

# The End of Wisdom

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A spectre is haunting Academia: the spectre of *relativism*. The campus has become a discount house of disposable goods, easily exchanged or discarded, with built-in obsolescence. Our new stance of so-called “postmodernism” makes us hawkers of inferior notions. The days of big ideas, “grand récits,” philosophy of life, are fading. Instead we resemble ancient Sophists, or those “mendicant quacks” that Plato scorned for their trivial pursuits.<sup>2</sup> (Of course, we have reversed Plato’s worldview in which ideas were superior to things, human values to mere science, which he regarded as a copy of a copy of the real world). Relativism means reductionism, evident in such items as the substitution of individual pleasure for the common good, of sex for love (“What’s love got to do with it?”), of learning for wisdom. Let us speak of the last, since wisdom is not only the ostensive aim of learned societies but also a crucial element in the field that Fred Wisse knows and loves, the Christian scriptures.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” is a text (Ps 111:10; Prov 9:10) familiar but neglected. On campus we may speak of wonder as the beginning of philosophy, of alienation as the beginning of social problems, even of dysfunctional organisms—but we would never speak of fearing God or committing sin. For instance, our rediscovered pluralism (a social invention?) combines with political correctness to make those peculiar (anachronistic?) prayers at Convocation into a cautious “to Whom it may concern” affair. More importantly, the “cult of total objectivity” still common in the natural sciences, despite the critique of Michael Polanyi and other philosophers of science, continues to furnish the model for academia, even in the Humanities. It is as if Aristotle had never distinguished two types of rational argument, or different modes of logic. We have lost his insight into the distinction between the necessary and the probable, demonstration and dialectic, syllogism and enthymeme; e.g. “for not to know of what things one should demand demonstration, and of what one should not, argues want of education;” “it is the mark of an

educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.”<sup>3</sup>

Frederik Wisse is a scholar who knows the difference between close textual exegesis (after all, he began as an engineer) and the larger picture. He moves easily within the two worlds of academia, analysis and synthesis, the realms of demonstrative and persuasive argument. His concern with ancient texts and contexts does not blind him to the necessity of spelling out their relevance for human being, and being human, both then and now. And so he knows that the goal of the Academy is not Alexander Pope’s “a little learning,” but Wisdom herself. But if wisdom originates in awe before God, how does it *end*? Let us trade on the happy ambiguity of the word—both *finis* and *telos*—as Wilfred Smith does in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion*. He concludes that while the purpose and goal of religion is God, God is also “the end of religion in the sense that once He appears vividly before us, in His depth and love and unrelenting truth all else dissolves . . . the concept ‘religion’ is brought to an end.”<sup>4</sup>

The “end” of wisdom is that transcendent Wisdom we call “God.” Commenting on the titles of Christ, the *epinoiai*, the ancient Father Origen stated boldly: “if we go through all his titles carefully we find that he is the *archê* only in respect of his being wisdom. Not even as the Word is he the *archê*, for the Word was in the *archê*. And so one might venture to say that wisdom is anterior to all the thoughts that are expressed in the titles of this first-born of every creature.”<sup>5</sup> One recalls here the sophiology of Eastern Orthodoxy, the “Divine Sophia” of Solov’ev (he was Dostoevsky’s model for Alyosha Karamazov), or Sophia as “fourth hypostasis” according to Sergei Bulgakov—a view condemned by his Orthodox Church. Such exaltation of Wisdom reflects *The Wisdom of Solomon* (LXX 8:3) where She is the Lord’s spouse, a theme repeated in some of the Nag Hammadi texts which Wisse knows well.

The Wisdom literature of the Jewish scriptures is not unlike our modern discipline of “philosophy of religion.” Just as for Socrates, wonder begets philosophy, so for these writings, religious awe begets wisdom. They treat roughly the same agenda as philosophers since Descartes, Hume and Kant: the divine attributes and the problem of evil. What the Wisdom writers do not consider appropriate, however,

is arguing for God's existence (as in the Monty Python skit when a bishop and an atheist wrestled to prove whether God exists: a "solid, knockdown argument!"). As Kierkegaard pointed out, this were either impossible or foolhardy.<sup>6</sup>

It should be said that there are two types of "natural theology," according to which argument is either demonstrative or dialectic-heuristic. The former, tendentious at best, is familiar in modernity, but the latter was the form in which natural theology was used to explore the rationality of the data (*dogmata*) of theological science. In the medieval period, for instance, no one argued from an agnostic or atheistic premise as we moderns do. Both Anselm and Aquinas illustrate this well. Anselm is on his knees, offering prayer to the One "than whom nothing greater can exist." Even his proposal *remoto Christo* is a tactic within his project of *fides quaerens intellectum*. And the notorious "five ways" of Aquinas serve a minor function in his extended analysis (more apophatic than cataphatic) of the divine-human reality.

There is a recent move in the debate on the arguments, deriving from the concept of "the groundlessness of believing." This may be related to Wittgenstein's musings on why certain things are believed with complete certitude while lacking objective certainty. But in another form it has been developed best by Alvin Plantinga and other Calvinist philosophers, mostly associated with Calvin College (Fred Wisse's alma mater), who accept John Calvin's insistence that some notion or *nisus* of divinity is universal. This posits faith as a "basic belief," not dependent on other beliefs or arguments. Thus there is rational warrant for believing in God apart from demonstrative argument.<sup>7</sup> In this debate on foundationalism the distinction between two kinds of natural theology noted above is helpful: unfortunately the medieval modality has been displaced by "the Enlightenment project of evidentialist apologetics."<sup>8</sup> Such basic belief is a case of re-cognition (similar to Barth's concept of "ac-knowledgment," or Tillich's re-conciliation) of a reality that should be obvious to everyone, if it were not for another fact, the spoiling of human being, the "fault" (Ricoeur) called sin. Most Western epistemologists approach knowing through the problematics of the human *sensa*, as if apprehending *transcendentalia* is simply a question of overcoming the limits of sensate knowledge. At most they accept an additional dimension of "alienation" as a complication. (One hears this term on campus in

various departments, with little idea of its causes or depth, much less of what an “alienist” might do these days). Most significant is the assumption that the proper metaphor for knowing is *seeing*. Now on the contrary, the Jewish (and Christian, and Muslim) metaphor is *hearing*. Faith does not come from seeing real objects but from hearing true words.

Modern philosophy of religion has adopted the academic fallacy of trusting in reason as a reified entity, with its own rules and capacity to make objective judgment, rather than following the advice of Boethius: “As far as you are able, join faith with reason.” Religious studies (*sciences religieuses*) in general suffer to some degree from the same ailment, although the presence of Oriental scholars tends to heal the dis-ease, particularly if they follow the warnings of Wilfred Cantwell Smith that we cannot study “religion” (itself a reification, a non-entity) without exploring the decisive category of “faith.” Smith was a member of our McGill Faculty in its early years, and I like to think that his heritage is still honoured among us in all disciplines.

As to philosophy of religion itself, its sometimes fanatical devotion to the arguments is either bravado or scandal. Failure to recognize the two types of natural theology noted above results in a false start in religious epistemology. So we teach our students that the possibility of transcendence is to be established or denied by rules of formal logic, by the kind of argument appropriate to physical reality. We neglect to reinforce their natural aptitude for higher or deeper things, that is, for reality in a dimension beyond the merely physical, for the *surreal*. We continue to map human being on a two-dimensional plane, to sketch on a flat canvas phenomena that occupy three dimensions and more. The resulting distortion led Picasso to say that “art is a lie.” But he intentionally used styles and signs to symbolize the Other and the More, not only through Cubism but in his *corrida* series for instance.

If the discipline of religious studies is to progress beyond the present malaise, where man [yes!—unfortunately so] is once again “the measure of all things,” we need to recover our nerve, to paint in bold strokes the Otherness of divine reality that haunts our imagination with its traces, that informs great art and literature with Story, that provides the groundwork for the sciences of nature as they explore the ambiguous building blocks as well as the limits (both micro and macro) of the universe. Whether a Grand Unified Theory

will ever be achieved by Stephen Hawking and his successors, there is enough mystery on view in inner and outer space to “deny our nothingness,” to demand a reckoning with the Unlimited, perhaps even to be surprised by That than which nothing greater exists. Even materialists should know that if reality were not both orderly in itself (our Greek heritage) and contingent on Will (the Hebrew) scientific method would not work.

The above sketches out my own current research into “philosophy of religion à la mode”, a philosophy of modal theology. At this last stage of life I know that facing one’s final limit does indeed “wonderfully concentrate the mind,” which can then roam freely over a lifetime’s *essais* and their ultimate import. I am clear that the discipline to which I have devoted my academic career suffers from a severe ambiguity, mistaking its subject as a natural theology divorced from the claims of revealed theology, and so failing to recognize the possibility of divine existence as a living voice rather than a terminal QED. Long ago, when Socrates was about to die (see Plato’s *Phaedo*, a work prone to student misspelling) he told his disciples that we can but “take the best and most unanswerable of human theories” to build a raft to sail through life, unless we can “find some word of God which will more surely and safely carry” us. As Kierkegaard put it, to advance one step beyond Socrates requires a dynamic shift, a leap over objective uncertainty to discover subjective certitude. He was thinking of how Aristotle changed gears into modal logic in order to explore the dynamics of that elusive category of motion, *kinêsis*.<sup>9</sup> This entails a need to exchange the modality of physics for a metaphysics that can apprehend (if not comprehend) the kinetics or energetics of properly “spiritual” reality.

Our Western tradition, once freed from a millennium of “classical theism,” failed to grasp the elegance of the latter’s philosophical theology, in which transcendent reality is an experiential or experimental phenomenon. The evidence of ascetical-mystical theology is sufficient to make the point. Jacques Maritain’s study of John of the Cross recognizes the importance of drawing distinctions without mistaking them for separations: *distinguer pour unir*.<sup>10</sup> Thus the difference between human and divine, for instance, need not imply the problematics of a/theism, but rather a recognition of the Other as “one like oneself.” The contemporary concern for “alterity” can easily miss this crucial point, particularly when it follows a scientific model in which

individuals function as monads, possibly contiguous but without the possibility of sharing the same space. Adding a dimension to Flatland, of course, solves the theoretical problem, and could even perhaps correct the primary assumption of extreme individualism.

The conclusion of this rather eclectic foray into modern academia is that the two worlds Fred Wisse inhabits, symbolized by the two institutions he has served for these many years, may be reconciled without compromising the “objectivity” of the one, or the commitment of the other. (By chance his, and my, College faces the university campus across the road, “outside the gate;” we know what it means to work both sides of the street). They need each other—to paraphrase Kant: subjectivity without objectivity is empty, objectivity without subjectivity is blind. If it requires a certain insight to recognize this principle, and a certain integrity to adopt it personally, then Fred Wisse is such a man. It is a pleasure and an honour to state this in this collection of tributes to a valued colleague and friend.

## Notes

1. Joseph McLelland is McConnell Professor of Philosophy of Religion Emeritus, McGill University, and Robert Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion Emeritus, The Presbyterian College, Montreal, and so has been Dr. Wisse’s colleague in both institutions.
2. In my writings, I reckon to have provided some 4000 footnotes, including references to obscure sources in Patristic and Early Modern European texts. This paper draws on a book of essays I am preparing under the title, “Philosophy of Religion à la mode: pluralism without relativism” (with full footnotes), which the earnest reader should anticipate. In this paper I include only the more significant footnotes. For instance, Plato, *Republic* 1.1.364b.
3. *Meta.* IV.4, 1006a6ff, *Nic. Eth.* I.2, 1094b 24ff; cf. *Top.* I.1, 100a18ff, *Rhet.* I.1, 1345a1.
4. W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 201.
5. Origen, *In Ioann.*, 1.23; see McLelland, *God the Anonymous: Alexandrian Philosophical Theology* (Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1976), 110.
6. S. Kierkegaard, *The Philosophical Fragments*, 31: “if God does not exist it would of course be impossible to prove it; and if he does exist it would be folly to attempt it.”

7. See, e.g., A. Plantinga & N. Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983).
8. N. Wolterstorff, "The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: from Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, edd. Audi & Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1986), 38.
9. In this he was aided by the writings of Trendelenberg; see Postscript 100, 267n; A. Come, *Trendelenberg's Influence on Kierkegaard's Modal Categories* (Montreal: Inter Editions, 1991).
10. J. Maritain, *Distinguer pour unir, ou Les degrés du savoir* (1932); *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. G. B. Phelan (New York: Scribner's, 1959).