The Concept of Revelation and the Primal Religious Tradition

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I

We scholars have often been accused of 'perpetuating the very world we analyze'. If I succeed in achieving even partially what I attempt in this paper, it should render us less liable to that accusation. Its goal, however, is modest and certainly much more modest than that of Marx, who would that one studied philosophy not merely to understand but to change the world. This paper studies the world, especially the primal world, for how it might change our understanding of philosophy, or more precisely, the philosophy of religion. The purpose of this paper then is to examine how the concept of revelation in the philosophy of religion fares when that concept is exposed to materials drawn from the primal religions.[1] This task has not hitherto been attempted from within the philosophy of religion to the best of our knowledge.[2]

II

The first issue which arises on undertaking such an enterprise is that of the adequacy of the Christian approach to revelation, which is

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1 Huston Smith on 'primal' and 'tribal': 'We shall call [it]...primal because it came first, but alternatively we shall refer to it as tribal because its groupings were invariably small, or oral because writing was unknown to them.' *The World's Religions*, San Francisco, 1991, p. 365. Might they be considered primal not merely temporally but also for being ontologically, as closer to the source of things? This might serve as a wholesome corrective to the tendency to contrast the "primal" with the "axial". See Samuel N. Eisenstadt, 'Religious Diversity', in Mircea Eliade, (editor in chief), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York, 1987, vol. 12, pp. 313-18; also Charles H. Long, 'Matter and Spirit; A Reorientation', in Steven Friesen (ed.), *Local Knowledge, Ancient Wisdom: Challenges in Contemporary Spirituality*, Honolulu, 1991 p. 14; and Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 366..

2 James Hastings (ed.,) *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, New York, 1919 vol. X, pp. 745-49 which stops with Islam; Eliade (editor in chief), *op. cit.*, pp. 356-62, which stops with Hinduism; John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Fourth Edition), Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1990 which stays with Christianity and generally excludes primal religions from consideration. See p. 3.

more or less taken for granted as normative in the discussion of the topic in the philosophy of religion.

This current approach in the philosophy of religion towards revelation distinguishes between two theories of revelation; namely, the propositional and the non-propositional theories of revelation. John Hick has pointed out that 'Christian thought contains two very different understandings of the nature of revelation and, as a result, two different conceptions of faith (as the human reception of revelation), of the Bible (as a medium of revelation), and of theology (as discourse based upon revelation)'.[1] These two positions are then summarized by him as follows:

> The view that dominates the medieval period and that is represented today by more traditional forms of Roman Catholicism (and also, in a curious meeting of opposites, by conservative Protestantism) can be called the 'propositional' understanding of revelation. According to this view, the content of revelation is a body of truths expressed in statements or propositions. Revelation is the imparting to people of divinely authenticated truths. In the words of the older *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 'Revelation may be defined as the communication of some truth by God to a rational creature through means which are beyond the ordinary course of nature'.[2]

This propositional view of revelation has been contested by another, the nonpropositional view of revelation:

> According to this nonpropositional view, the content of revelation is not a body of truths about God, but God coming within the orbit of human experience by acting in history. From this point of view, theological propositions, as such, are not revealed but represent human attempts to understand the significance of revelatory events. This nonpropositional conception of revelation is connected with the modern renewed emphasis upon the *personal* character of God and the thought that the divine-human personal relationship consists of something more than the promulgation and reception of theological truths. Certain questions at once present themselves.[3]

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1 Hick, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
2 *Loc. cit.*
3 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

The Christian concept relies on the idea of God's disclosure to human beings either *verbally* or *historically through a scripture.* Such a view, however, immediately poses a twofold problem from the perspective of primal religions *on their own ground.* A revelation is, by definition, a revelation of truth. However, religiously sensitive thinkers of the primal religious traditions remain unconvinced of this very veracity of the Christian revelation on its own ground. In relation to the propositional view of revelation they point out that it exists in the form of scripture, as something written down. But Jesus Christ, around which the scriptural world revolves, himself 'left no writings'.[1] In other words, the verbal revelation already stands removed one step from its primal source, as we have it now. Not only did Jesus never write a word, what was supposed to happen historically about him has failed to transpire, namely, the Second Coming. It has yet to materialize.[2] This is why the primal religious thinkers tend to take a sceptical view of revelation as traditionally conceived, within the philosophy of religion. Indeed from the point of view of the study of primal religions, it is now claimed that it is primal religions which shed new light on the content of Christian revelation. The phenomenon of the cargo cult acquires special significance in this context. Although the phenomenon of cargo cults is associated with Melanesia, parallel phenomena are clearly discernible in the case of the 'Good Message' cult of the Iroquois Indians early in the nineteenth century[3] and the Ghost Dance Cult of the Native Americans in the late nineteenth century.[4] In order to see the implication of this phenomenon, more generally referred to as revitalization movements, one must bear in mind that 'In every case the cargo cult is a broad reflection of the colonial political and cultural subjugation which an innovative religious cosmology legitimates'[5]

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1 Gerald O'Collins S. J., 'Jesus', in Eliade (editor in chief) *op. cit.*, vol. 8, p. 15. Not only does nothing written by Jesus survive, the first Christian Gospel was probably not written until after 66 C.E.

2 See II Peter 3:8-10; I Thessalonians 5:1-3 and 4:13-18 (in context); as well as II Thessalonians 2:1-12 and Matthew 25:19 and Luke 20:9 (in context). I am indebted to Ian Hendersen for these references. Also see Mircea Eliade (editor in chief), *op. cit.*, vol. 12, p. 348. The deferment of the Second Coming is repeatedly alluded to, for instance, by Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red*, New York, 1973 p. 119 etc. In general primal thinkers remain highly sceptical about the historical charms associated with the Rorlele, *ibid.*, Chapter 7.

3 Anson D. Shupe, Jr., *Six Perspectives on New Religions: A Case Study Approach*, New York, 1981, pp. 85 ff.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

and that there are two elements common to its numerous manifestations: 'the "cargo" in the foreigners' ships, and the natives' own ancestors'.[1] Many cargo cults foresee the apocalyptic destruction of the whites and the restoration of a new order characterized by plenty.

One's perception of the early Christian experience is, speaking as a historian of religion, profoundly altered, if this model is applied to that experience. The colonial, political and cultural subjugation of the Hebrews by the Romans, the consequent wish for the 'cargo' of political supremacy and the intervention of the spirits such as the Holy Spirit in the matter, the expectation of the Second Coming and the destruction of non-Christians followed by a reign of plenty, though not on all fours with the cargo cult model, bears such a striking resemblance to it that it is hard to put it out of mind and calls for investigation by scholars more competent in this field. The study of new religious movements may here open up a strikingly new perspective for examining the early phase in the history of Christianity.

Moreover, some of the new religious movements have been rash enough to make specific prophecies and scholars like Leon Festinger and others have examined the issue of what happens *When Prophecy Fails*.[2] In a classic study of a UFO cult the reaction of its followers to the failure of the predictions to materialize was analyzed after this failure gave rise to what Festinger calls 'cognitive dissonance' - the simultaneous presence of two inconsistent cognitions which is potentially stressful. In this case the options for handling the situation were clear: either one overlooked the prediction or abandoned the cult or, notwithstanding an awareness of the failure, retained membership of the cult. This last course of action seems highly illogical and yet not only was this course adopted by many, it was discovered that those who had a considerable 'amount of social support at the time of the disconfirmation... retained their faith (though not without some effort)', but those who were 'alone when they confronted the fact that the prophecy had failed invariably abandoned it'.[3]

These findings could throw new light on how the Christian Church faced the disconfirmation of the Second Coming. For when the Second Coming ceased to materialize for centuries the *logical* expectation should have been the abandonment of Christianity by people in large numbers; instead, the Church emerged strengthened

1 *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

by the crisis. This is perhaps a development which can be anticipated by the model under study, for under certain conditions Festinger and others postulate 'an increase in religious fervour and belief after an irrefutable disconfirmation of prophecy',[1] which seem to hold in this case. The basic factor to be considered is the strength of the socially intermeshed network of believers. Thus the Christian experience here may again benefit from a conclusion drawn from the study of some new religious movements in a primal context, namely,

> that religious belief does not depend solely on the logical consequences of prophecy and real world experience... It is not unfulfilled prophecy per se that irrevocably disillusions believers, but rather it is the social conditions in which such disconfirmations are received that determine their ultimate impact on faith.[2]

This gives a new meaning to the role of the social gospel aspect of Christianity, to which Elaine Pagels has drawn fresh attention in the very formative phase of Christianity itself in her recent work: *The Origin of Satan.*[3]

III

At a secondary level, the way in which the primal religious tradition actually encountered the Christian revelation was not designed to enhance their confidence in its truth claims. The other modalities of revelation - the verbal and the historical - were not such as might inspire divine confidence in them, when primal peoples encountered the former as literacy, and the latter as missionary activity or outright conquest. It is possible that these are secular surrogates of the Christian concepts but it was through them that the primal people experienced the Christian presence. However it has been alleged that literacy was used or perhaps abused by the Christian community to defraud and exploit nonliterate primal cultures[4] and

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1 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
3 New York, 1995.
4 See Constance Classen, 'Literacy as Anticulture: The Andean Experience of the Written Word', *History of Religions* 30:4 May 1991 pp. 404-21. Although this article deals with archaic cultures, its conclusions apply *pari passu*, to the primal. One can only wonder how 'the negative experience of writing' (p. 413)

the concept of history was employed in the form of doctrines such as those of 'progress' or 'manifest destiny' to obscure the legitimate and even legal claims of the primal people.[1] In other words, the historical experience of the primal people with Christianity seems to cast a cloud of philosophical doubt over its revelatory modalities.

IV

At even a tertiary level, the propositional and nonpropositional doctrines of revelation in the philosophy of religion pose difficulties from a primal point of view. The Christian concept of revelation, in either case, intimately relies on God's revelation to human beings either through word (verbally) or deed (historically). Yet these are not the ways in which God has been typically experienced in primal religions. Even when these modalities have appeared, they have assumed different forms. Thus the *verbal* mode has taken the form of oral narratives[2] and oracles[3] and the *historical* mode has always possessed dimension.[4] In fact, a much more fundamental issue seems to be at stake from the point of view of the philosophy of religion. It is a truism that words are also symbolic in nature, as icons or images are. However, philosophy of religion has accorded special status to *language* as a symbol-system and has not

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by a people might have coloured their attitude toward 'scripture', especially Christian scripture.

1 Dedria, *op. cit.*, p. 82: 'A religion defined according to temporal considerations is placed continually on the defensive in maintaining its control over historical events. If, like the Hebrews of the Old Testament, political, economic, and cultural events can be interpreted as religious events, the religious time and the secular time can be made to appear to coincide. If, however, the separation becomes more or less permanent, as in Christianity and Western concepts of history, then religion becomes a function of political interpretations as in the Manifest Destiny theories of American history, or it becomes secularized as an economic determinism as in Communist theories of history. Either way the religion soon becomes helpless to intervene in the events of real life, except in a peripheral and oblique manner.' etc.

2 Raymond J. De Mallie and Douglas R. Parks, (eds) *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*, Norman and London, 1987, pp. 57-65 etc. 'A Zuni Indian once asked an ethnologist who was meticulously noting each word of a traditional story, "when I tell these stories, do you see it, or do you just write it down?"' Highwater, *op. cit.*, p. 68, also see pp. 112 ff.

3 Geoffrey Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions*, London, 1969 pp. 60 ff.

4 D. M. Dooling (ed.), *The Sons of the Wind*, San Francisco, 1984.

extended the same recognition to *objects* of art or culture as distinguished from words. In this sense, for want of a better word, the philosophy of religion may be described as logocentric.

A philosophy must be so by its very nature. The problem this poses in the context of primal religions is that while most of the religions covered by the philosophy of religion express themselves simultaneously in *words* and *objects* - in philosophy and in art the philosophy of religion, while focusing on the former mode of expression, is able to do justice to the tradition as a whole. The primal religions present a challenge to the philosophy of religion in confronting it primarily with objects instead of words and as these objects often tend to be grotesque, the philosopher of religion is inclined to ignore them instead of attempting to tease out the worldview embodied in them and to put it in words as a valid philosophy of religion.

This, no doubt, represents a reversal of our normal experience in which explanation by words precedes or is simultaneous with the formation of the object. It is because we are aware of the passion narratives that the image of Christ on the Cross does not appear to us as an undeciphered object of primitive art. We see the issue involved in a flash once the image is deprived of the narrative it is reduced to a primitive meaningless object. The problem which primal religions present is this - that their philosophical or narrative thinking itself has often been carried out *not* through words but objects. Hence a primal perspective on the philosophy of religion involves the acceptance, retrieval and incorporation of such philosophy, originally expressed in objects rather that words, into the philosophy of religion. This process has commenced:

> There has been an enlargement beyond doctrinal emphases that center religion on a set of beliefs that can be written as a creedal statement; an enlargement beyond religion conceived exclusively as an institutional entity with a directive priesthood or authoritative voice. These aspects are not to be denied, but that overly narrow construal of religion has been broadened to include other dimensions, such as aesthetic expressions...[1]

A good illustration of this is provided by the 'monstrous feline crouches' in Columbia, the jaguar-monsters of San Agustin. These could easily be dismissed as meaningless primitive representations unless the following clarifying question was asked: 'What, then, do

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1 Lawrence E. Sullivan, 'Dissonant Human Histories and the Vulnerability of Understanding', in Steven Friesen (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

these different types of feline sculptures represent, and how do they express iconographically one of the major tenets of religious system?'[1]

A primal perspective on the philosophy of religion predisposes one to ask such a question. And it is only *after* such a question had been posed that they were found to acquire, upon further investigation: 'A much wider meaning, in accordance with a broad underlying system of beliefs related to the shamanistic power quest and the all-important concept of procreative energy'.[2] Without the philosophical context they appear 'Figures of fantasy and nightmare' but once their language of objects rather than words is understood a conclusion, as follows, can be reached:

> It is obvious then that the jaguar-monster is not a deity, a divine being whom people would adore as a god, but rather a general principle of creation and destruction - a natural life force, so to speak - himself subject to a higher power. This point is clearly stated in many aboriginal myths: The jaguar was not alone in the beginning but was created by a divine being and set into this world as a great ambivalent force capable of good or evil. It has to be mastered not only by the shaman but also by each person for himself, if a moral and social order is to be preserved. The Jaguar is man, is the male; it stands for all human nature that is sexually and socially aggressive and predatory, and whose energy has to be curbed by cultural restrictions to ensure the survival of society.[3]

V

But what about a phenomenological rather that a merely philosophical approach to the concept of revelation? Might not its more inclusive nature allow for the material from primal religions to be accommodated within it? Johannes Deninger, for instance, offers the following five phenomenological criteria of revelation:

1. Origin or author: God, spirits, ancestors, power (*mana*), forces. In every case the source of revelation is something supernatural or numinous.

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1 Gerardo Reichel-Dolmotoff, *San Agustin: A Culture of Columbia*, Charlottesville, 1975, vol. I, p. 108, emphasis added.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

2. Instrument or means: sacred signs in nature (the stars, animals, sacred places, or sacred times); dreams, visions, ecstasies; finally, words or sacred books.

3. Content or object: the didactic, helping, or punishing presence, will, being, activity, or commission of the divinity.

4. Recipients or addressees: medicine men, sorcerers, sacrificing priests, shamans, soothsayers, mediators, prophets with a commission or information intended for individuals or groups, for a people or the entire race.

5. Effect and consequence for the recipient: personal instruction or persuasion, divine mission, service as oracle - all this through inspiration or, in the supreme case, through incarnation.[1]

The phenomenologists have cast their net wider than the philosophers but they too may have failed to reel in the catch. The catch lies in the expression 'in nature' when the instrument or means of revelation is discussed. For, from the perspective of primal religions, *nature itself* can be the medium of revelation, rather than something contained in it, such as a sacred place or animal. Yahweh offered to the Hebrews Israel, which was a piece of nature (land) but it was the 'effect or consequence for the recipient' (Deninger's item 2) not the instrument or means' (Deninger's item 5).

Shinto provides a closer parallel with stories of its specific creation by the *kami*, as in the picturesque account of an island being formed through a bejewelled spear, as in Chapter 3 of the *Kojiki*:

1 At this time the heavenly deities, all with one command, said to the two deities IZANAGI-NO-MIKOTO and IZANAMI-NO MIKOTO: 'Complete and solidify this drifting land!'

2 Giving them the Heavenly Jewelled Spear, they entrusted the mission to them.

3 Thereupon, the two deities stood on the Heavenly Floating Bridge and, lowering the jewelled spear, stirred with it. They

[1] Johannes Deninger, 'Revelation', in Eliade (editor in chief), *op. cit.*, vol. 12, p. 356.

> stirred the brine with a churning-churning sound; and when they lifted up [the spear] again, the brine dripping down from the tip of the spear piled up and became an island. This was the island ONOGORO.[1]

The process, as described in Chapter 6 refers to the islands being begotten:

> CHAPTER 6
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> IZANAGI AND IZANAMI GIVE BIRTH TO NUMEROUS ISLANDS.
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> 1 After they had finished saying this, they were united and bore as a child [the island] APADI-NO-PO-NO-SA-WAKE-NO-SIMA.
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> 2 Next they bore the double island of IVO. This island has one body and four countenances, each with a separate name:
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> 3 Thus, the land of IVO is named EPIME; the land of SANUKI is named IPI-YORI-PIKO; the land of APA is named OPO-GE-TUPIME; and the land of TOSA is named TAKE-YORI-WAKE.
>
> 4 Next they bore the triple island of OKI, also named AME-NO-OSI-KORO-WAKE.
>
> 5 Next they bore the island of TUKUSI. This island also has one body and four countenances, each with a separate name:[2]

As Izanami dies she gives birth to numerous deities from her body, as happens in the *Purusasukta* of the Rig Veda (X-90).[3] After the two together had brought forth a number of deities, although in this case they are born not so much from the body as from her bodily secretions like vomit, urine, etc.[4] Similarly, various items grow from the corpse of the deity OPO-GE-TU-PIME-NO kami, rather than

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1 Donald L. Philippi (trans.), *Kojiki*, Tokyo, 1968, p. 49.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
3 I owe this suggestion to Victor Hori, as also the references from the *Kojiki.*
4 Phillipi, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

emerging from dismembered parts of the body.[1] Nevertheless the parallel with the sacrifice of the *purusa* does have a teasing quality to it.

In Chapter 11 Izanagi does the same: he generates a host of *kamis* as he ritually cleanses himself, providing an interesting case of creation not through ritual as such but ritual cleansing:

IZANAGI PURIFIES HIMSELF, GIVING BIRTH TO MANY DEITIES INCLUDING AMA-TERASU-OPO-MI-KAMI AND SUSA-NO-WO.

1 Hereupon, IZANAGI-NO-OPO-KAMI said: 'I have been to a most unpleasant land, a horrible, unclean land. Therefore I shall purify myself'.

2 Arriving at [the plain] AKAPAKE-PARA by the river-mouth of TATIBANA in PIMUKA in TUKUSI, he purified and exorcised himself.

3 When he flung down his stick, there came into existence a deity named TUKI-TATU-PUNA-TO-NO-KAMI.

4 When he flung down his sash, there came into existence a deity named MITI-NO-NAGA-TI-PA-NO-KAMI.

5 Next, when he flung down his bag, there came into existence a deity named TOKI-PAKASI-NO-KAMI.

The parallel with the Australian Aboriginal experience is striking, wherein the activity of the mythic beings in mythic time (often called Dreaming) involved the 'process of shaping that world, making it habitable or humanized - that is, preparing it for the emergence of a human population'.[2] The identification of some beings with the contour of the land was so close that sometimes 'a natural feature [was] itself iconographic'.[3] However, two differences between the Japanese original and Australian Aboriginal experiences also stand out. There is a clearer sense of linear time in the Japanese accounts and the Japanese quickly acquired scriptures, in the form of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi* as soon as writing was introduced. It is an interesting point for our discussion that

1 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
2 Ronald M. Berndt, *Australian Aboriginal Religion*, Leiden, 1974, p. 8.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

although these texts are canonical in one sense, in another they are not. They are not like Western scriptures in terms of function and though they approximate them in terms of form, again they seem to differ in terms of content. In other words even when religions with marked primal features become historical religions, this fact leaves its tell-tale signatures on their sacred texts.

Although special connection to nature distinguishes primal religion, the nature of the connection can vary. Now what do we mean by nature? In religions it is primarily the earth, but the attitudes of the American Indians have a different configuration than that of the Australian Aborigines, as becomes apparent from the following account:

> When I was a young man I went to a medicine-man for advice concerning my future. The medicine-man said: 'I have not much to tell you except to help you understand this earth on which you live. If a man is to succeed on the hunt or the warpath, he must not be governed by his inclination, but by an understanding of the ways of animals and of his natural surroundings, gained through close observation. The earth is large, and on it live many animals. The earth is under protection of something which at times becomes visible to the eye. One would think this would be at the center of the earth, but its representations appear everywhere, in large and small forms - they are the sacred stones. The presence of a sacred stone will protect you from misfortune'. He then gave me a sacred stone which he himself had worn. I kept it with me wherever I went and was helped by it. He also told me where I might find one for myself. *Wakan Tanka* tells the sacred stones many things which may happen to people. The medicine-man told me to observe my natural surroundings, and after my talk with him I observed them closely. I watched the changes of the weather, the habits of animals, and all the things by which I might be guided in the future, and I stored this knowledge in my mind.[1]

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1 Elaine A. Jahner, 'Lakota Genesis: The Oral Tradition', in De Mallie and Parks (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 55. Also see the speech of Young Chief, A Layuse, who refused to sign the Treaty of Walla Walla because, he felt, the rest of creation was not represented in the transaction. Most of this rest of creation is described in terms of the earth in his speech cited by Deloria, *op. cit.*, p. 95: 'I wonder if the ground has anything to say? I wonder if the ground is listening to what is said? I wonder if the ground would come alive and what is on it? Though I hear

The following account is even more illuminating:

> Oral Lyons was the first Onondagan to enter college. When he returned to his reservation for his first vacation, his uncle proposed a fishing trip on a lake. Once he had his nephew in the middle of the lake where he wanted him, he began to interrogate him. 'Well, Oral,' he said, 'you've been to college; you must be pretty smart now from all they've been teaching you. Let me ask you a question. Who are you?' Taken aback by the question, Oral fumbled for an answer. 'What do you mean, who am I? Why, I'm your nephew, of course'. His uncle rejected his answer and repeated his question. Successively, the nephew ventured that he was Oral Lyons, an Onondagan, a human being, a man, a young man, all to no avail. When his uncle had reduced him to silence and he asked to be informed as to who he was, his uncle said, 'Do you see that bluff over there? Oral, you are that bluff. And that giant pine on the other shore? Oral, you are that pine. And this water that supports our boat? You are this water'.[1]

Just as the Australian Aboriginal resonated with the early Shinto religions this one strikes a chord in harmony with the early Hindu Upanisadic tradition, once set alongside it:

1. 'Bring hither a fig from there'. 'Here it is, sir'. 'Divide it'.
   'It is divided, sir'.
   'What do you see there?'
   'These rather (*iva*) fine seeds, sir'.
   'Of these, please (*anga*), divide one'.
   'It is divided, sir'.

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what the ground says. The ground says, It is the Great Spirit that placed me here. The Great Spirit appointed the roots to feed the Indians on. The water says the same thing, The Great Spirit directs me, Feed the Indians well. The grass says the same thing, Feed the Indians well. The ground, water and grass say, the Great Spirit has given us our names. We have these names and hold these names. The ground says, The Great Spirit placed me here to produce all that grows on me, trees and fruit. The same way the ground says, It was from me man was made. The Great Spirit, in placing me on earth, desired them to take good care of the ground and to do each other no harm.'

1 See Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

'What do you see there?'
'Nothing at all, sir'.

2. Then he said to him: 'Verily, my dear, that finest essence which you do not perceive - verily, my dear, from that finest essence this great Nyagrodha (sacred fig) tree thus arises.

3. Believe me, my dear,' said he, 'that which is the finest essence - this whole world has that as its soul. That is reality. That is Atman (Soul). That art thou, Svetaketu'.[1]

The accounts from the primal religions and what might be called the primal dimension of some of the so-called ethnic religions such as Shinto and Hinduism, also known for their association with 'land' in their own way are more diversified than we expected, but they are also less divided than they might appear on account of their common connection with nature. This leads one to ask the question raised in the next section.

VI

What could this focus on nature possibly contribute to the concept of revelation in the philosophy of religion? Philosophy of religion in general employs three key categories in its discussion of revelation and its philosophical significance: God, Nature, and History. It sides with God and History over Nature. As one extends the scope of revelation to include other religions the role of Nature becomes more difficult to overlook. Even within the Abrahamic religions Judaism in its commitment to Zion retains a stronger link with Nature (land) closely tied to history though it be, links which become global in Christianity and Islam (though without the 'sensory experience of the earth as a whole',[2] from outer space) and eschatological in Zoroastrianism. In Shinto the land is not offered by God to a people and hence 'sacred', as in Judaism but is sacred as the land of the Gods itself, rather than per se.[3] In

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1 Robert Ernest Hume (trans.), *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (second edition), London, 1931, pp. 247-48.

2 Ewert Cousins, "Three Symbols for the Second Axial Period", in Friesen (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 23.

3 The linear concept of time associated with Shinto also needs to be factored here, see Kitabatake Chikafusa (thirteenth century as cited by Paul S. Maglapus 'Philippine Culture and Modernization' in Robert N. Bellah (ed.) *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia*, New York, 1965, p. 40.

Hinduism, remarkably, in its most standard formulation of the concept, there is a revelation but without a revealer.

> Then from where does it come? The answer is stark and simple: it is given with the world. For some of the Mimamsa (or orthodox exegetical) thinkers who have addressed themselves to this problem, the world is beginningless and the assumption of a creator is both problematic and unnecessary.
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> And even if a beginning of the world is assumed, as in later Hindu thought when it is held that the universe goes through a pulsating rhythm of origination, existence, and dissolution, it is also held that at the dawn of a new world the revelation reappears to the vision of the seers, who once more begin the transmission.
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> Revelation, then, comes with the world, and it embodies the laws which regulate the well-being of both world and man.[1]

If these religions of revelation present one type of difficulty it seems to lie in viewing nature as instrumental either as a divine means or means to the divine or an end divinely secured. On the other hand, the Taoist, Confucian (and when placed in that category) Shinto cultures 'are characterized by what J. J. M. de Groot termed "universism": a holiness, goodness and perfection of the natural order...'[2] This comes close to the primal position, as foreshadowed in the discussion of Shinto but the primal pattern remains different in that land is holy in and of itself and not necessarily as part of a universal system - natural or theological.

In primal religions, it seems, the revelation is made by the higher powers not as a person might speak words but as a potter might mould clay. The medium of revelation was not verbal language but material nature.

> Once the spiritual vision of the cosmos is recognized, the [American] Indian attitude toward the land itself becomes understandable. The land was the gift of the domain of powerful beings. Certain locations, such as mountains and lakes, served as

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1 Eliot Deutsch and J. A. B. van Buitenin, *A Source Book of Advaita Vedanta*, Honolulu, 1971, p. 5.

2 Winston L. King, 'Religion' in Eliade (editor in chief), *op. cit.*, vol. 12, p. 282.

> especially important points of contact with these spirits or forces.[1]

The point to note is that such sacred places are not unknown in revealed religions, but in primal religions the shaping of the land itself, like that of words in a scripture, could constitute divine disclosure. The primal person can no more sell off the land than a Christian can sell the copyright to the Bible to a press.

> Tecumseh and a few other great leaders had the vision of a whole continent given to all Indians, and epitomized the Indian feeling for land in the famous words, 'Sell the earth? Why not sell the air, the clouds, the great sea?' In the realization of the land belonging to all Indians, do we hear an echo of the tribal God of Israel being transformed into the God of all human beings?[2]

Primal revelation thus takes place through the lineaments of nature through not a verbal but plastic medium. Now the question arises: Who is the revealer? In theism God is the revealer. However, in the same breath as we assert that God is the revealer (and such revelation occurs *somewhere*) we also assert that God is everywhere. If one can grab both the horns of this paradox then one can perform a Minoan somersault which vaults us to freedom over and beyond the charging bull in the china-shop of our philosophical wares, rather like D. H. Lawrence who wrote:

> It was a vast old religion, greater than anything we know: more darkly and nakedly religious. There is no God, no conception of a God. All is God. But it is not the pantheism we are accustomed to, which expresses itself as 'God is everywhere, God is in everything'. In this Indian religion everything is alive, not supernaturally, but naturally alive.[3]

Similarly God is eternal, but revelation is given at various points in time - whether propositional or nonpropositional. Knud Rasmussen records the following remarks of a shaman from among the Eskimos who regarded Sila (Hila) as the supreme deity.

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1 J. Donald Hughes, as cited in Highwater, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
2 Hick, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
3 Cited in Highwater, *op. cit.*, p. 82. Also see Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 365-66.

Yes (I believe in) a power that we call Sila, which is not to be explained in simple words. A great spirit, supporting the world and the weather and all life on earth, a spirit so mighty that his utterance to mankind is not through common words, but by storm and snow and rain and the fury of the sea; all the forces of nature that men fear. But he has also another way of utterance, by sunlight, and the calm of the sea, and little children innocently at play, themselves understanding nothing. Children hear a soft and gentle voice, almost like that of a woman. It comes to them in a mysterious way, but so gently that they are not afraid, they only hear that some danger threatens. And the children mention it as it were casually when they come home, and it is then the business of the *angakog* (wizard) to take such measures as shall guard against the peril. When all is well Sila sends no message to mankind, but withdraws into his own endless nothingness apart. So he remains as long as men do not abuse life, but act with reverence towards their daily food.

No one has seen Sila; his place of being is a mystery in that he is at once among us and unspeakable far away.[1]

VII

In the context of such a revelation the relationship of religion to life is another key element, and the point involves considerable subtlety. In fact it has to do with the definition of religion itself. In primal religion one does not distinguish the 'religious' from the remainder or rest of life but this is what the West feels culturally compelled to do, on account 'of the theistic inheritance from Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The theistic form of belief in this tradition, even when downgraded culturally',[2] as Winston L. King shrewdly observes, 'is formative in the dichotomous Western view of religion' and 'even Western thinkers who recognize their cultural bias find it hard to escape, because the assumptions of theism permeate the linguistic structures that shape their thought'.[3] These linguistic and cultural factors lead its subjects to distinguish between creator and created, sacred and profane, and between the circle of believers and

1 F. M. Bergounioux, O.F.M. and Joseph Goetz, S.J., *Prehistoric and Primitive Religion*, London, 1965, pp. 78-79.
2 Winston L. King, *loc. cit.*
3 *Ibid.*

those outside it, so that '*religion* suggests both separation and a separative fellowship'.[1]

Revelation does not seem to have these connotations in primal religion and in Hinduism. Again Winston L. King, addresses the issue with great subtlety:

> Many practical and conceptual difficulties arise when one attempts to apply such a dichotomous pattern across the board to all cultures. In primitive societies, for instance, what the West calls religious is such an integral part of the total ongoing way of life that it is never experienced or thought of as something separable or narrowly distinguishable from the rest of the pattern. Or if the dichotomy is applied to that multifaceted entity called Hinduism, it seems that almost everything can be and is given a religious significance by some sect. Indeed, in a real sense everything that is divine; existence per se appears to be sacred. It is only that the ultimately real manifests itself in a multitude of ways - in the set-apart and the ordinary, in god and so-called devil, in saint and sinner. The real is apprehended at many levels in accordance with the individual's capacity.[2]

The key lies in being able to distinguish the primal case from the Hindu and being able to trace the hair-line distinguishing them on the screen. We have tried to distinguish between attitudes to nature among those religions, like Judaism, Hinduism, Shinto and the primal religions themselves and are not in danger of getting lost in the trees by not seeing the wood. For the point to be pressed is not in distinguishing between attitudes to space but the contrast it presents to time as a factor in revelation.

This point comes into clear focus when we include the discussion of African traditional religion which is almost ready to boast, it seems, that it does not possess scripture or even provide a kind of scripture of African religion.[3] As for history, 'Since people are so intimately bound up with their religious life and outlook', writes John S. Mbiti, 'their history constitutes the history of their religion'.[4] He then articulates how seamless this bond between religion and life is.

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1 *Ibid.*, p. 283.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 282.
3 Parrinder, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
4 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1969, p. 5.

Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. Through modern change these traditional religions cannot remain intact, but they are by no means extinct. In times of crisis they often come to the surface, or people revert to them in secret.

Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is part. Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a selfexcommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.[1]

Vine Deloria, Jr. carries the point further to its logical conclusion in differentiating between the two as fundamental modalities of revelation: temporal and spatial. He then sees a series of points flowing syllogistically, as it were, from the original premise. Temporal revelation, he tends to argue, devalues experience.[2]

So too with one of the related concepts of monotheism, that of revelation.[3] In traditional terms a revelation occurs at a point in

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1 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

2 Many Hindu scholars note these two aspects of Christianity but do not make the connection he forges, see S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, New Delhi, 1993 (first published 1927), pp. 37, 43-44.

3 This relationship between monotheism and revelation is not one of necessity in Hindu thought.

> time, and succeeding generations are more dependent on their understanding of the original revelation than upon their immediate experience of deity. Almost all of the world religions are partially dependent on a revelation at some point in history. Contemporary people are more dependent on the validity of the original revelation of their religion in an educational sense than they are on their own immediate experience in a qualitative sense. For many religions this dependence means that belief replaces experience, and proofs of a logical nature are more relevant than additional revelations.[1]

Temporal revelation, according to Vine Deloria, Jr. not only places emphasis on faith (because it is a *past* event) rather than experience but it also changes with time, is individualistic in nature and (proselytizingly) universalistic by implication.

> Revelations must somehow be phrased in the cultural beliefs, languages, and worldviews of the time in which they occurred. As times change and cultures become more sophisticated, sciences come to present a broader view of the universe, and languages become infused with foreign words and concepts, and the original revelation also takes on a different aspect. Revelation has generally been considered as a specific body of truth related to a particular individual at a specific time. This glimpse into the eternal, as it were, is too often taken as universally valid for all times and places. If the universal nature of religions has not been the subject of debate, it should be our immediate concern.[2]

There are also other consequences, which flow as well, according to Vine Deloria, Jr. if a spatial rather than a temporal dimension is associated with revelation. He goes on to say:

> In shifting from temporal concepts to spatial terms, we find that a revelation is not so much the period of time in which it occurs as the place it may occur. Revelation becomes a particular experience at a particular place, no universal truth emerging but an awareness arising that certain places have a qualitative holiness over and above other places. The universality of truth then becomes the relevance of the experience for a community

1 Deloria, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
2 *Ibid.* p. 56.

of people, not its continual adjustment to evolving scientific and philosophical conceptions of the universe.[1]

However, space is in time only. That is to say, even the spatial expressions of revelation are subject to time. Thus if in an early eolithic period the sky is the supreme divinity; in the paleolithic the master of animals and in the neolithic phase of the association of the productivity of the earth with fertility, the divinities took the form of a pair - the earth and the sky.[2] Such differentiation is identifiable even in the case of the Sky Gods themselves. Joseph Goetz has proposed the following:

1. 'Among the hunters, properly speaking... it is difficult to make out any idea of God';[3]

2. Among 'food gathering and pastoral societies'[4] one finds a Sky God who is 'active and intervening in man's life'.[5]

3. Among planter-agriculturist groups one finds 'an inactive, distant God'[6] so much so that in 'the myths themselves describe, as in Peruvian tradition, how the first men were destroyed because they could invoke no God but the Father in the Sky'.[7] This corresponds well with the changing concepts of Yahweh in the context of the history of the Hebrews.[8]

Structurally then there are synesthetic similarities between temporal and spatial dimensions and what began to diverge also seems to start to converge. Could it be that the medium is not the message; it is the same message in different media? And what is the message?

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1 See Charles Long, 'Religion, Primitive', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Chicago, 1966, vol. 19, pp. 110-11.
2 See Charles Long, 'Religion, Primitive', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Chicago, 1966, vol. 19, pp. 110-11.
3 F. M. Bergounioux O. F. M. and Joseph Goetz S. J., *op. cit.* p. 86.
4 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
6 *Loc. cit.*
7 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
8 Hick, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

VIII

Thus the primal contribution to the philosophy of religion on the point of revelation is to reveal it as a particular kind of hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred. It is this recognition or revelation as a subcategory of hierophany in terms of primal religion - which, once made obvious, becomes obvious but remains obscured so long as the relation is not established. The movement in this direction is clear in the work of Mircea Eliade, although if it has been made as emphatically as it is being made now, then it escaped my attention. The clues Eliade provides consist of such statements as 'we cannot be sure that there is anything object, movement, psychological function, being or even a game - that has not at some time in human history been somewhere transformed into a hierophany'.[1] Eliade goes on to cite a number of items, including, 'to the essential words of the language'[2] (hence *mantras*?) but he still does not mention scriptural revelation. He almost hints that he treats 'written texts' as a sphere from which the 'scraps of evidence' of hierophany may be drawn, rather that considering the text itself as a sphere of hierophany. However a breakthrough comes with this comment:

> One might even say that all hierophanies are simple prefigurations of the miracle of Incarnation, that every hierophany is an abortive attempt to reveal the mystery of the coming together of God and man.[3]

He goes on to say:

> Ockham, for instance, even went so far as to write: 'Est articulus fidei quod Deus assumpsit naturam humanam. Non includit contradictionem, Deus assumere naturam assinam. Pari ratione potest assumere lapidum aut lignum'. It does not, therefore, seem absurd in the least to study the nature of primitive hierophanies in the light of Christian theology: God is free to manifest himself under any form - even that of stone or wood. Leaving out for a moment the word 'God', this may be translated: the sacred may be seen under any sort of form, even the most alien. In fact, what is paradoxical, what is beyond our understanding, is not that the sacred can be manifested in stones

1 Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

> or in trees, but that it can be manifested at all, that it can thus become limited and relative.[1]

And then he concludes with this footnote:

> One could attempt to vindicate the hierophanies which preceded the miracle of the Incarnation in the light of Christian teaching by showing their importance as a series of prefigurations of that Incarnation. Consequently, far from thinking of pagan religious ways (fetishes, idols and such) as false and degenerate stages in the religious feeling of mankind fallen in sin, now may see them as desperate attempts to prefigure the mystery of the Incarnation. The whole religious life of mankind - expressed in the dialectic of hierophanies - would, from this standpoint, be simply a waiting for Christ.[2]

The way is thus paved for the unhesitating acknowledgement of Christian revelation as a hierophany:

> ... Hierophanic moments of time are not restricted to cosmic rhythms of nature or biology. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, human history is transfigured into a theophany. The manifestation of God in time guarantees the religious value of Christian images and symbols such as the cross, the holy mountain of Calvary, and the cosmic tree.[3]

The following points emerge from viewing the concept of revelation through the prism of primal religions:

1. Hierophany is the broadest general category. Hierophany is a mode of revelation just as theophany and kratophany are modes of hierophany.

2. Nonpropositional revelation fits the category of hierophany better than that of propositional revelation, as per the current usages of the term.

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1 *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 31, note 1. Interestingly the discussion by Wilhelm Dupre (*Religion in Primitive Cultures: A Study in Ethnophilosophy*, the Hague, 1975 pp. 313-14) oscillates between protorevelation and the claim that 'consciousness is in its very essence revelatory'. (p.314).

3 Mircea Eliade and Lawrence E. Sullivan, in Eliade (editor in chief), *op. cit.*, vol. 6, p. 316.

3. Revelation may be categorized as propositional, historical or symbolic to accommodate all major modes of its manifestation in the religions of the world within it.

4. The incarnatory description of Jesus Christ as fully human and divine is an attempt to rationalize the dialectical structure of the sacred by assimilation, whereas distinguishing the metaphysical and moral attributes of God in the same context and regarding the Incarnation as an embodiment of the latter represents a partial reversal of the process.

5. Hierophanies can also be verbal but an oracle is not a scripture. Nevertheless, a comprehensive hierophany of natural components may be comparable to one of verbal components.

For the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, for example, the landscape of their native lands is alive. Its smallest details are charged with meanings revealed in myth. Because the sacred first appeared in those places (to guarantee a food supply and to teach humans how to feed themselves), they became an inexhaustible source of power and sacrality. Humans can return to these places in each generation, to commune with the power that has revealed itself here. In fact, the Aboriginal peoples express a religious need to remain in direct contact with those sites that are hierophanic.[1]

In this respect the *Qur'an* may be treated as a verbal hierophany. Its finality as a revelation, however, breaks the cycle of comparison for hierophanies 'capable of repeating themselves' unless the repeated readings of a text provide a parallel.

6. The media of hierophany can change, just like the language of a scripture.

IX

To conclude: In a recent book Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith asks the provocative question crucial to so many world religions,

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1 Eliade and Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

namely, what is scripture? And in a step which highlights the significance of the issue we are discussing even makes that provocative question the title of the book itself. Now we know how the question will be answered from the standpoint of the primal perspective on the philosophy of religion: it is a hierophany, a revelation of the sacred. I feel tempted to add: all scriptures are hierophanies but not all hierophanies are scriptures but I shall do my best to resist it.