

WHAT IS TRUTH?
Scientific Knowledge and Spiritual Substance:
Is There a Conflict?

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered as a Contribution by a Universalist Quaker to
Pendle Hill's Weekend Conference on
"What Is Truth?"
A Friendly Dialogue Among Christian, Universalist and Scientific Perspectives
Wallingford, Pennsylvania
February 25-27, 2000

What Is Truth?

A Universalist Quaker Perspective

Spiritual Prophecy and the Enterprise of Civilization.

The Truth Claims of Religion and the Four-Part Truth Matrix

- a. Diversity within each religious culture.*
- b. Paradox and spiritual truth.*
- c. The unpremised first premises.*
- d. Examining what is vs. envisioning what ought to be.*

The Erosion by Science of Spiritual Culture.

- a. Creation myths.*
- b. Science mis-appropriated and mis-applied.*
- c. Post-modernism.*
- d. The expanding universe of spiritual quandaries created by technology.*

Conclusion.

ॐ

सर्वभूतस्थितं यो मां
भजत्येकत्वमास्थितः।
सर्वथा वर्तमानोऽपि स
योगी मयि वर्तते ॥

Bhagavad Gita VI:31

DEUS
caritas est
et qui manet
in caritate in
Deo manet et
Deus in eo.

1 JOHN 4:16

In this world
Hate never dispelled hate.
Only love dispels hate.
This is the law.
Ancient and inexhaustible.

You too shall pass away.
Knowing this, how can you quarrel?

THE DHAMMAPADA ~
The Sayings of the Buddha

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Pontius Pilate

First Panel: "The person who in the oneness of love, loves Me in whatever she sees, wherever this person may live, in truth she lives in Me."

Second Panel: "God is love: one who dwells in loves dwells in God, and God dwells in him."

What is truth? According to the states of Kansas, Kentucky, and Oklahoma, the theory that human beings evolved from lower forms of life over a long period of time through a process of natural selection is not truth. In one way or the other, these states have hedged, restricted or banned outright the teaching of the scientific theory of evolution in public schools.

When we here in the United States speak about truth claims, and about the sometimes distinctive truth claims of science, on the one hand, and religion, on the other, we usually have in mind the noisy confrontation between the scientific theory of evolution and certain kinds of fundamentalist Christianity. This obviously leaves many scientists and many religionists out of the picture. The task I have been assigned, the task of reflecting upon truth claims advanced in the name religion in general, rather than focusing only on Christians of a certain persuasion, presents us with an opportunity to step back from the bickering in the headlines.

Perhaps the truth claims of religion and the truth claims of science are reconcilable. They might be reconcilable by being incorporated into some grand, unified theory of human knowledge in which each blends and harmonizes with the other in the achievement of a satisfactory whole. Or, some settlement of the matter might be achieved by explicitly defining and separating the sphere of influence of each, showing that they need not interfere with each other.

I hope that it will aid the intelligibility and usefulness of what I am about to offer if I tell you from the outset about where I am going. Overall, I am going to conclude that the framework we are using to contemplate truth claims -- the four-part framework of correspondence, coherence, operationalism, and pragmatism -- is itself an expression of a rational and empiricist mind set, and is not fully adequate for comprehending the truth claims of religion.¹

The second point I hope to make has to do with the corner of human affairs which might loosely be termed "liberal religion." We who inhabit this corner tend to become impatient with the know-nothingism of people whom we perceive as fundamentalists, and to shrug off their Don Quixote-like assaults on the juggernaut of science as embarrassing and picturesque. I believe we are, at the same time, inclined to overlook and to underestimate the truly profound problems for well-being posed by science's relentless reduction and marginalization of humankind's spiritual cultures. We have a job before us, and we are failing to do it because we are distracted and repelled by the clumsy and noisy responses of so-called fundamentalists.

The Catholic Church got its fingers badly burned in the incident with Galileo. Tragically, some of the Church's victims got more than their fingers burned. But the Catholic Church is definitely not in the mood to quarrel with science any longer. The current Pope, John Paul II, bravely proclaims that since both scientific truth and religious truth come from God, there must not be any real contradiction between them. Howard Brinton takes comfort in the fact that both science and Quakerism rely on experimentally and experientially arrived at knowledge as the basis for their truth claims, and he also

¹ The four standard philosophical theories of truth proposed by the conference organizers as a framework for discussion are summarized in the Appendix, page 19.

concludes that there is no contradiction here. Ultimately, I believe, both the Pope and Howard Brinton are correct, yet their affirmations might lull us into complacency about the extent of the cultural crisis we face.

Five weeks ago, Pendle Hill had another weekend on science and religion, but because our Board of Directors met on the same weekend, I could only attend it briefly on a part-time basis. I had chance to test the material I am about to share with you only in fragmentary way. Doug Gwyn and I noticed that my thoughts produced some defensiveness among science-oriented people, as if I thought they were to be "blamed" for something. So, I want to be clear from the outset that I do not think the scientific community on the whole has committed very many sins in the last 400 years. One might wish that certain scientists had been more reluctant to sell their talents to weapons-makers. One might wish that others had been less enthusiastic about advancing an anti-religious agenda in the name of science. But as a whole the scientific community has done what it is right and proper for it to do: it has pursued data and developed theories in accordance with the scientific method. The fact that this enterprise may have resulted in a very profound cultural crisis is scarcely the fault of scientists.

In trying to draw some sort of conclusion about truth claims in the vast panorama of spiritual cultures, it is a little difficult to know where to begin. It seems not useful to start discussing the epistemologies of various religious movements. We need not get into Vedantic critiques of Buddhist metaphysics. Rather, in order to focus on the problems we face together today, it is more useful to examine how spiritual truth claims have functioned in the enterprise of human society. I am going to take what might be considered an anthropological approach to the subject. And, in order to do this, let us throw ourselves right into the middle of all the controversies by starting with the chimpanzees.

According to science, chimpanzees are our closest living relatives in the animal kingdom. This has long been implied from evolutionary theory and the fossil record, incomplete as it is. But apparently the theory to our relatedness to chimpanzees has been given added force by DNA analysis. At any rate, chimpanzees, like almost all other primates including humans, live in groups. Their doing so is facilitated by inherent dispositions of assertiveness and deference that support a social life in which each knows his or her place and in which one individual tends to lead and

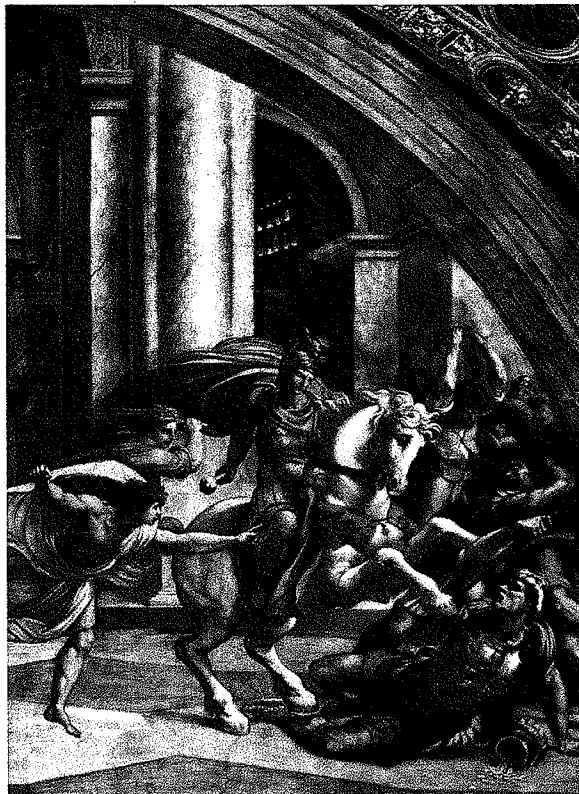


the others to follow. Jane Goodall, the famous researcher of chimpanzee societies, in addition to observing this social organization, also discovered that chimpanzees eat meat and make tools. Other observers note that chimpanzees like to watch television, their favorite programs being National Geographic specials about chimpanzees. Significantly, Jane Goodall found that even though they are helpful, generous, and even loving with members of their own group, chimpanzees behave murderously towards members of other groups. They are intensely territorial, and regularly patrol the boundaries of their area, seeking not only to keep others out, but to expand their domains at

others' expense. She has observed a hostile and violently aggressive attitude on the part of chimpanzees toward non-group individuals and has seen members of one group kill members of another group. They are not averse to ethnic cleansing, if you will. Like ourselves, then chimpanzees have not one kind of politics, but two: the politics of comradeship within groups and the politics of hostility between groups.

Now we human beings are in some respects like our chimpanzee relatives, but in some respects unlike them. Although, according to the DNA evidence, our genetic code differs from theirs by a mere 1.5 to 2 percent, that two percent might perhaps contain much of paramount significance. In particular, the facility for language allows a quantum leap in the character of group life, supporting the development of culture from which so much else flows. Human beings, rather than merely living together in clan groupings, actually work together to achieve common ends. We learned to build canals for irrigation, to mine, to smelt metal for tools, and to develop an agricultural surplus allowing a specialization of labor into non-food producing activities, including the building of cathedrals and skyscrapers, the study of medicine, and the sending of rockets to the moon. It is not that groups can do these things better than an individual can. It is that an individual by himself cannot do them at all. Culture, a product of spiraling interactivity, dwarfs the sum of what the members of the society can contribute individually. Groups can transcend time, creating cultures that endure through generations and even ages.

Involving as it does a complex organization of society, civilization requires a shared outlook, an ideal held in common by those who belong to the same society, a vision almost always expressed in a foundational set of religious beliefs that are given expression in sculpture, painting, music,



architecture, literature, philosophy, and other manifestations of the human spirit. Civilizations and the religions at their core in some sense answer the question of how human beings should conduct their lives, what goals they should pursue, and how human beings themselves can become better.

Sadly, it seems that civilizations also involve armies and organized warfare. The innate tendencies that allowed human beings to progress, that is, the loyalty of individuals to their group, which enabled people to pool resources of mind, muscle, and imagination, and to extend dominion, did not abolish a feeling of alienation from members of other groups. Indeed, it could perhaps be argued that different cultures, by their creating an overlay of distinctiveness beyond mere blood relationship and clan ties, exaggerated innate tendencies to regard non-group members as "alien" and "other." This was less of a problem when the earth was sparsely settled and when different

groups encountered each other less frequently. As population grew, intergroup battling became more and more costly, especially since the technologies of civilization itself made it possible to wreak havoc on one's enemies with ever more effectiveness and efficiency. As a result of all this, human aspirations turned naturally to a search for unity and peace.

The search for unity and peace tended to take either one of two forms. One was, quite simply, conquest. Societies sought security by conquering their neighbors, pacifying them, and incorporating them into their own social and civilizing system. We are non-violent Quakers, and the idea of conquest turns us off. We are apt to dismiss these enterprises as the product of a degraded humanity motivated by plunder and greed. It is true that greed cannot be ruled out of the equation, but Alexander the Great, for example, was tutored by Aristotle and sought the spread of culture and law. His efforts, dazzling in their heyday, were short lived. But he became a model for the Roman Caesars. Suleyman the Magnificent, while conquering a vast area for the Ottoman Turks, brought with him scholars and architects and lawyers to uplift life in the conquered territories. While a civilizing intent is not very conspicuous in Genghis Khan, his grandson, Kublai Khan, who greatly

expanded the Mongol Empire, definitely had ambitions of a lofty sort akin to those of Alexander, the Roman Caesars, and Suleyman.



The Roman Empire generally gets a bad press among Christians because of the complicity of Pontius Pilate in the execution of Jesus, because of the oppression suffered by the Hebrew people under Roman rule, and because some Roman emperors persecuted Christians in the early days of the church. But I think that it is fair to observe that during and following the reign of Caesar Augustus the European continent experienced 200 years of peace, a duration of peace never matched during the subsequent two millennia. Under the Roman Empire, the people of the Mediterranean also flourished materially in a way unmatched until the modern era.

The other avenue which the search for unity took was not one of arms. Prophets and sages arose -- Lao-Tzu, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Isaiah, Confucius, Plato, Jesus, Mohammed, and others -- each advancing a spiritual vision of a way of life intended for universal applicability, a way of life to which all people could adhere, a way of life of which counseled compassion and loving-kindness by each person for all others regardless of clan, culture, or ethnicity. These religious visions often succeed in orienting and defining entire

civilizations, enabling countless millions of people to relate to each other so that life flows along in predictable and natural seeming patterns, patterns which almost everyone can regard as appropriate and good. The influences on human history of the founders of the great religions have endured over the ages in a way that far exceeds the impact of even the most successful generals and statesmen.

The communities of faith which have gathered around the truth claims of the great prophets are very large. It is estimated that approximately one sixth of the world's people live according to one or another variety of Buddhist teaching, that one seventh of the world's people are Islamic, and that one third are Christian.

One of the main functions of a religious culture is to preserve, to teach, and to ensure the continued availability of the gathered wisdom of the faith community, and to inspire love and enthusiasm for this wisdom. With their various scriptures and traditions, the communities of faith hold up for us a vision of human life expressing our best possibilities, showing us their nobility and attractiveness, drawing us to them.

But the totally universalizing and unifying aspirations of these religious cultures have never been fully realized by any one of them. Although each succeeded in prevailing over significant segments of the human population, they have seemed impervious to each other, and their expansion has been stymied by the existence of the others. Centuries of Christian evangelism, for example, have not made much of a dent in the Hindu or Islamic worlds. Moreover, to the extent that these religious cultures did encounter each other, they, too, tended to become embroiled in a sort of religious warfare which would merit the disdain of any civilized deity.

But the drive for unification and pacification continued on the military level until a global unity was reached, with the European branch of civilization at the center and in charge. A mutually reinforcing confluence of science, technology, and commerce which occurred in European culture allowed that branch of the human family to prevail over all the others. Students of European colonialism estimate that by 1914 over 84 percent of the world's land area was dominated by Europeans. This hegemony has subsequently collapsed, as we know. The collapse began with disastrous wars and conflicts among Europeans themselves, starting with the first World War, followed by the Russian Revolution, and the second World War. These, in turn, were followed by the successful struggle for the independence of India led by Gandhi, and then by many other successful struggles and wars and liberation on the part of subject peoples. But oddly, although the global hegemony of the Europeans has been dissolved on the political level, the economic system that went along with their empires seems to have survived intact, in fact developing even further. Somehow, the same cast of characters remains in charge, except that the Americans and the Japanese are now included in the power elite, and the same populations as before are the ones being subjected and exploited.

In order fully to understand in a general way the relevance of conflicting claims to truth, it is necessary to bring into view two more developments, one involving science and technology and the other involving religion. The development involving science and technology dates from pre-history. The significant events involving religion occurred at the close of the Middle Ages in Europe.

Seven thousand years ago there occurred events which are at the root of the most baffling aspects of the situation we now face. In a series of strokes by anonymous intellectual geniuses, it was discovered that certain stones on the earth's surface did not chip well for tools, but were malleable. Then, it was discovered that when heated these stones became pliable, and were eventually liquified if the temperature was raised to a high enough degree. Next, it was discovered that metals were found not only in a pure state but as constituent elements of ores. Finally, it was discovered that seemingly abundant supplies of ores were located underground, and could be obtained by mining. These discoveries were made between 7000 and 2800 years ago in different parts of the world, when the various ages of metallurgy began.

We now face two profound sets of consequences which result from these astounding discoveries. One we know as the ecological crisis. The age of metallurgy started a process of extracting non-renewable resources from the earth, resources which we now know face exhaustion. The age of metallurgy also introduced into human culture smelting and manufacturing processes which degrade the environment. Neither of these consequences—the exhaustion of the earth's resources and the degradation of the biosphere—became apparent as long as humankind's efforts remained small in scale: now these consequences are quite glaring and totally alarming.

But the second series of consequences of these astonishing technological discoveries made seven thousand years ago were social consequences. Before the age of metallurgy, human beings for the most part, were "Jills-and-Jacks-of-all-trades," largely responsible for and able to develop the wide range of skills necessary to care for themselves and their families. While an exchange of goods was practiced, this tended to be on a small scale and not essential to survival. But metallurgy ushered in a radical division of labor. The smiths and miners became the first specialists. Each had to devote the whole of his available working time to his craft, instead of continuing to be a "Jack-of-all-trades," as the Paleolithic hunter and the Neolithic husbandman had been. Moreover, as mines developed, there was a need for primitive engineers to construct and to maintain them, for scribes and accountants to keep track of transactions, and for specialized merchants and tradespeople to distribute the product of the mining effort. The development of irrigation systems, and the growth of cities which the resulting agricultural surplus allowed, required a similar set of functions and the division of labor. Here arose a significant ethical problem. On what principle is the total product of society to be distributed among the various classes of producers? Who gets what, how, why, and when? The total product is the fruit of the cooperative work of many people, but their respective contributions are unequal in effectiveness and value. Moreover, the finite natural resources utilized are the common inheritance of all of humanity. How can an allocation of shares be made which will be recognized by all parties as being just? After seven thousand years this fundamental ethical question has yet to be solved satisfactorily. Various attempts to do so on so-called "scientific" bases have tended to exacerbate, rather than solve, the problem.

Developments in the fields, agriculture, commerce, empire-building, and religion, all tended to occur independently in several different parts of the world in roughly the same periods of time. But this parallelism or balance among the world's major cultures ended as a result of a dramatic synthesis of science, technology, industry, and commerce which occurred in the European branch of human

civilization, and which allowed it to propel itself to the dominance on the world stage which I have already described.

The second development which I mentioned had to do with religion and took place at the close of the Middle Ages.

In spite of the lofty teaching and example of Christianity's founder, Jesus of Nazareth, the ethos of compassion, peace, and unity never fully took hold among the peoples who inherited and carried on the Christian tradition in the wake of the collapse of the Roman Empire. Although beset by enemies from without, from the Visigoths who sacked Rome in A.D. 410, to the raiding of Vienna by the Turks in A.D. 1683, the Europeans were also prone to shed blood profusely in quarrels among themselves. As the Middle Ages came to a close, this bloody fratricide involved quarrels over Christianity itself. The Hundred Years War, resolved in part by the military accomplishments of Joan of Arc, and the Thirty Years War, involving Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, were incredibly destructive and traumatic. As the Frenchman, Francois de la Noue, observed at the time, "it was our wars of religion which made us forget our religion." In putting an end to these conflicts at the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 Europeans vowed never to war over religion again, although, unfortunately, they did not give up warfare in general.

This "forgetting of our religion" took on an even more profound import than Francois de la Noue supposed. Revulsion at the wars of religion, and the tendency of religious institutions to ally themselves with outmoded and despotic monarchies, made it seem to people of good will useful to de-emphasize spiritual things, to rely on reason and human good nature to iron out arrangements. An alliance of science and reason seemed a surer basis for resolving problems than arcane disputes over theological issues. The church and state were deemed best kept separate. "Laws" of the market, viewed as a kind of natural law, were allowed to govern economic arrangements in a way largely cut loose from any concept of social ethics.

Rene Descartes' intellectual path was indicative of the direction in which a certain distinctive kind of European thought was moving. He was the proponent of radical doubt, systematizing skepticism. Michel de Montaigne was another such exemplar of doubt. Seeing the dangers and errors to which passionate religious convictions about truth can lead, such philosophers became exponents of moderation. An enlightened self-interest, a practical turn of mind, a disposition to base judgements only on facts and hard evidence, skepticism in thought, and moderation in action were the characteristics of mind toward which European culture reached as it emerged from long centuries of feudalism. This distaste for passionate belief which first arose in response to the wars of religion has been reinforced in our own time by revulsion at wars of ideology. To many people of a certain kind of modern deconstructionist frame of mind, certainty itself, certainty of any kind, has come to seem the enemy of human freedom and progress.

So, here is the paradox. Involving as it does a complex organization of society, civilization requires a coherent, shared outlook, an ideal held in common by those who belong to the same community. Yet today, while modern industrial society is uniting people through commerce and technology in

external ways, the spiritual basis for cohesion is evaporating. From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, it has been apparent that our society has been eroding, coasting along on a constantly dwindling legacy from Christianity. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that democracy breeds individualism, a word he used to mean selfish and exclusive withdrawal into our personal concerns and a lack of care for the interests of others or for the community as a whole. It is expected that modern people will find their own faith individually, one by one. So, while on the technological level, modern society brings people together, on another level it sends them apart, driving them away in search of certainties an open society cannot provide.

As the 21st Century begins we see emerging a global system of technological development and economic growth in which people are purposefully moving on and moving ahead. Yet there is no undergirding body of spiritual ideas like those which have sustained all previous cultures – no unifying aspirations – which would allow people to be in reasonable concord about where they should be going in this moving on and moving ahead. Nor can they assess what activity is fair and unfair, nor know how to balance costs and benefits in a moral sense. And there remains the age-old unresolved dilemma about distributive justice. The free play of market forces can provide needed discipline; it can also produce chaos and many victims. Socialism and Communism were invented because unbridled Capitalism can be very offensive. Because Communism has failed, it does not necessarily follow that Capitalism is a success. At any rate, it is interesting that defenders of both systems have appropriated the vocabulary and reputation of science to advance their cause.

Counterpoised against the rationalist, secularized, commercial and technological global culture, with its unfeeling reliance on market processes, there are forces of disintegration, nationalism, separatism, ethnic cleansing, secession, and religious and ideological factionalism. Modern nationalisms encourage people to secede from their respective countries to form independent states of their own; such nationalisms often demand the right to expel from their own state all groups other than themselves. It is clear that this is a pattern and not a few isolated instances. Each people would rule itself within its own territory; each would be ethnically pure. The increasing standardization of what people eat and wear and what entertains them belies much deeper conflicts. Some of these conflicts seem to be little more than a continuation of the ages-old and instinctive hostility to those outside ones own group, a pattern that recurs throughout human history and all the way back to the ancestors we share with the chimpanzees. But some of these conflicts are also conscious and determined revolts against modernity itself. Leaders of ancient Rome referred to barbarians at the gates. Today there are no gates or frontiers in a global culture. Instead we have 1000 Trojan horses within the gates. They are filled with rebels, whom rather than label barbarians, we now designate as terrorists.

This, then, is what the 21st Century will be all about: the drama of humankind's pulling together and pulling apart at the same time, and the search for spiritual vision, a vision of truth, which can infuse the globalized secularized culture of science, technology, and commerce with justice, with ecological sensitivity, and with a meaning and purpose beyond itself.

I realize that what I have presented thus far is an all-too-hasty sketch of an awesome panorama. But it seems to me necessary to get this panorama into some sort of perspective if one is going to discuss

truth-finding from a universalist point of view.

One thing we notice when considering humankind's existing spiritual cultures is that each of them somehow embraces a macrocosmic system of social expectations which allows millions of people to resonate reasonably harmoniously in their interconnected living. At the same time, miraculously, the spiritual culture offers each individual a framework for pursuing his or her individual life journey, a framework which imbues the journey with spiritual enchantment and spiritual meaning. But the prophetic voice which is at the heart of each of humankind's diverse spiritual cultures, the prophetic voice which calls people to a way of life intended for universal applicability, is not essentially a philosophical voice or a scholarly voice. Furthermore, the day-in and day-out practices and patterns of living to which these prophetic voices give rise are not necessarily philosophically coherent or internally consistent. Marxism, with some justification, is sometimes analogized to religion. But where Marxism as a spiritual culture differs from other major spiritual cultures is exactly in this regard. Marxism alone was totally systematic. The diverse and richly textured character of almost all other spiritual cultures is one reason why the task of comprehending them defies our four part truth scheme.

Now to be sure this four-part framework we are using has a great aura of common sense about it, and I am sure that all human beings, as they wend their way through life, use each of these avenues to determine the truth of things, whether they know they are using them or not, and whether they do it self-consciously or not. Some individuals or groups may rely on one or another of these parts of our framework more than others. But even though our four-part framework has a characteristic of universalism and utility about it, it is not adequate for describing or explaining the truth-seeking path of humankind's spiritual traditions. Even in their most philosophically coherent form, the traditions universally have something more to them than this four-part framework can embrace. For, as we read in the letter to the Hebrews, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1, New Revised Standard Version).

Within a particular spiritual community or culture, there exists a spectrum of approaches to truth finding. A great diversity in this regard can exist even though the spiritual culture holds together fairly well. A single tradition might involve highly intellectual philosophies of fabulous range and depth, together with the naive and childlike practices of masses of people. Thus, each religious tradition contains a spectrum of possibilities which we might characterize as going from low to high. One hesitates about the connotation of these words because they could be quite misleading. Sometimes a more authentic spirituality might come from practitioners of a so-called "low" version of a tradition. The so called higher versions might be drowning in deadening pretensions.

Christianity itself, and later Quakerism, both affirmed the authenticity of the spiritual experiences of common people as compared with that of the elites. Nevertheless, what I am getting at is the fact that the approach to truth-seeking of, say, an Albertus Magnus, who lived from A.D. 1200 to A.D. 1280 and who was the great teacher of both Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, might have been quite different than the approach to truth-seeking of a devout villager ten miles away from the University of Paris, where Albertus taught. When considering the significance of the truth claims of religion,

we must not assume their truth only comes in forms digestible by philosophers.

When Margaret Fell's heart leapt for joy, for example, and she proclaims "this I know experientially," was she really responding to anything that even remotely resembles the prosaic finding of a proposition to be true because it corresponds with observable data?

Is something like the Golden Rule really testable by our four-part system? Or, to give a contemporary flavor to things, consider two propositions: 1) Marriage is a life-long covenant relationship between an man and a woman, and 2) Marriage is a life-long covenant relationship between any two people, regardless of gender. Will our four-part system actually provide a tool which will bring all sincerely concerned people in line behind one or the other of these propositions?

I have selected the formulations of religious insight posted at the front of the room with some deliberateness. I selected them in part because of their resemblance to each other in spite of their origins in the Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu faith traditions. I also chose them because they are susceptible to analysis in different degrees in terms of our four-part truth model. If we take the statement "God is love: he who dwells in love dwells in God, and God dwells in him" and scrutinize it in terms of our four-part truth model, I cannot help feeling that we somehow destroy it. We might ponder certain exemplary lives, perhaps the lives of Mother Teresa and St. Francis of Assisi, and say we observe this proposition to be true because it corresponds to "observable data," but this observable data, if such it is, is by no means verifiable in the same way that scientific data is or as are various other kinds of more mundane facts accumulated during practical every day life. If Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche looked at the same observable data about Mother Teresa and Francis of Assisi they might find the lives which so inspire us to be contemptible, to be emblematic of humankind's fatal proclivity for self-abasement. There is very little in the four-part truth model which will enable us clearly to affirm that we are right and Nietzsche is wrong, or vice versa.

The quotation from Buddhist scripture is more down to earth. Indeed Buddhism and certain Vedic traditions might fit better into our four-part truth scheme than does Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. The Buddha claimed to have derived his teaching from observation. He was very frankly and unapologetically agnostic about certain questions for which no observation was possible -- the existence of God, the origin of the world -- things about which the Judeo-Christian tradition has been wont to make proclamations somewhat too boldly. In fact, the Buddha's agnosticism and his reliance on observation and logic has caused some Christian commentators to declare Buddhism not a religion at all, but "merely" a philosophy.

Certain Vedic schools of thought have taken an almost "scientific" approach to spiritual pathfinding. Through trial and error, and through observation passed down through dharma traditions lasting many generations, they have come to insights and practices to which our methods of correspondence, coherence, operationalism, and pragmatism might indeed be reasonably applied. Yet the Buddha's enlightenment was achieved after a fierce struggle; it did not come merely out of a calm gazing at observable data nor a dispassionately pursued set of operations. Even in Buddhist and Vedic traditions enlightenment or Nirvana is proclaimed most likely to come upon a person when the

disciplines, studies, and philosophies, while respected as meritorious pursuits, are yet somehow left behind and transcended.

Moral and spiritual claims, unlike factual claims, cannot be proven by testable hypotheses. Our rationalistic and scientific culture leads us to expect that truth is the product of logical reasoning. When we are dealing with intermediate truths or detailed truths, which rest on more fundamental premises, logical reasoning can indeed be of service, even in the moral and spiritual fields. But the model breaks down when we try to establish the fundamental premises themselves. Logic and rationalism is a way of getting to conclusions from premises; by its very nature logical argument cannot justify the premises upon which it rests. There is no way of justifying through logic the ultimate starting point for moral and spiritual reasoning. The rational and enlightened founders of the American republic recognized this when they declared: "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." and then proceeded simply to announce the starting point of their thinking.

It is interesting that Jesus never claimed to be a philosopher or an analyst. Indeed, very few of his sermons, as they are passed down to us in the gospels, could even be said to follow an outline. It is hard to imagine these sermons being delivered without long intervals of silence interspersed – the silence of Wisdom listening. Often Jesus spoke in somewhat obscure anecdotes and parables. On several occasions he simply said, "I *am* Truth." He did not say I have come to give you great ideas or penetrating philosophies. He simply said, "I *am* Truth." One of these occasions occurred during an interview with Pontius Pilate. Pilate's response to this strange assertion was to ask the question which is the theme for our present gathering: "And what is Truth?" In asking the question in this way, Pilate was, perhaps, revealing his background in Hellenistic culture, with its penchant for philosophizing. And as if to indicate that there was little possibility for rapprochement between one who claimed to "be" Truth and another ready to dispute about it, Pilate, without waiting for any response from Jesus, turned away, and, ultimately, washed his hands of the entire matter.

It is a misconception of modern life to believe that if we know how to think rationally we will know how to live, but this is not so. The rationalist affirms, "I think, therefore I am." The spiritually aware person asks something deeper: "I am *what*?" Neither reason nor our four-part truth scheme can supply the definition of our essential nature, of our ultimate purpose as human beings. The answer can only be supplied by a kind of intuitive certitude, a certitude we know as faith. The answer our faith supplies is extremely important. Mohandas K. Gandhi observed that people tend to become what they think they are. So clearly, the vision about the truth of human nature that we carry about in our minds and hearts is no inconsequential matter!

All sanctity, all holiness, is born of conflict, or paradox. It arises out of contradictions which become resolved, finally, into union. The landscape of humankind's spiritual world, the world in which we realize our most noble accomplishments and in which we suffer our most crushing defeats, is a landscape of intellectually unresolvable dichotomies. Freedom versus order; gaining our life by losing it; a Kingdom which is yet to come but which is also here within us and among us; having enemies but loving them; the simultaneous fallenness and exaltedness of human nature; the immanence and transcendence of God; stability versus change; justice versus mercy. (Saint Thomas Aquinas

observed that justice without mercy was cruelty, while mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution). We are told to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves simultaneously. The logical mind, the mind to which the four part matrix appeals, is offended by these dichotomies and seeks to come down on one side or the other of them; the same dichotomies provoke and stimulate the higher human faculties. People of great sanctity somehow transcend these dichotomies without abandoning the truth on either side of them. They can distinguish between what is plainly true and clearly false, on the one hand, and those areas of life, on the other, where the opposite of a great spiritual truth is not a falsehood, but rather another great spiritual truth. They make the unutterable visible by the way they live.

One way of looking at this, but not the only way, is to observe that science, and our four-part truth finding matrix which is heavily influenced by the empirical, scientific, and rationalist mind set, are concerned with things as they are. Humankind's religious cultures are concerned not only with things as they are but also with things as they ought to be. There is no mechanism or vocabulary for dealing with things as they ought to be in our four-part truth system, not even in the pragmatic part. In fact religion and religious cultures do not merely dwell longingly on things as they ought to be, but actively endeavor to change reality, at least the reality of the human estate.

Earlier I described religion's task as forming communities, cultures, and civilizations by preserving and teaching a spiritual vision. This obviously is a conservative function. But religion also undertakes a revolutionary task. This revolutionary task is most apparent in times of transition, when the old order in human affairs is disintegrating and being replaced by something new. We ourselves live in an age where a new civilization is seeking to be born. In ages of transition, the significant religious teachers I have already mentioned started communities of believers intended to be the beginning of a new culture. Such sages are revolutionary in the sense that they project a revised vision or faith, and seek to nurture a new kind of human being through a revised pattern of community, hoping to inspire a new way of living and a new society, a better society than any thus far seen on earth. The use of the term "revised" is important, for rarely do great spiritual teachers propose something entirely new. They are always syncretic, always ready to acknowledge the usefulness of what has sustained others. The Christ and the Buddha, to cite two conspicuous examples, built upon the religious inheritance they found rather than rejecting it *in toto*.

The kind of religious culture which characterizes our own civilization, where people can shop and graze among spiritual traditions until they find one that most suits them, is entirely unusual in the long sweep of human history. Most often a religious perspective is absorbed with one's mother's milk, so to speak. People are spiritually formed by their families and by the surrounding culture in which the family exists and which supports it. Their religion and their culture become a kind of second nature to them, an aspect of their very identity. In this sense, one might say that a coherence theory of truth has been the paramount experience in most human lives, as day-to-day issues and questions are contextualized by virtue of this inherited or inculcated view of truth and spiritual reality.

This aspect of the religious and cultural enterprise, and its claims to truth, has become very controversial in modern times.

For example, post-modern deconstructionists see the civilizing and acculturating enterprise through which fixed patterns of meaning are carved into the raw material of our humanity as an elaborate oppression. Whether a culture insists on monogamy or permits polygamy, whether it allows you to eat pork or does not, whether it allows you to make religious and recreational use of alcohol or peyote or bans them altogether, whether it permits or represses homosexuality or abortion, it is social networks of power and interest which shape language, society, and human consciousness. Moreover, it is seen that conventional social behaviors are upheld by violence, that is by the force of the state, where the recalcitrant, if not shamed into conformity, are simply forced into it.

In this view, civilization is a fight for the control of cultural processes. Again, this becomes easily expanded to the idea that there is no truth that and we are engaged in the invention of reality as we go along, with those who somehow muster the most power prevailing.

There was a recent story in the newspapers regarding Pakistani immigrants who had settled in the American mid-west. As I recall the story, a man and his son-in-law, a son-in-law who was nearly the same age as his father-in-law, went to a police station seeking the help of the authorities in tracing and retrieving a missing person. The missing person was the daughter of one of the men and the wife of the other. The missing person turned out to be a girl of only 13 years of age. Much to their surprise, the father and his son-in-law, rather than gaining the aid of the police in retrieving a delinquent bride, were instead arrested for statutory rape.

This pawning off of a young girl, indeed, of a child, to a man three or four times her age is very abhorrent to contemporary Christian sensibility even though it still occurs in some Islamic cultures. But it is not really so long ago that this was practiced in Christian cultures as well. I am not sure that our four-part matrix of truth seeking would help us know if this practice is good or bad. We know it is bad, but not because of our four-part matrix. The practice has corresponded to cultural reality for many centuries. It was apparently deemed perfectly coherent within Islamic and Christian doctrine. It worked operationally, since the cultures which practiced it flourished for many centuries. The practice had many pragmatic advantages for the people involved, save perhaps for the young women, and was indeed one of the devices used to build prosperity among family dynasties.

No one would claim that they can repeal or remake the law of gravity. But how variable and malleable are the laws which are peculiar to the human estate? Are there social practices which can take us very far from a recognizably good way of life, away from a way of life in which our faculties and our good potentials can flourish? Are there practices which can take us toward ways of life that diminish our spirit and that in the long run lead to social breakdown?

The word, "religion" is derived from roots which mean "to bind together." Religion binds people to each other and to their Creator. But the truth process of religion, the process through which it is grasped by large numbers of people, does not occur through philosophy and theology, as I have already mentioned. Philosophizing and theologizing are activities which are reserved for a very small elite. Most people instead tell stories which in some way illuminate the significance and meaning of the great themes of human destiny in which every life participates. Although many of these stories

have a true historical basis, their power often stems from their location in a distant time or realm where they can be freed from the inevitable idiosyncrasies of real remembered events, where they can be idealized so as to illuminate the underlying principles, principles which are often hidden by distracting accidentals in actual experience.

It is a natural thing that those who take the narrative approach to apprehending spiritual truth will root their understanding of the meaning and the purpose of human life, and its relationship to a divine teleology, in creation myths, in stories of origins. Not every spiritual movement does this, but it is quite common. In many spiritual cultures creation stories are regarded with utmost reverence.

Now there is a lot about the creation story developed by our own culture in the early chapters of the book of Genesis with which we are quite reasonably uncomfortable. Scientific theories of evolution aside, the story has, perhaps, had its day. My purpose here is not to offer an apology for the role assigned to Eve, or for the doctrine original sin, or for the idea that humankind should have dominion over the earth, or for the supposition that we should go forth and multiply without restraint. What I only wish us to focus on is the function the story has played in orienting our own western culture and in consolidating a consciousness of spiritual truth which has informed the culture.

In diction of undoubted power, and in poetry of a lofty quality which comes across in the many various translations that have been made of the text, we are informed in the opening passages of the Bible that the Creation of which we are a part is the work of an all-powerful God, that this Creation is very good, that humankind is given a preeminent place in and dominion over this Creation, and that as human beings we are accountable to the Creator and the Creator's laws. We are given reasons for the complexity of our relationship as men and women in a procreative system. We are told that this, and the recurrence of violence among us, are a consequence of our rebellion against the childlike and naive garden life which was our original state. We are told that the achievement of our full humanity and self-awareness is in some sense is a rebellion against the ordained order of things. Whether we like all this or not, it has had undoubted significance in shaping a great civilization.

How many people through the ages have regarded the Genesis story as a factual account and how many have regarded it as a kind of myth with a lesson or moral?

As long ago as the fourth century A.D., Saint Augustine cautioned us about taking the story literally. Augustine was unaware of any "Big Bang" theory, but he reasoned internally from the text itself. Since God created the heaven and the earth before he separated the light from the darkness, our concept of "day" cannot fully embrace the creative process as described in scripture. But in spite of such cautions, many people have been inclined to believe that there really were two individuals, Adam and Eve, that there really was a garden, and that there really was a tree of knowledge and an evil snake. Yet, what we know of reality no longer supports these beliefs.

Juxtaposed against this rich and poetic story which we now understand as a metaphor or a myth, we have the "genuine reality" of the "Big Bang," and of the evidence that humankind has evolved from lower forms of life through natural processes. In a universe that is seemingly indifferent to our

suffering, we are traveling along on an almost incomprehensibly inconspicuous speck of dust which is being propelled by the explosion of a self-creating universe that has sprung into existence spontaneously from a cosmic nothingness. Even if on a philosophical level we can convince ourselves that the Big Bang was a change, not a creation, and that it does not in itself disprove the existence of a creator God, can we view this new understanding of the universe with any kind of imagery which is not simply poetically vacant? I have heard some people claim to have been deeply moved by contemplating the "Big Bang" and the countless years of natural selection which have led, seemingly somewhat randomly, to human consciousness. Awe and radical amazement certainly have something to do with religious sensibility, with a search for spiritual truth. But awe is only a beginning, only the first stepping stone in the development of an actual culture of spiritual truth.

The advance of scientific knowledge is tending to erode the rich fabric of myth and poetry which upholds religious culture. It is urgent that religion "catch up" with this incredible expansion of scientific knowledge and find anew a prophetic voice which claims and builds upon this scientific knowledge, rather than seeking fearfully to discount it.

I also should observe that this problem is not the same for all religious cultures for various reasons which time does not permit us to explore right now. The foundational metaphors, poems, myths, and parables of Hinduism have been formed in such a way that they are less vulnerable to erosion by modern scientific theory.

I have selected the Creation story by way of illustration. I suppose I could have used Noah and the flood, the parting of the Red Sea, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, or Jesus' bodily ascent into Heaven. How could Christians of an earlier period have known that if Jesus sought to ascend bodily into heaven he would have gone into orbit around the earth, or perhaps would have plunged into the sun? Discovering that the story of the flood perhaps refers to an ancient memory when at the end of an Ice Age the melting of the glaciers caused widespread flooding, will perhaps save the Bible from the charge of proclaiming an outright lie, or perhaps a fairytale. But it still does not help us very much in terms of significance and meaning. Seeing a misfortune befall the human community because of the ineluctability of natural processes is not the same as believing there is an ordained order for human behavior the violation of which brings retribution by the Creator.

Obviously, I am not saying I like the world view which has held western civilization together, nor am I claiming that we should scramble somehow to resurrect these ancient and sometimes destructive myths. What I am saying is that something has been taken away by the march of science and the associated cultural perspectives it has induced, something which has not been replaced, the grasp of a kind of truth which in the long run we cannot survive without. Someone once spoke of a "God of the gaps," meaning, I suppose, that as scientific knowledge grows the deity constantly gets evicted from large areas of the universe and more and more confined to relatively small spaces where our knowledge does not yet reach. In a certain sense religious liberals have been content with a religion of the gaps. We have been content to try to sustain ourselves on an ever-diminishing treasure of spiritual culture. I spoke earlier of some of the problems which this brave new world of demythologized but globalized commerce and technology seems to hold in store. We are not developing a

countervailing force of spiritual culture which can critique it and around which prophetic resistance to it can rally.

Another problem regarding the intersection of scientific ideas of truth and religious ideas of truth has to do with the expropriation of science in half-baked ways to address human and social problems. This is usually not done by scientists themselves, who tend to be extremely cautious and who try to stick to the careful assessment of the probability by which one thing will lead to another based on meticulously collected data. Pseudoscientists, in contrast, often apply scientific theories derived from the material world to human societies in completely invalid ways, while enlisting the reputation of science to advance their claims of truth.

I will just cite social Darwinism as an example. It is easier for us to understand because, mercifully, it has been dead and buried for many decades. But we can distinctly remember how the theory of evolution was used to justify racism, imperialism, and laissez-faire capitalism's indifference to poverty. The suffering and even death of the weak at the hands of the strong was considered an example of the "survival of the fittest." This conception of the survival of the fittest was thought to have God's blessing, since it is the way He had established His great creative process with its inexorable tendency to create organisms as majestic as ourselves. In short Darwin's Theory of Evolution was used to deify nature in all its aspects, and nature, thus deified, was invoked to support oppression.

This all looks rather sad in retrospect, but let us not forget the force and power exercised over human affairs by movements as diverse as Freudianism and Marxism, the persuasive impact of which was often a result of their claiming to be "scientific." Today, the boldness of presumably intelligent professors from the University of Chicago who claim scientific credentials for their conservative theories of the economy remains awesome.

This process of expropriating scientific credentials when asserting the truth of theories about human beings and society continues apace. String theory, information theory, chaos theory, and certain theories of genetic processes and of the human mind are still being relied upon to promote sometimes innocent and sometimes repellent theories about humanity, human social organization, and the meaning of human life.

Evolutionary biology, for example, with its theory of the "selfish gene," interprets a mother's sacrifice for her child not as a free act of love but as a quest to propagate her genetic heritage. Does such an idea lift us up, or does it merely render our moral vocabulary vacant and hasten a trend in which increasing numbers of human beings see life as essentially senseless?

Consider the popularized version of all this science. In the beginning were the particles and the impersonal laws of physics; life evolved by a mindless, non-teleological process in which God played no part; and human beings are just another animal species. There is no such thing as free will or choice, for human thoughts and actions are caused by synapses firing in the brain, the exact equations for which will soon be discovered. To claim a special status for human beings is to commit the sin

of species-ism, a self-serving prejudice that could hardly arise in the culture without a lot of invalid rationalizations. In a sense, post-modern deconstructionism is a kind of outcropping of this "scientific" cosmology. Resentment at being trapped in a stupid and inert material world, people have come up with the idea that the real world is something we create, and therefore something that is answerable to us. If all of reality is a social construction, then it is we who are in power, not the dumb and mechanical world that science has given us.

The final general area of interface between a religious approach to truth and a scientific approach to truth has to do with the fact that science and the technology which derives from it seems to be enlarging the universe of concerns which need to be addressed from a spiritual basis, and to be doing so at a rate far too fast for humankind's spiritual cultures to keep pace with. I think this is the easiest aspect of the situation to understand and need not be exhaustively treated here. A very few examples will bring into view what I have in mind.

The growth of technological culture has put a strain on the earth as a habitat which is unprecedented in any previous experience. It requires a whole new poetry and morality of the earth, a whole new earth ethics, one considerably at variance with what we inherit from Biblical tradition. Religion is still scrambling to catch up with this.

Modern medicine has increased longevity and decreased child mortality. This has led to a population explosion which requires a revision of the pro-natalist ethos of many or most spiritual traditions. It also presents very large dilemmas about managing the end of life, now that it is within the realm of possibility to prolong an individual's dying process considerably, regardless of the quality of this protracted existence. This raises enormous ethical dilemmas with which our spiritual cultures are grappling in a very uncertain way. Medical science has made of abortion a relatively easy procedure, raising still further questions for humankind's spiritual culture. In a recent conversation I had with a colleague, my colleague suggested that a satisfactory resolution of the abortion question from a spiritual point of view is still 100 years away!

The development of modern methods of communication and the entertainment media which have grown out of this have dethroned the family as a spiritual formation system. Spiritual formation now seems to be in the hands of the same commercial and technocratic culture which is globalizing the human community.

All these developments are not necessarily to be regretted, for in many ways they do enhance human life. But it seems quite clear that religion, which ordinarily evolves extremely slowly, must develop ways to find truth and to express it at a speed quite unprecedented in human experience.

Major changes in the civilization are foreshadowed when words and ideas that once had power and weight become empty formulas rather than expressing vital living principles. For modern people the world has become demystified; the cosmic drama has lost its plot, its point, its direction. Certainly we are at a very significant turning point, a turning point which provides an extraordinarily profound challenge to the religious sensibility. The modern person's clear awareness that there are many

different ways of looking at the world, and at the place of humanity in the world, is one of the most unusual circumstances we face. It makes it hard for most people to think that their own particular way of looking at things is altogether true. The bread of life, the living water of truth, which is so thoroughly ingrained in our being that we are ready to die for it, seems simply no longer to exist. Traditional religion has often failed to understand that a genuine truth arrogantly asserted -- asserted without so much as a moment's consideration that it might be false -- is a most pernicious kind of falsehood, far worse in its effects on the humane than a flat mistake. Yet the modern idea that there are numerous and conflicting truths, or simply numerous and conflicting illusions, all shaped mainly by the historical situations of those clinging to them, has become nearly irresistible to many people. The tolerance and questioning this engenders is perhaps a good thing, but at a certain point the idea that there is no truth, that the only reality is a shifting variety of opinions and impressions, and that it only the biggest bully who wins the argument, ultimately undermines human dignity.

The truth which can powerfully address this modern dilemma is available. For it is true, as scripture tells us, that there is a wisdom which comes from God, created from eternity in the beginning, and remaining in eternity until the end. It is a wisdom which we are also told that the Creator has poured out on all her works to be with humankind forever as her gift. It is available through the Quaker discernment process. It is accessible to us through the many practices of meditation and prayer which have been discovered in diverse spiritual traditions, practices which free the spirit of the grasping and agitation of the separated and alienated ego and which permit us to see things as they really are. It is available through the mystical insights of countless sages in every spiritual tradition who have been telling us, long before modern science came along, of the absolute oneness and interrelationship of all things. Most of all, at this unique juncture in history, it is available to us through the spirit of Quaker universalism, a spirit which calls us into a charitable relationship with Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and so many other people of faith, a charitable relationship characterized by attentiveness to one another and by dialogical patience. Out of such attentiveness and dialogue we can find again a sacramental world, a world that mirrors divine life and grace, a world that is truly our home.

“What is Truth?”
A Friendly Dialogue of Christian, Universalist, and Scientific Perspectives
Pendle Hill

February 25-27, 2000

FOUR STANDARD PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES OF TRUTH

CORRESPONDENCE: Aristotle: “It is by the facts of the case, by their being or not being so, that a statement is called true or false.” Bertrand Russell: “Truth consists in some form of correspondence between belief and fact.” Standard, “commonsense” idea of truth. Problems: What are facts? What is it for a belief to correspond to a fact? What assumptions and expectations inspire us to experience certain data as corresponding to certain beliefs?

COHERENCE: A belief is true if it is part of an entire system of truths that is consistent and harmonious. Brand Blanchard: a statement about something being blue is related to an entire spectrum of colors to which it has likeness and difference. The perception of a fact is really a judgment, based on a whole stock of judgments. Coherence is strongly related to questions of meaning, and tends to be emphasized by the great rationalist system-builders, like Spinoza, Leibnitz, Hegel. Mathematics has affinities in this direction too, since it is not related to objects of experience, but proceeds by logical deductions from accepted axioms.

OPERATIONALISM: For every proposition there is some specific procedure for verifying its truth or falsehood. This is a fundamentally different form of verification, emphasizing methods, processes over a static body of accepted beliefs. (However, the methods chosen are based upon deductions made from accepted beliefs.) Tends toward empirical, logical-positivist definitions of truth; avoids metaphysical concepts as untestable – at least meaningless, if not false. Problems: It equates truth with provability; it overstates the link between knowability and truth. Statements can be true but impossible to prove.

PRAGMATISM: William James: true assumptions are those provoking actions with desirable results. As with operationalism, emphasis is on action, though focusing on ends rather than means. This criterion is pervasive and commonsensical, like correspondence. Problems: the link between truth and utility is debatable. True beliefs tend to foster success. But true beliefs can lead to disaster, just as false ones may lead to success.

SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR BASIC READING: *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1967; supplementary volume, 1996); *The Truth about the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (Tarcher/Putnam, 1995).

(compiled: Doug Gwyn, 2/2000)