

On the Unity of Religion



Frederick Turner

i. Seven Blind Men and an Elephant

There is a parable whose origin has been attributed to the Sufi poet Rumi, but which is probably older still, from the Hindu Vedic tradition or perhaps further east. Seven blind men encounter an elephant for the first time, and (since no doubt it's a tame Asian elephant, and permits it) they are able to investigate it by feel. Each one touches it at a different spot. Afterwards they fall into an argument about what it was they have experienced. One has touched its flank, and is sure it was a wall. Another has grasped the tail, and maintains that no, it was a rope. A third, who has felt the sharp tip of the tusk, knows that it was a spear; and so on—the ear was a sail, the leg was a tree, the mouth was a bag, the trunk was a snake.

The elephant in this story might make an excellent metaphor for the central subject of all religions. It invites us in an entirely playful spirit to imagine what that central subject must be like, and what the world must be like, if all the religions are true, in the sense that each of the blind men is telling the truth about his own experience.

The old Indian story is actually a rather deep and sophisticated one. We see this when we ask ourselves how the blind men might deal with their disagreement; the various ways they could do so sum up neatly the strategies of philosophers and theologians from many times and places in dealing with the deepest meaning of our experience. I count five broad ways by which the blind men might negotiate their differences.

They might fight.

They might seek a common element in each of their experiences.

They might fall into radical doubt.

They might accept multiple accounts of reality.

They might syncretize their experiences, putting them all together into one.

ii. They Fight

The first way has been the traditional route for many religions, and has of course caused much human misery. Yet it has considerable justification. After all, each blind man has actually experienced what he has experienced, and knows it to be true. What other reason might the others have to question his reality but an intent to deceive or confuse? Surely the most belittling act of all is to devalue another's actual experience, to ignore the validity of his

selfhood, to attempt to replace his point of view with one's own. The others must be enemies then, conspiring to rob one of one's vision, or worse, they themselves have been deceived by the Enemy of all truth and should be resisted by force if necessary.

And after all, one's actual experience of ultimate reality should be honored in its particularity, as Schleiermacher argued persuasively in his letter to religion's cultured despisers. If one's experience of the divine is in the burning of the paper offerings at one's father's Shinto funeral, or in the lighting of the Christmas candles, or the taste of passover matzo, or the ecstasy of Vodun possession, or the sacrifice of a bull to Dionysus, or the screams of the prisoners upon the Chac-Mool of Tlaloc, or the wild ringing of the Orthodox Easter bells and the smell of roasting lamb, then one would be a fool to give that up for some generalization or other. One ought to defend that reality, to the death.

It is hardly necessary to list the holy wars and ideological slaughters that this approach has produced. Each tribe has its own fierce and dear and familiar deities, who preside over hearth and home, and protect their warriors as they go forth to righteous battle. The Christian crusades, the Muslim jihads, the exterminations of Canaanites and Philistines by the chosen people in the Bible, the Inquisition, the German Thirty Years' War, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the martyrdom of Ireland by the Protestant Cromwell, the bloody wars between Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir, the Holocaust, the Gulag, the killing fields of Cambodia, the ethnic cleansings of the Balkans, and the destruction of the World Trade Center are good examples. What Freud calls the narcissism of small differences intensifies the fury of the conflict in inverse proportion to the magnitude of the disagreement; the more we are able to identify with the other, the more perfidious the other's betrayal of the truth comes to feel. Jonathan Swift imagined a bitter war between the Big Endians and Small Endians of Lilliput over which end of a boiled egg should be cracked, and this conflict is not entirely implausible when we compare, for instance, the differences of the Serbs and Croats.

iii. They Seek a Common Element

A second recourse of the blind men would be to seek the abstract principle or ideal form that underlies the diverse phenomena of wall, rope, spear, sail, tree, bag and snake. Clearly it could not be "human artifact", for tree and

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snake would not fit that category. Nor could it be alive, made of fabric, hard, soft, large, small, and so on, for the same reason of poor fit. All the specifics—the ropiness of the rope, the live curling of the trunk, the sharp point of the spear—that convinced the blind men of the actuality and presence of the elephant, are sacrificed to rationality and concord. Our blind men would become philosophers, seeking the essence or isness or Being or essence or quiddity that underlies all these diverse appearances, or perhaps, like William James, some common psychological factor embedded in human nature that urges us to worship. They would seek the highest common factor among all the different quantities given by the world religions.

Now such an approach, like the fight solution, has much to recommend it if we take the point of—I was about to say view—of the blind men. It is reasonable, peaceful, and shows a laudable tendency toward civilized compromise. It rises above the passions of the moment and of factional dispute. It moves from the notoriously unreliable and compromised world of the senses to the pure and abstract realms of the ideal forms.

Its major problem is that it is wrong. The real elephant is not the same thing as the highest common factor of all the blind men's diverse observations. And this reflection should give us pause when we realize that many of the noblest attempts of human philosophy and metaphysics might fit perfectly into this description. The theological project of the Enlightenment, which claimed many of the greatest minds of Europe and America including Voltaire, Newton, and Jefferson, is a case in point. Their theistic deity is more like a principle of logic or mathematics than like the personal, time-embedded god of Job or of the disciple John—he is eternal, infinite, immaterial, omniscient, omnipotent, impersonal, characterless, a sort of shining colorless sphere that is not a physical sphere and does not physically shine. Earlier examples include the theological abstractions of Plato and of the Muslim, Hindu, Taoist and Buddhist philosophers, who all sought a divine principle beyond time, change, expression, phenomena, multiplicity. The Sikhs found ways to reconcile the theology of Brahman with that of Allah by a resort to higher level of generality. The sub-Saharan African concept of the distant and uninvolved creator-god (whom I came across in my childhood under the name Nzambi) has the same abstract flavor, as does the North American Plains Indian notion of the Great Spirit. In our own times we can cite the admirable ecumenism of Baha'i, the Unification Church, modern Anglicanism, Unitarianism, and the New Age movement; Heidegger's notion of Sein—Being—is an especially fashionable example in intellectual circles.

Hard though it may appear, human beings have found it possible to worship this bloodless generalization of a deity. It certainly seems at first blush to be a more civilized religion. But worshippers of the abstract God can be at times as tyrannical as the idolators. The theistic concepts of "superstition" and "paganism" themselves are deeply intolerant ones. The abstracting monotheism of Akhenaton, of the armies of ancient Israel, of the Byzantine iconoclasts who gave their name to the whole category, of the Islamic holy warriors, of Savonarola and John Knox and Protestant missionaries all over the world, and the yet more abstract materialistic theology of modernism, have been responsible for their own share of atrocities.

Not that there might not indeed be something underlying and in common among walls, ropes, spears, sails, trees, bags and snakes. The effort to find that underlying commonality has actually succeeded in producing brilliant answers, emerging from the inquiries of physical science. They include the idea of matter itself, and its language of molecules, atoms, elementary particles, quarks, strings, and topological manifolds. The problem is that none of them is an elephant; nor, we might infer, is it God. The highest common factor turns out to be One, which in itself does not give us the miracle of quantities and differences.

But, it could be argued, genuine and splendid religious experience has taken place under the very theology of attributeless and indescribable divinity, the intangible Ground of Being. Our metaphor of the elephant breaks down, precisely because we do know what an elephant looks like, whereas in relation to God we are in the very position of the blind men. Some of us have, in fact, experienced God as eternal, impersonal, changeless, invisible. So the "common element" approach is not entirely wrong. Our elephant must be strange indeed if it can be experienced not only in the blood of a sacrificed chicken or the ecstasy of tantric sex or the striking of a temple bell, but also as the utterly non-sensory, the irreducibly inexpressible, the disincarnate. We have certainly come some way toward our goal—of a view of things that would include the particulars of all religions—when we recognize that the reality of the divine might be as strange and Rube Goldberg a contraption as an elephant is, and realize that the shining, featureless sphere of the philosophical religions is not necessarily an improvement. But this elephant is one which some blind men have indeed experienced as a shining sphere, and which we must now add to our list of metaphors like sails, walls, bags, snakes and so on.

Let us not despair, however. This stage of our journey is necessarily the one where we encounter the difficulties of

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our project in all their apparent insuperability. Perhaps the difficulties themselves are part of the solution, as many of the wisest religious thinkers and mystics have suggested.

iv. They Doubt

But why bother at all? Perhaps the best thing for us blind men to do is to recognize that since our experiences differ so radically, the categories of our perception—the modes of time and space in which we sense things—cut us off forever from the thing in itself. Or perhaps we are not blind at all, and our different experiences are all there is. Or there is no such thing as sight, and we are deceived by mystics and priests into thinking that there is such a faculty. Or there is indeed sight, but it is what has been called “touch” up to now, and the true maturity of the human race will only arrive when we recognize this fact. Perhaps there is no reality underlying our perceptions. Perhaps there is no elephant, but only phenomena. In our search for the elephant, we are neglecting the immediate, warm reality of trees and snakes and walls and sails. Or perhaps the blind men’s language and metaphorical system determine what they are perceiving, for surely we cannot perceive what we cannot name; the limits of my language are the limits of my world, and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent. The elephant is like a unicorn, a nonexistent fabrication of language, a piece of nonsensical metaphysics. Or perhaps the world itself is only text. If contradiction is inherent in the very process of “giving an account of reality”, perhaps the world is only the differences between those accounts, and the endless delay between the account and its confirmation, the deferring (“différance”) of certainty, the slippages between words and meanings.

Readers familiar with the history of philosophy in various cultural traditions will recognize these forms of doubt as corresponding to one or more of the multitudinous skepticisms of the world: Kantian, positivist, Stoic, Cartesian, phenomenological, existentialist, nominalist, solipsist, Wittgensteinian, deconstructionist and so on. Again, one must admire the magnificence of the intellectual edifices that this approach has raised, even though they may appear absurd when we know that there is indeed an elephant. This approach has fostered a critical attitude toward sense perception that has been indispensable in the development of science: if we had been incapable of doubting that the sun rises, as it appears to do, we would never have discovered the heliocentric theory of the solar system. If we had insisted on the apparent solidity of matter, we might not have found its atoms and voids. Morally

the skeptical approach has been an excellent solvent or dissolver of tyrannical certainties and ethnocentric bias.

And we can indeed recognize in this approach a genuine element of much real religious experience. Zen Buddhists know the strange delight of recognizing that all is illusion, that we live in a floating world of change and appearance, that it is attachment to those illusory realities that is the source of pain, that the lotus of insight floats in the flow of mutability. Christian, Jewish and Muslim mystics have reported a similar vertigo as they pass through the dark night of the soul where all is in doubt, and the self must be emptied of all it holds sure, before it can encounter the divine. Existentialism, with its radical skepticism of all essences, will surely one day be recognized as a form of religion.

But even as we add this sensation of radical doubt to our list of blind men’s accounts, we must recognize the inadequacies of skepticism on its own, when unaccompanied by a faith that there is something to discover when the illusions are dispelled. Three such failings stand out.

One is that if the elephant exists, there is a staggering arrogance in the assumption that because we can’t see it, it is not there. A simple recourse, which has not yet been mentioned, is for the blind men to go back to the elephant and conduct a more thorough examination, tracing with their fingers each other’s first encounters and the connective tissue between the various parts. There is an old story about a group of philosophers who were arguing about how many teeth a horse has. A passing farmer overheard them, and went off, found a horse, and counted them, ending the dispute. Too radical a skepticism might discourage such commonsense activities—activities that correspond in our grand analogy with the studies of physical science, anthropology, and comparative religion—on the grounds that they required an initial acceptance of a nonsensical piece of metaphysics.

The second inadequacy in the strategy of doubt is that it can lead to an irresponsibility about fact in general, an irresponsibility that has a major moral dimension. One of the great practitioners of doubt in recent times was Paul de Man. A leading deconstructionist, he had managed, strangely, to absolve himself of personal responsibility as a former Nazi propagandist; for what, after all, was de Man himself but a play of texts and representations? There was no elephant in him to stand trial, there was no promiser or keeper of promises, no agent that could be held responsible. Jacques Derrida has been similarly evasive on whether the former South African doctrine of

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apartheid was a bad thing. A century that permitted the Gulag, the Holocaust, the Great Cultural Revolution and the killing fields of Cambodia has shown the inadequacy of equivocation as a refuge, and of skepticism about underlying realities as a moral stance. However distasteful certainty might be, it is our jury duty when called, as we all must be, to judgement.

The third failing is that religious experience is itself a real experience, and if we are to accept only our experiences as real, then by our own rules we are forced to accept the validity of the Loas of Vodoun and the Kamis of Shinto and the angels of Catholicism along with trees and walls and ropes—and where is our skepticism then? What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. In Wallace Stevens' marvelous poem "Sunday Morning", the speaker urges his female companion to forget the ancient metaphysics of the holy sepulchre and ancient sacrifice, and join him in coffee and oranges instead of dashing off to church; his trump card is the immediacy and holiness of secular experience. But in T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland", it is that very same secular experience that is the "unreal city", the place of shadows, and it is the almost impossible commitment to religious sacrifice that is full of existential vitality and immediacy. Both poems are convincing; neither feels like propaganda or special pleading. Our skepticism about inferring transcendent realities from the various flow of experiences must, to be consistent, apply to the philosophical program of skepticism itself.

v. They Become Pluralists

A recent variant of the "doubt" strategy is pluralism. The blind men, in this view, are not blind at all; they see with their fingers, and what they see is radically incommensurable worldviews. We should therefore accept each of these worldviews as equally valid ways of knowing. Each ethnic group, gender, or sexual preference community has its own unique closed hermeneutic system, incomprehensible to the others, making up together a rich multicultural diversity. We should cultivate an ethos of tolerance, and not attempt to expropriate the visions of others. Each worldview, in the words of Michel Foucault, the most well known exponent of this view, is an "episteme", that is, a system of knowing, and the world is completely passive to how it is known. After all, any word in a given language only "means" its paraphrase in other words of the same language, whose meanings in turn are glossed at some finite number of removes by means of the very word we began with; a dictionary nowhere refers anywhere outside the world of texts. Even pictures are visual con-

ventions, no more truly representational than other words or symbols (hence postmodern artworks made of verbal slogans and postmodern architecture made of coded art-historical references). Ostensive definitions (pointing at something and naming it) will not get us out of our semantic box, as Wittgenstein argued, because pointing is itself already a semantic convention. And the crucial issue, then, is who decides what means what— who has the power to enforce their own meaning.

Indeed, in this view the world as a transcendent reality outside our views of it does not exist. The assumption that it does is, in the opinion of multiculturalist and postcolonial critics, a subterfuge, a regime of power and knowledge, designed by the rich, powerful, heterosexual, male, and ethnically privileged to oppress the underprivileged, the weak, the female, the sexually "deviant" and the ethnically other. Reality is socially constructed. Some scientists, like Paul Feyerabend, have given their support to this idea. There is even support for the position in physics itself, if we interpret the observer principle of quantum mechanics as implying that reality is constructed by how we see it—and then add the sociological observation that we see things the way our culture tells us to. The world is text, filled with contested sites. (The reader will pardon my use of the characteristic vocabulary of this discourse: nothing gives the flavor of it so well, for it is a style of thought as well as a position, as unmistakable as the vocabulary of the Southern Baptist, the Communist, or the business school marketing consultant.) We are familiar with this position in, for instance, some versions of medical anthropology, which hold that bacteria and viruses are no more valid explanations of disease than spirit possession or a bad combination of humors.

Again, the elephant story might cause us to take this very inviting position with a grain of doubt. After all, the blind men are not touching spears, walls, trees or snakes but an elephant. Suppose the real world might actually exist? Gravitation still works in Tibet and the Amazon jungle, local beliefs to the contrary notwithstanding. Wouldn't it then be intellectual suicide, rather than tolerant pluralism, to silence one's own quest for the reality beyond the appearances? And is the position really consistent? For surely pluralism is itself a worldview, one which tacitly proposes itself as—if not an underlying generalization or core principle for all the others—a bag in which all the others can be put, even if unexamined. But this bag role privileges pluralism; and therefore pluralists must decide whether other regimes of power and knowledge, other epistemes than the pluralist one, are inside or outside the bag. Some of those regimes might be jihads, witch hunts,

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inquisitions, Communist or Nazi hegemonies. If they are inside the bag, they must be controlled and protected from one another by some kind of single superordinate authority or world policeman or New World Order, the very antithesis of political pluralism. If they are outside the bag, in other words if their moral authority is unchallenged by a pluralism that recognizes itself as just another worldview among many that are equally valid, then one would be unable to protest their oppressiveness. One would have to accept clitoridectomy, or suttee, or Scientological denials of medical treatment to children, or local racism and homophobia--or the Holocaust, the Gulag, and the killing fields--as all part of life's rich multicultural pageant. Or should the regime of religious tolerance itself be an absolute and exclusive view of reality that should be defended to the death?

Thinkers like Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas have sought to find pacific ways for the blind men to live with their differences, at the cost of not taking anything in the world seriously enough to be worth the defense of one's convictions. But at root the pluralist response to the blind men problem logically entails, as I have shown, a sophisticated version of the first answer -- to fight. If those other blind men should not be persuaded, and if their values are radically and untranslatably different from mine, they cannot be trusted for one moment. I am in what Hobbes called a "state of nature" with respect to them, with no sovereign authority over us to protect us from one another. My advice to the reader who accepts the validity of the pluralist answer is: if you have power and wealth, to prepare powerful weaponry in secret, conceal your disagreement with others, and then suddenly and covertly launch an overwhelming attack on your enemies, silencing them forever by death. In the academy, fail them or deny them tenure. Machiavelli would be an excellent guide in this endeavor; and this writer takes some risks in so clarifying the options, since no doubt he would be a victim.

If, however, you are politically, ethnically, or in gender terms disenfranchised, disadvantaged, and therefore weak, it would be suicidal to subscribe publicly to the pluralist view of things -- given that you truly believed in it. Your best recourse would be to pretend to adopt one of the other strategies, build support, and silently bide your time until you get into power. Thus those who sincerely espouse pluralism, if our logic is correct, must be one of the following: silent about their views, fools, or in absolute power. Pluralism is an excellent view to espouse publicly if you do not really believe in it, for it implies that one is holding oneself back by sheer goodness of heart from crushing the supporters of other views, which,

since they are not in error according to pluralist doctrine, constitute a real threat.

But the pluralist position is flawed in even deeper ways. Contemporary pluralism is partly based on Wittgenstein's apparent refutation of any relationship between facts and propositions -- his brilliant demonstration that pointing is itself part of the realm of arbitrary human signs and thus cannot connect us with nature. This idea has been expanded by Willard van Orman Quine into a critique of reference in general, and by some followers of Thomas Kuhn, Jürgen Habermas, and Paul Feyerabend into a universal questioning of the unique validity of science. If language is essentially untestable by physical reality, any account of the world in language is as valid as any other, provided it meets whatever practical or political goals human beings are using it for.

But this analysis rests upon a prior assumption, that language, in the sense of arbitrary mutually understood signaling systems, is unique to human beings. If pointing is a natural signal and reference a common means of organizing information among animals and other organisms, the great Cartesian barrier between mind and matter, meanings and facts, the realm of language and the realm of nature, breaks down. New games-theory and replication-dynamics research in the biological selection of social behavior (reported in such useful works as Brian Skyrms' *Evolution of the Social Contract* and Elliott Sober and David Wilson's *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*) shows that adaptive constraints actually require the emergence of arbitrary signaling systems among animals. Even bees point at food sources, by means of their bee-dance. To bee, so to speak, is to know. At an even lower level, the decoding of the DNA molecule reveals an uncanny resemblance between the way DNA "means" and the way language does--with DNA versions of words, sentences, lexicons, surface grammar, deep syntax, morphology, phonology, and even semantic change over time. If reference and meaning are perfectly natural, and if the constraints of evolutionary survival insure a reasonable correspondence between an organism's signaling system and its natural environment, then there are naturally better and worse systems of discourse, and multiple epistemes can be referred to a more general standard as a test of their accuracy. Thus epistemological pluralism -- the belief that there are different valid ways of knowing the world -- cannot get any support from epistemological skepticism -- the belief that nature cannot be known because only humans possess the arbitrary signal systems that embody knowledge. Pluralism can indeed be defended as a temporary posture of laudable humil-

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ity, maintained until a larger picture emerges. But it can have no defense as a description of nature, which has had thirteen billion years to adjust and fine-tune its signaling systems with respect to one another, so that now they are largely translatable into each other; and thus it is useless in trying to understand whatever divine emergent properties nature makes manifest.

vi. They Syncretize

What would be the most sensible thing for the blind men to do? We have already glanced at the down-to-earth empiricism of the farmer who counts the horse's teeth. Perhaps the blind men need to go back to the elephant and examine it more carefully. But a horse is a familiar beast to the philosophers and the farmer, and they are not therefore scandalized by its bizarre shape (though for a being from another planet it might seem a monster or a miracle). Perhaps we should accept the validity of all true religious experience in its particularity, including the inner meaning and expressive appropriateness of all religious ritual and myth. Perhaps the object of religious worship need not be the bland featureless sphere, the all-purpose generalization, the most likely and acceptable explanation--nor a plurality of incommensurable narratives, each quite plausible when taken in its own context. Could it instead be as odd and unique and ad hoc as history itself, with its staggering variety of ceremonial hats, its tobacco mosaic viruses, its assassination at Sarajevo, its palmetto trees and stag beetles and astrolabes, its meteor impact at Chicxulub, its shoes and ships and sealing wax, its cabbages and kings? But we have been put off, perhaps, by the sheer Rube Goldberg unlikeliness of the beast that results. An elephant is, as we have noted, a bizarre contraption, that would tax the most fanciful of science fiction artists to invent if it did not already exist. Suppose that what we experience in religion is actually as weird in its own way as an elephant is. Let us try to visualize it -- to fill in, as it were, plausible connective tissue between the spear and the snake, the wall and the rope. To do this is called syncretism.

This project is not new. In fact some of the greatest civilizations in the world have been based upon just such a synthesis. The ecumenism of the Roman Empire before Constantine is a good example. Every time the Romans came across a new religion and deity, they promptly baptized it into their pantheon. The Persian god Mithras was worshipped by Roman centurions manning Hadrian's wall in northern Britain, along with Apollo, Minerva and Venus. The African god Ammon was interpreted as

another avatar of Jupiter. Pompeiian frescoes sport images of the Egyptian Isis. Indeed, the Greeks before them had done the same thing. The marvelous conversation reported in Plato's Republic takes place on the occasion of the instauration in Piraeus of the Thracian goddess Bendis.

Hinduism has likewise exploited this special talent of polytheism, so as to give generous welcome to alien deities. Images of Mary and Jesus can sometimes be found among the multitude of sculpted gods and goddesses in ancient Hindu temples. When Dark Age Christian missionaries came to northern Europe they happily adopted large elements of the existing animist, totemist, and polytheist religions, bequeathing us such ritual remnants as harvest festivals, Halloween, yule logs, holly, mistletoe, the names of the days of the week, easter eggs, the word "Easter" which comes from the fertility god Eostre, and the sobriquet for God himself, "Lord", from the Germanic chieftain's title "hlaforð". The same blending is going on in Christian Africa, in the Catholic festivals of the Maya, Quechua, and Huichol, in the cargo cult, and in the rituals of Umbanda and Vodun.

For me the most delightful syncretism is that of China, wherein three different religions, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, have been genially merged while preserving their individual differences. Wu Ch'eng-en's great prose epic *The Journey to the West*--which tells the how the holy but rather nerdy priest Tripitaka, helped by the irrepressibly comic god Monkey, carries the sacred scriptures of Buddhism over the Himalayas from India into China--celebrates and cements that union. Its hallmark is a very peculiar and at first off-putting blend of holy seriousness, slapstick comedy, rousing adventure story, tall tale and postmodern self-reference, full of odd, charming Chinese metaphors, practical jokes, puns, riddles, and anecdotes. The mood or tone of the book is itself part of its meaning: holy seriousness must include a certain hilarity, sacred foolery, and nonsense, lest it seek to trap the mysterious and multitudinous wind of the spirit and thus belie what it would reveal. I hope readers of these words might come to them in the same spirit--as Philip Sidney put it, the true poet "nothing lieth, for he nothing affirmeth".

The old syncretisms, however, could not assimilate the exclusivist certainties of iconoclastic monotheism. Egyptian polytheism, which had successfully negotiated the integration of the cultures of the Valley and the Delta, could not digest the fanatical monotheisms of Akhenaten and of Moses, and was forced to excrete them. The Roman Empire could not ever bring the stubborn Jews to heel, and was itself eventually swallowed by Christianity with

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its claim of a unique God and a unique path to salvation. Polytheistic Athens found it necessary to give the hemlock to its greatest philosopher, the monotheist Socrates. Monotheistic Islam replaced polytheistic Hinduism in many Asian regions. Christianity replaced the old gods of pre-Columbian America. Across Africa Islam and Christianity gain millions of converts among the local syncretist populations. Even the great Chinese syncretism has been challenged to its roots by the new monotheism of Marxist dialectical materialism.

The urge to oneness in conceiving of the fundamental ground of being has triumphed, and for good reasons. Science itself could never have developed in a polytheistic universe; the inquirer into physical truth must be absolutely confident that the whole world makes one kind of sense, at least at some level. If nature has as many languages as the gods of a polytheistic pantheon, one would never know what language a given fact was couched in, and the test of consistency with other facts, which is the core of scientific investigation, would be doomed from the start. And our actual experience of the success of science and of technology based on it has confirmed the "one physical truth" hypothesis over and over again. The authorship page of almost every article in the scientific journals is mute testimony to the cultural universality of science—the names are from everywhere on the globe. Every smart young person in the world who wants to find out about physical reality ends up accepting the basic premise of science, the assumption that the world is consistent and thus is one.

The problems of polytheistic syncretism are not just problems of knowing, but also of feeling and willing. The very activity of retrofitting one's religion with a succession of new deities and narratives, when unaccompanied by some deeper insight, leads to a loss of seriousness, of sincerity; and even to a loss of compassion, since every mode of feeling is being equally affirmed and thus none is taken especially seriously. There is something a bit cold-blooded about prechristian Roman religion as it developed away

from its virtuous republican roots toward empire, a coolness shared by those sects of Christianity that emulate the tolerance and easy assimilateness of classical Rome. The playfulness and comedy and tolerance we have praised in the polytheist must somehow be accompanied with as much love, moral depth and passion of feeling as could be boasted by a monotheistic religious fanatic, or our project will have failed.

Thus if we are to take the way of the syncretizing blind men, we must be prepared for what seems like an almost pretzel-like mental exercise (as a skeptical friend recently put it to me). We must somehow integrate radical unity with the demonstrable plurality of religions in the world and of our experiences of its deepest meaning. It will not be enough for us to simply baptize every different creed as we encounter it. Sooner or later there will be a Masada that we cannot conquer in that fashion.

Science is the great validator of the unity view of reality, as poststructuralist pluralists recognized when they assailed "Western rationality" in defense of their ideas of cultural relativism and the social construction of reality. But science may also offer rich views of the nature of the physical universe, and of time in particular, that go a long way to solving our problem. A tree—the great metaphor of biological evolution—has one trunk but many branches. And if time can branch, and even in some limited ways turn back upon itself, then there might be room for many narratives without inconsistency. What if the various religions—including those without a god, such as Confucianism, secular humanism, Zen Buddhism, and dialectical materialism—were all perfectly accurate impressionistic accounts of some twig, branch, root or flower in the evolving history of the consciousness of the universe? or, to return to our first metaphor, of a tusk, tail, trunk or flank of the divine elephant?

They might accept multiple accounts of reality.
They might syncretize their experiences, putting them all together into one.

