

THE SPIRIT AND THE CATEGORIES

a philosophical fragment toward CVIII (22-26 July 91 Craigville Theological Colloquy on "The Holy Spirit in Creation, Truth, and Power")

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A half century ago today I handed in a doctoral-seminar paper on *What is "nature"?* And years before that, down South a farmboy studying for the ordained ministry, having heard me use the word, asked "What is a 'category'?" The second question was asked by an intellectual & educational inferior, who got such a satisfying answer that he leeches onto me for many more questions day after day, to my delight & satisfaction. The first question was asked, assigned, by an intellectual & educational superior, Edwin Ewert Aubrey (philosophical theology, U. of Chicago), the only teacher I ever had who could think-speak faster, more comprehensively, & more profoundly than Reinhold Niebuhr, while being as clear.

Aubrey, a Brit, had studied under the world's most powerful living atheists, who at that time were Brits (more Scots [Hume's successors] than English). A half century ago, the U. of C. was crawling with atheists, & he was eating them alive as ladybugs eat aphids in my garden. On the faculty, he was up against Henry Nelson Wieman, the father of "process theology" (the first to adapt, to that purpose, Whitehead's process philosophy). While I was handing in papers for Aubrey's "The Problem of the Supernatural," I was doing the same for Wieman's "Mysticism."

Now, Aubrey was a man of the mind, a categorical thinker; & Wieman, a man of the spirit, a radiant romantic who, when encountering a category, assumed he was meeting an enemy. The latter's religion was a mystical naturalism, "God" being the word for "the person-making process of the universe."

Aubrey, the comprehensive-categorical thinker, was also a loving Christian who wasn't about to read Wieman out of the church or academy. Rather, he embraced him with a categorical formula that says both yes & no as to whether Spirit is separable from matter, God from the universe: "ontological continuity in the prosaic [intellectual] dimension [where science works] & epistemological discontinuity in the poetic dimension [where art & religion work]."

1 The Aubrey/Wieman encounter is only a classic instance of a debate, inherent in human "nature," between (choose your set) mind/heart, mind/spirit, body/soul, et al. Efforts to give the victory to one or the other side of the polarity always wind up impoverishing more than illumining. They range from the victory of mind ("nature" being maya, illusion) to the victory of matter ("spirit" being an illusion of "the bicameral mind"). The **failure** to resolve the controversy is the chief intellectual factor in the current revival of a wide variety of phenomena we seem to have settled for putting in the category-grabbag labeled spirituality.

2 The socio-existential "problem of the supernatural" is that what we used to call Enlightenment Man absorbed, & absorbs, spirit (the beyond-matter, the meta-physical, the super- or supra-natural) into nature, effectively destroying the categories of the mystical, the miraculous, the weird-odd. In the Bible, everyth unusual is given a "natural" interpretation. "The spirit of God" is only a thmonotheistic refinement of animism. "The Holy Spirit" is the early Church's esprit de corps, which was Durkheim's launching pad for developing his atheistic psycho-sociology (widely held till devastated by Peter Berger & a few others).

3 In the secular mentality controlling the American academy at all levels, there's literally no place for "creation," "providence," "Pentecost"--"The Holy Spirit in Creation, Truth, and Power." But in a spiritual worldview, there's no place for the worldview now regnant in academia. We're in a Christ-against-culture situation painful to us liberals (in my case, the liberal side of me). Current nonevangelical theologies are not yet facing the philosophical **either/or** which, if avoided, trivializes into mere empiricism all theologizing on spirituality, spirit, Spirit.

4 Joachim Wach, then Mircea Eliade, enriched the U. of C. great conversation with additions for anthro-sociology & psycho-comparativism (depth analysis of the world's religions), respectively. Aubrey had shown that "nature" as category

does not exist by itself but is in a set--"nature/supernatural," "nature/spirit," "nature/God," "nature/man/God" (as in Wm. Temple's Gifford Lectures). Now scholars from other disciplines were further undermining the simpleminded confidence secularists had in "Nature." But this erosion has not prevented the re-emergence of "nature religion" (which Catherine Albanese's new work of that title traces throughout history, especially American history).

5 This re-emergence has a number of **impulses** behind & within it: (1) Feminism's hunger for ontological-prehistorical underpinnings in "the Goddess"; (2) "New Age" movements; & (3) revived interest, in Christianity (eg, Matthew Fox) & Judaism, in the our biblical & postbiblical spiritual heritage.

5 Some languages (eg, Amerind) have no word for "animal," for the man/animal distinction is absent from their **language-world**; but since the man/spirit distinction is universal, all languages have a word or words for "spirit." Also universal, in each case to the extent of philosophical development, is the **linkage** of "spirit" with what is valued (esthetics & ethics), what is really real (ontology), what sustains human life against chaos (cosmology), & how we human beings think (logic) & know (epistemology, including revelation). You will produce your own Christian philosophical theology of spirit if you work through these linkages in light of "spirit" & "category" in the dictionary, & "spirit" & "Holy Spirit" in a biblical dictionary (or wordbook or theological dictionary).

6 In our civilization, "nature" is a social word, a creature of God & an aspect of our human creaturehood (though a minor Western tendency is to use "nature" elatively, as a holophrase including "God"--as "Mother Nature" in current media use). "Spirit," however, signals **transcendence** of such categories as nature, time (cf. "the eternal Spirit"), space, causality, gender, race, ethnicity, class, context, particularity (cf. Kant's "categorical imperative"), substance, power.