

# Preface

A PROMINENT MARK OF THE MODERN ERA is its substitution of a cold universe for the ancient and medieval cosmology in which human beings once knew themselves to be ethically and spiritually at home, according to the account given in a powerful new book by French philosopher Rémi Brague.<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging the thesis of the modern “disenchantment of the world” to be familiar, even trite, Brague’s account moves beyond the historical changes in the Western understanding of the world to focus upon the ethical and anthropological implications of such concepts: “The modern cosmos is ethically indifferent. The image of the world that emerged from physics after Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton is of a confluence of blind forces, where there is no place for consideration of the Good” (185).

Such ethical indifference stands in stark contrast to the ancient and medieval cosmology in which the human person felt at home. In that cosmology, “to say what man is is to rank him in an order that is spatial, dynamic and axiological. As for simple localization, it is not without meaning for man, and for his very humanity, that he be located on the earth and under the sky” (105). This cosmology placed the human person in a humble position within the cosmos as a whole, but it was a position within a world in which the being of the whole in its ordered perfection and completeness also constituted the good. Such a cosmology therefore had profound ethical implications: “The world, and above all that which is most cosmic in the world—the sky—provided ancient and medieval man with brilliant

evidence that good is not only a possibility but a triumphant reality. Cosmology has an ethical dimension" (121).

Brague shows how what he calls the "Abrahamic" tradition developed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims was "superimposed" on a cosmology developed by the Platonic tradition but was also "in excess" of the Platonic tradition and was therefore capable of surviving when the Greek model collapsed. While the Greek model focused on the geometric and musical perfection of the harmonious cosmic whole, the Abrahamic tradition found a different principle of cosmic order: for the multiple components of the cosmic order, "it is their common obedience to a single and sole God that assures the harmony of relationships that they form among them" (176).

The focus of Brague's book is the anthropological and ethical challenges we face in modern thought when this cosmology is no longer part of our thinking: "For us, there is no longer any connection between cosmology and ethics, no longer any relationship between what we know of the structure of the physical universe and the way man thinks about himself and feels what he is and what he ought to be" (216). This situation, the situation of "the lost world," leaves us with fundamental and puzzling questions: "Why is man both ethical and in the world? Ancient thinkers never asked the question. In Antiquity the answer was given from the outset with the ethical nature of the world; the question did not have to be asked" (219). In the modern world, especially in light of the modern project to conquer nature through technology, a question that Brague says emerged implicitly within the thinking of Plotinus also has urgent relevance for us: "What must the world be for wisdom to be possible in it?" (219)

The collapse of the ancient and medieval cosmology brought about by the astronomical revolution eventually had profound religious and theological implications: through the use of metaphors borrowed from the emerging modern views "the proclamation of the 'death of God' occurred with the help of astronomical illustra-

tions" (191). The indifference of nature, the amorality or even apparent immorality of nature, and the notion that the universe displays nothing but the struggle of opposing forces give rise to the theory of a cruel God, or of a God who has abandoned or forgotten the universe, or of a God who left the work of creation incomplete, or of a God in eclipse, or of a silent God—or, again, of the death of God.

At this point, it seems to me that Brague's book, which has the rare merit of being simultaneously erudite and lucid, can usefully be supplemented by an article Brague published in 1995, "The Impotence of the Word: The God who has said it *All*."<sup>2</sup> Here Brague focuses on the religious and theological situation of modernity, taking up a question that seems to correspond well to the challenge posed by the collapse of the ancient and medieval cosmology studied in *The Wisdom of the World*. In this article Brague turns again to the silence of God in the modern era: "Our era can be characterized as a period of the silence of God or the gods. The process of secularization, by which the world is 'modernized' (in the purest sense of the term), leaves no room for divine speech" (44). How is it possible within the modern era to hear the divine word? In the modern era, "Can we still experience a word of this kind? Or rather does this word not belong to a period now definitively over, and is not the attempt to revive it the result of a nostalgic dream that is regressive if not reactionary?" (43) If we live in the age of "the retreat of the sacred" (45), what would it mean to hear the divine word?

Before turning to Brague's response to this question in his 1995 article, we should consider first the observations offered rather briefly in the final pages of *The Wisdom of the World*, in which he hints at the possibility of restoring our relationship to the cosmos in the modern era through the recognition that the totality of the world comes through our subjective awareness of being in the world. This observation can perhaps be understood as a philosophical account that is presented in its fuller theological implications in the 1995

article. Brague finds in contemporary philosophical (and especially phenomenological) accounts the concept of “the subjective world.” We “come into the world” at our birth and we “leave the world” at death and the “worldiness” of the world comes not through the harmonious multiplicity of things but through us. This is not a collapse into mere subjectivity: “it is a matter of showing that the true world is situated on the side of the subject and that what we call ‘the world’—or the universe of objects—is not capable of satisfying the requisites of the concept of world—in a word, it is not yet ‘worldly’ enough for man” (228). Brague offers only relatively brief reflections on this theme in the book.

These final pages of Brague’s book seem elliptical, but his 1995 article offers a fuller account of what it might mean to find “worldliness” through the human person. Working from a text by St. John of the Cross, Brague shows how the divine word is addressed to the human person, and the divine word has been spoken once and for all in its completeness through the incarnate Word. The silence of God in the modern world is the necessary silence of one who has delivered divine revelation in its completeness, the silence of one who has spoken all. The demand for something more to be spoken betrays a failure to receive the completeness of the word spoken through the identification of the Word with the Son within the Trinity. The human person to whom the divine word in its completeness is addressed through the Son in receiving and responding to this word enters into relationship with the Creator and with the created order, and it is in this sense that we can best understand the suggestion offered in the last pages of *The Wisdom of the World* that human subjectivity—in this theological context we can say human receptivity or in von Balthasar’s sense human aesthetic receptivity to the unique form of the one who is fully human and fully God—is the true foundation of the worldliness of the world through which we know ourselves to be at home within the cosmos.

Such receptivity to the divine word would restore what Brague

in *The Wisdom of the World* describes as a fundamental feature of the medieval world, its attunement to symbolism in which “the world is linked to man through the presence in both of the same system of signification. The world is full of meaning, and of a meaning that man is capable of deciphering and applying to himself. Wisdom would be a wisdom of the world in that it would consist of correctly interpreting the messages contained in things” (119). Brague has articulated with profundity and breadth a key theme found within the Catholic intellectual tradition and that can be discerned with special force in the modern Catholic intellectual tradition: the effort to find in the grace of our receptivity and responsiveness to the incarnate Word the connecting threads through which we know ourselves to be at home within the goodness of the whole order of creation. The intellectual transformation from which modernity emerges poses particular challenges to our sense of the ordered whole and to our receptivity to the divine word, and the response to such challenges appear in prominent ways within many works in the modern phase of the Catholic intellectual and artistic traditions.

I will draw upon this theme to illuminate the significance of many of the articles in this issue of *Logos*. Using Brague’s terms, we can see the challenge posed to the modern understanding of ecclesiology by the collapse of the cosmology of the medieval era, and it is this challenge to which **Nancy Enright** responds in “**Dante and the Scandals of a Beloved Church.**” The scandals to which the title refers are the familiar contemporary scandals in the Catholic Church in the United States, and Enright wisely and helpfully turns to the vision of Dante to explain how it is possible to criticize some members of the Church by responding openly and honestly to scandal and at the same time remain faithful to the Church. Dante was able to draw upon the fullness of medieval cosmology to articulate the concepts of the “Church visible” and the “Church invisible,” in which the sinfulness of members of the Church here on earth can be criticized

in light of the truth of the Church rooted in heaven and including all members of the Church as the Body of Christ. The concept of the “Church invisible” is difficult to articulate in contemporary terms because of the narrowness (perhaps flatness) of modern worldviews that identify perceptibility (visibility) with being. And yet only through a much richer cosmological understanding can we grasp the deepest being of the Church within which acknowledgement and confession of present sin leads to salvation. Enright proposes the depth of vision offered by Dante and the example of Dante’s confrontation with scandal in the Church of his day as a much-needed model for our own confrontation with scandal and our own continuing affirmation of faithfulness to the full truth of the Church.

Enright highlights significant moments in the journey of *The Divine Comedy*, focusing especially on Dante’s intense confrontations with evil and scandal in the Church of his day but showing that such confrontations are only an early stage of a journey that finds its culmination in the beauty and love offered by grace that draw him through the fire of confession and purification to the vision in which he knows himself to be united with divine love. According to Enright, “The encounter between Dante and Beatrice perfectly encapsulates all that *The Divine Comedy* teaches about how the Church in heaven deals with the sinfulness of the Church on earth. The glory of the heavenly Church and its love and concern for the sinful earthly Church are embodied in Beatrice, shown in bliss and heightened beauty but venturing even to hell on Dante’s behalf.” Enright urges us to lift our eyes to a full vision of the Church available only when we have overcome the narrowness of a modern worldview that in its materialistic and naturalistic tendencies does not know how to recognize and respond to the spiritual dimension. When we again understand the full vision of the Church we will have the courage to confront scandal without jeopardizing faithfulness. As Enright notes, “[T]he lesson of *The Divine Comedy* is that the Church need not fear this fiery ordeal of painful confession, even shame.

When the Church has passed through the wall of fire, as Dante does at the top of Mount Purgatory, Beatrice—symbol of God’s love—will be on the other side.”

Contemporary writers who want to explore religious experience must find ways of guiding readers beyond the narrow boundaries of dominant modern worldviews, and **Thomas A. Wendorf, S.M.**, examines the success of two contemporary novelists in this effort. In “**Body, Soul, and Beyond: Mystical Experience in Ron Hansen’s *Mariette in Ecstasy* and Mark Salzman’s *Lying Awake*,**” Wendorf shows how both novelists have recently addressed the challenge of presenting religious experience to contemporary readers, each focusing upon the mystical experiences of a woman in a Roman Catholic convent. In doing so, “both Hansen and Salzman do justice to the ambiguity of individual religious experience and the encounter between human understanding and mystery.” One prominent modern attitude that must be overcome to present spiritual experience in its proper depth is “medical materialism,” and each novel in its own way seeks a path that permits a full encounter with spiritual mystery, even though the contemporary world finds itself poorly attuned to mystery. Each novel explores the relationship between a mystic and her community and recognizes the importance of the communal dimension: “while the mystic comes in conflict with her community in both works, consideration of the community, including its demands, provides needed resolutions in the wake of the mysteries.” Wendorf provides an insightful reading of the novels and helps us understand the power of art in illuminating religious experience in a world much in need of such light.

Just as Dante through his poetry enables his readers to contemplate the “Church invisible,” so also contemporary poets who want to explore spiritual experience must find ways to present the invisible. **Jenifer Whiting** shows the success of a contemporary Swedish poet in such explorations in “**The Recognition of Faith in the Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer.**” She introduces Tranströmer’s work

with these words: “The unseen—God, angels, ghosts, saints—populate acclaimed Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer’s world. Tranströmer is a master at taking life’s foggy realms—hallucinations, dreams, meditations—and breaking them upon the page in brief, breathtakingly concrete images.” Tranströmer, born in 1931 and widely published in Sweden since 1954, has been translated by prominent American poets such as Robert Bly, Robert Hass, and Mary Sweeney. His poetry frequently offers frank encounters with the mystery of faith: “faith is something that the poet comes to through encounters in the physical world, through the senses, in a series of recognitions that bring the poet and his readers face-to-face with their uniqueness.” Responding to the modern need for a fuller sense of the world in which our lives unfold, his poetry renews the deep connections between self and world: “Tomas Tranströmer is a unique kind of secular poet, who clearly sees himself within the active framework of God’s continual creation.”

Earlier in this preface I discussed Rémi Brague’s study of a text by St. John of the Cross in Brague’s 1995 article, and this issue of *Logos* includes an article by **Timothy A. Mahoney** that attempts to overcome some contemporary misreadings of St. John of the Cross that would dilute or eliminate the Christian nature of his mysticism. In “**Understanding the Christian Apophaticism of St. John of the Cross**,” Mahoney takes issue with the view endorsed by writers such as Aldous Huxley that St. John of the Cross can best be understood as presenting “the Pure Perennial Philosophy,” demonstrating that “perennialist apophaticism is incompatible with traditional Christianity.” After exploring the Christian apophaticism of St. Bonaventure, Mahoney demonstrates that “for John, the apophatic must be understood in terms of Christ’s cross.” In a view presented also by Brague in his reading of John, Mahoney concludes, “Christ is the lifeblood of John and his writings.”

In an article aptly characterized by the author as “expository, synoptical, yet dialectical,” **Nino Langiulli** presents an appreciative

and critical review of existentialist thought in **“Two Cheers for Existentialism.”** Langiulli shows how existentialist thinkers presented an important critique of some key components of the dominant modern worldview by “reversing the argument for the priority of thought over being—an argument crucial to modernity and propounded by such influential modern thinkers as Descartes and Kant.” This attempt succeeded only to a limited degree but presents an effort to recover the contemplative aspect of thought that was prominent in much premodern philosophy. Langiulli also applauds “existentialism’s recognition and embrace of human mortality and fallibility—doctrines already enunciated and taught in Christian theology.” Such an approach provided an important response to the Enlightenment’s view of boundless progress through rational control. The reservation Langiulli holds about existentialism is a result of “existentialism’s inability to hold and protect the limits of the idea of possibility (existentialism’s central idea) from the absolutist or the ‘anything goes’ treatment it receives in postmodernist discourse,” a path followed avidly by postmodern thinkers to the detriment of philosophy, in Langiulli’s view. Just as Brague seems to hint at the potential to find in thinkers such as Heidegger a renewed effort to understand the human person as meaningfully situated within a world, Langiulli carefully discerns the enrichment of philosophy to be found in much existentialist thought while acknowledging significant shortcomings.

**David Vincent Meconi, S.J.**, examines the early encounter of Christianity with non-Christian culture in the genre of the “cento,” a form composed of passages culled from prominent non-Christian writers such as Virgil and rearranged to produce a new text that tells a Christian story in his article **“The Christian Cento and the Evangelization of Christian Culture.”** Meconi explains, “By selecting and stitching various verses and half-lines together, the great poets’ words became attached to a new historical situation. In this way, the cento is not a poetic genre per se but a technique or method

of imitation and resemblance.” Meconi highlights the work in this genre of Faltonia Betitia Proba (c. 320–370), “the first Christian woman whose work we can actually verify and whose writing we still possess in full.” Viewing this work as an effort in Christian apologetics, the article illuminates early Christian efforts to approach the classical world and its great cultural accomplishments while affirming also the Christian faith of early converts. Meconi observes, “Faltonia’s cento is an excellent example of Christian apologetic. She takes the best of non-Christian culture and literature and from there shows how all truth speaks of one God.”

In **“Dissenting from Reality: The Denial of Evil,” John F. Owens, S.M.**, asks, “How is it possible to perform an action that rebels against the very order by which anything exists at all, including actions?” This question powerfully confronts us with the philosophical mystery posed by evil, and the article explores the implications of the Western concept of evil for the desire and will of the agent who does evil. Viewing evil actions as a rebellion against the “one good order” within which our actions necessarily unfold, Owens examines the withdrawal of the evildoer from that order while also bringing to light the impossibility of establishing an alternative order. Owens argues, “Evil is the product of a fundamentally manipulative stance toward the world and toward our own lives. What does this tell us about good? Good is the opposite of this—affirming the world we were given rather than the world we make for ourselves. It does not restrict its horizon but is content to live under the horizon that frames the original heaven and earth. A life that does not try to manipulate begins here.” In the terms developed in this preface, the argument presented in this article reaffirms one of the central insights of the classical and medieval cosmologies presented by Bregue: that human life is necessarily situated within a cosmic whole in which there is an identity between being and good and which is therefore an ethical foundation for human action.

Our Reconsiderations feature in this issue is by biblical scholar

**Ben F. Meyer, “Election–Historical Thinking in Romans 9-11, and Ourselves,”** with an introduction by **John W. Martens.** Meyer “was a man of the Church and saw his task as a theologian of the Bible to make present the resources of the past that would allow for the appropriation of the Bible today,” in the words of Martens’s introduction. He brought to biblical scholarship an impressive breadth and depth of learning, drawing upon theologians such as Bernard Lonergan. Martens tells us Meyer was “at ease in the ancient languages of the Church, with the Church Fathers, and with ancient philosophy, was raised on Thomism, and was comfortable with English and Continental philosophy and their postmodern children.” Such resources were brought to bear powerfully in his books in the effort to help modern readers encounter as fully as possible the meaning of the biblical texts. His work, again in the words of Martens, “diagnoses the critical situation of Western civilization with respect to our ability to accept the biblical notion of God and why it is necessary that this take place in order to encounter the New Testament text in its fullness.”

Meyer explores why biblical interpretation for many centuries failed to understand properly the biblical concept of election in Romans 9-11 and offers a startling analysis of the modern failure: “If we have lost our hold on election–historical thinking, it is because we have lost our hold on the biblical understanding of the living God.” Biblical exegesis must reach a deep understanding of those elements of modern worldviews that obstruct our ability to understand the biblical concept of the living God: “without deep cultural changes neither we nor even perhaps the interpreter himself will be quite up to a full encounter with the interpreted text. Exegetical excellence will perforce remain a sterile and isolate achievement.” In this way, Meyer presents not only a reading of a particular text but also a profound account of the problem of biblical understanding and shows that such understanding depends upon a radical conversion in the reader: “as the question of God is implicit in all our

questioning, so the love of God is the basic fulfillment of all our intending. The actualization of this love is religious conversion and it sows the seeds of moral and intellectual conversion.”

Michael C. Jordan

Editor

### *Notes*

1. Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). The original French edition was published in 1999.
2. Rémi Brague, “The Impotence of the Word: The God Who Has Said It All,” *Diogenes* 170, vol. 43/2 (Summer 1995): 43–67.