finding order in the empirical data of material happenings. He assumed that the natural laws that Aristotle discerned could be reconciled with the more Hebraic elements retained in the heritage of the Catholic Church.

Thomas's synthesis was not sustained by all of those who came after him. Some have made **Ordering the Absolute Wonder** paramount and dismissed **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator** as superstition. Others have gone in the opposite direction, fighting with science whenever it seemed to contradict with what they thought they knew from their **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator**.

This war between fanatics of Western science and fanatics of Western religion has persisted to this day. I call them "fanatics," because there need be no irresolvable conflict between **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator** and **Ordering the Absolute Wonder**, provided that each of these primal metaphors are seen as poetic expressions drawing attention to experience rather than seen as literalized systems of rational beliefs.

Today we are experiencing some fresh synthesis of the wisdoms of these two primal metaphors. We know more clearly than some generations have known that Mystery surrounds us and only grows deeper as we learn more. Furthermore, natural reality in its deepest and broadest scopes is so unimaginable to the human mind that even order-loving research scientists are carried into experiences of extreme wonder at the shocking Mystery of it all. So, the best of research science can be viewed as a religious practice and as including a religious perception in terms of the definition of religion that we have been elaborating. An openness to deep Awe before the truly Awesome has happened in the very heart of science.

In the more Arabian side of Western culture, literal understandings of Final Reality's "Speech" are being abandoned under a bombardment from the sciences. For example, a literal creation of the Earth in seven days has been given up by all but the most belligerent defenders of magically revealed knowledge. Western religious thinkers are learning how to distinguish mythic expressions of contemplative experience from literal statements of scientific fact. Such thinking sees the creation story not as a scientific theory or a rigid dogma but as a story about the goodness of the natural world and its Mysterious Source. The creation story is now widely seen as a poem about that first Word of the Infinite that brings nature and humanity to be. The response of humanity to this first Word is symbolized in the story of Adam and Eve naming the other creatures. The Infinite Silence "speaks" the existence of these creatures, but they do not have names until humanity names them. This I-Thou dialogue continues in the story of a "fall" in which illusions, forbidden by Reality, are eaten (taken in) by humanity. We can understand these stories as stories about our actual lives only if we understand these ancient stories as mythic tales rather than literal science or factual biography.

When such innovations in science and in religion are thoroughgoing, there is no conflict between science and religion. And it is also true that **Ordering the Absolute Wonder** and **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator** are primal metaphors that can exist side by side as two complementary modes of accessing Final Reality. Our

Athenian and Jerusalem roots can mingle together as two perspectives on the same Final Reality. We can thank science for showing us some of the wonders of this "creation" as well as acknowledging the Mysteriousness of nature's Source. We can recast our Hebraic/Arabic inheritance with an understanding that "Yahweh," "Allah," or "God" mean nothing more or less than a devotional dialogue with Mysterious Reality. "The Mind of God" is likewise a poem pointing toward our awareness that any Intelligent Design of the cosmos is unknown and unknowable to our mind while nevertheless present to us as Awe in our enigmatic consciousness. Our personal experience of Reality and our I-Thou dialogue with Reality reveal to us an ever-expanding sense of amazing richness.

The combination of these two antiquities has taught us that Reality is experienced by human consciousness as an impenetrable Blackness. That Blackness may shine with Awesome Power and provide those who experience it with a Peace that passes all understanding, but encompassing that Blackness with the human mind does not occur. We can love that Blackness and even celebrate our perpetual ignorance, an ignorance that persists no matter how deep our actual experiences of Reality become. And this same love of Reality can also fully embrace the pursuit of knowledge, but with the awareness that our knowledge is forever partial.

In such an enriched and limited way, **Ordering the Absolute Wonder** remains for many European and American citizens today a viable and powerful primal metaphor for relating with Reality. But the viability and vitality of this metaphor is only operative if we remember that this exalted ordering is only a poem, a metaphor about a Mystery that the human mind never encompasses.

Europe and Sub-Asia

The metaphor of **Ordering the Absolute Wonder**, which found its first glory in ancient Greece, had little contact in ancient times with Sub-Asia's **Uniting with the Infinite Silence**. These two primal metaphors seem quite opposed to one another. Europe has emphasized the intelligence of the human mind and the intelligibility of Reality while Sub-Asia has emphasized states of consciousness that transcend the human mind, states of being that are entirely transrational. For Greece, truth is a discovery of the Mind of Reality through the openness and action of the inquiring human mind. For Sub-Asia truth is a participation in the transrational Unity of Reality, the mind being only a tool for describing this experience. Sub-Asia emphasizes the inward look of consciousness upon itself, and Europe emphasizes the outward look upon the objects of this world. The European primal metaphor has also encouraged an emphasis upon the inward magic of mind to comprehend outward things as well as its own mental functioning. Europe has spawned a love of wonder that witnesses to transrational experience, but this was seen to happen alongside its basic thrust for practical truth. Sub-Asia has not entirely neglected practical truth; but the truth that mattered was the result of an inward inquiry that finally dissolved inward and outward perceptions into an apprehension of the Oneness of what is Real. This relativized the whole of practical life. Reality and consciousness merged into a shining Blackness of Absolute Mystery and a Silence or Stillness of Absolute Peace. From this enduring and cleansing "place," the Sub-Asian "sage" returns to the practical realms of endeavor and lives there in a fresh and free manner.

As a member of the Arabian/Athenian synthesis, the Western "saint" never leaves the temporal world, but sees a sacredness that is filling all of nature because of its Source in a Final Sacred Mysteriousness. Every rock, river, mountain, and historical event becomes intimate Speech from this Vast and Shining Blackness. This vision inspires the inquiring mind to speak back with new creations of order.