More than right:
a theological contribution to a discussion of cultural pluralism

by

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Thesis 1

Although there is no understanding without experience, a significant barrier to understanding is experience, particularly "successful" experience.

1.1 Understanding is the process of seeking out the possibilities of an actual situation.

1.1.a Truth is not limited merely to our establishing a correspondence between judgements and the facts.

Truth involves both the manifestation of facts or actuality and the concealment of possibilities. Far greater truth in experience is concealed in our personal and communal possibilities than in the mere manifest facts about which we can form "right" judgements.

To be sure, the correspondence theory of truth involves the concealment of a background by our focus upon some fact in the foreground, but the background and foreground of factuality do not begin to exhaust the concealed truth of situations. Despite the greater truth of possibilities, we are usually concerned with the mere facts of our context. If we do address possibilities, we try to turn those possibilities into predictable quantities or probabilities. We treat possibility as a kind of quasi-factuality.

However, there is far more than facts and quasi-factuality in our situation, and despite our emphasis to the contrary, the real focus of our attention is on the possibilities of our factual, actual situation. The recent changes in Central Europe and South Africa are dramatic confirmation of the role of concealed possibilities shaping manifest and intractable actualities.

1.1b Understanding is circular. However, the "circle" functioning in the process of understanding is not a circle of factual knowledge, but a circle of possibilities. All that we will ever actually experience is in some sense already possible now. Hence the enhancement of possibilities is an "ought" in every "is".
Language is the vehicle for mediating to us both facts and possibilities. Hence, language is the "house of Being", but not as a mere description of what "is". Language is concerned with mediating the "ought" of concealed possibilities.

If we want to understand reality, we have to learn not only our own but the language of the other. Short of our learning the language of the other, we must acknowledge that the other possibilities although perhaps even within our own factual context are not the same as ours since possibilities are concealed by our actual circumstances and mediated by language. Without the language of the other, we are incapable of understanding the possibilities of the other.

Personal experience is always within a context of communal manifest factuality and concealed possibilities.

Individuals are ceaselessly validating the adequacy of their experience of actuality and of possibilities by testing out their own perceptions with those in their social group(s).

Personal and communal experience is historical. Because of the role of possibilities in all actuality, personal and communal experience is historical: our future possibilities are inseparable from our past and present possibilities.

Time or history consists of a ceaseless dynamic of past possibilities coming towards individuals and communities out of the future into the present. While inseparable from factual actuality, time is neither bound by nor limited to facts.

A historical context consists, then, not only of shared concrete facts but also of possibilities unique to a particular social group yet always at least partially shared with others not of that group.

Language is the vehicle for preserving and communicating not only the factual historical experience of a community, but it is also the vehicle for illuminating the possibilities of the individual and community.

Personal and communal experience transpires within a common model of coherence that is intolerant of the anomalous.

We spend our lives not only confident that the world/universe is orderly but also ceaselessly seeking to confirm the adequacy of our take on that order by ignoring or eliminating what contradicts our personal and communal sense of order.

Our allegiance to our cultural model of coherence is inseparable from our personal success within the order of that cultural model of coherence. Hence, our personal experience "forces" us to commit ourselves to our cultural model of coherence to the exclusion of other models.

Understanding tends to be limited by our common communal model by three factors:

1. We have worked our entire lives to ensure that we have the "right" understanding of reality, and our success is confirmed by our community’s affirmation of our right understanding. This is nowhere more confirmed than by our dependence upon our mother tongue, the "great institution that precedes us all".
2. Only those possibilities are readily acknowledged by ourselves and our community, however, that are capable of conforming to the common communal model.
3. Hence, the very "success" of our own communal reality model in facilitating the making sense of our experience (and success will be defined differently for each community) hinders our acknowledging the successful understanding that occurs
within the other’s communal reality model. If not understood properly, the result of successful understanding within one’s own communal model leads with respect to the other’s communal model at the least to a conflict of "common sense" and at the most to violence.

Thesis 2  

*Personal experience and our communal reality model are indirect spiritual constructs which we embrace on faith, not because we can empirically or directly verify either.*

*The spiritual nature of experience forces us to engage religion, the spiritual dimension of experience, with the critical or second order tools of theology.*

2.1  
Theology is not concerned with defending the truth of a community’s model of faith. Theology is concerned with being more than right.

Theology is concerned with understanding experience, and its task is to focus attention upon the concealed spiritual nature of experience as well as upon the linguistic nature of experience that mediates the concealed possibilities of experience to individuals within historical communities.

2.2  
All experience transpires in a dimension that is inaccessible to the senses.

2.2.a  
It is impossible to get "outside" our minds (i.e., our experience) to adjudicate whether or not our experience corresponds to the way "reality" truly is.

We can at best only compare different sets of mental or spiritual data.

2.3  
The spiritual nature of experience does not result in vulgar but in refined scepticism or, more appropriately, non-epistemic faith.

Although we can never be certain that our personal and communal take on reality is correct, this does not mean that there is nothing independent of our personal and communal spiritual models to which we are accountable.

2.3.a  
Our best efforts at "getting it right" are grounded in a non-epistemic faith commitment confirmed by pragmatic success.

2.4  
However, our pragmatic testing of the adequacy of our personal and communal model of reality is not limited to the empirical, material world. Pragmatic experience is as dependent upon an actual spiritual "order" of unchanging universals and *nous* as it is dependent upon an actual material "order" of changing material objects.

We neglect either the material or the spiritual order only to our own personal and communal peril although neither order is capable of absolute verification. We cannot ever be sure we have gotten it right.

2.4.a  
Experience consists of a spiritual processing of actual mental data within the framework of coherence of our community’s model of reality mediated to us by our language.

2.5  
Hence, the full articulation of thesis 1 now must include that spiritual experience tends to focus on actuality or facts either spiritual or material to the neglect of possibilities.

2.5.a  
For example, the Logos tradition of Christian theology focused on the "factuality" of universals, the Christ, as the vehicle for mediating between the eternal thinker, God the Father, and the created order that consists of mere copies and shadows of the universals, the Christ. According to the Logos tradition, what it means to be a Christian is to turn one’s focus away from the mere copies and shadows to embrace the invisible universals,
the Christ, as the ultimate source of all order and as the anchor to any and all experience.

The Logos tradition neglected the dimension of possibilities to God, the Christ, and the created world. An absolute or right metaphysical system of "factual" actuality or universals was employed to explain rather than to understand experience. Metaphysics replaced the concealed ambiguities of possibility in "factual" actuality.

A pressing task of theology today involves recovering the concealed spiritual nature of experience. Theology can most adequately contribute to an inter-communal, pluralistic conversation when it emphasizes the true nature of faith that is non-epistemic in order to liberate itself from the "right" metaphysics that is epistemic.

Thesis 3

The encounter between communal models of reality is a spiritual or theological encounter that can be productive rather than merely a conflict when all are aware of the spiritual nature of our experience and our dependence upon linguistic cultural models for grasping the facts and for projecting the possibilities of our respective communities.

3.1 The success of a multi-cultural social system depends upon each social group’s ability to think beyond merely "getting it right". "Getting it right" limits us to facts. There is far more to life than being right, for life is a project of possibilities.

Mutual achievement in understanding and practical action hinges upon acknowledging there are other legitimate spiritual linguistic systems of order that do successfully mediate both facts and possibilities to other social groups different from our own and that are capable of "getting it right" in the context of their own experience.

We can benefit form the other’s spiritual model of reality in two respects:

1. Even if we wanted to blatantly ignore our own limits, the other’s excesses can illuminate our own damaging excesses to remind us that we are all subject to systematic distortion by our communal model of reality.
2. Since no one model of reality is exhaustive because of its finitude, there are valuable insights and perspectives to be learned from the other.

Hence theology teaches that enabling possibilities for all rather than control of actualities is the key to justice.

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