CHAPTER I

Europe encounters the world

EUROPE AND OTHER CULTURES

If we insist on characterizing our age as multicultural, we should recognize it as a late phase of an age that began with increased pressure and contact with the Islamic world in the twelfth century. This pressure helped to drive the attempts to develop a sea route to Asia, which in turn led to the European "discovery" of the Americas. The history of Europe's encounter with other cultures, however, goes back much further. At no point was Europe or "the West" self-sufficient. Alexander and his troops reached India in 326 BCE. By the second century, Indian merchants traveled to Egypt and in 26 BCE a mission from Sri Lanka met with the Emperor Augustus in Rome. In the second or third century CE, Roman traders reached China, where 90 percent of Rome's silk originated.[1] Clement of Alexandria mentioned Buddhism in the third century CE, at the same time that Hippolytus discussed the Upanishads. Mani, the founder of Manicheanism, may have traveled to India and named Buddha as one of his divinities. It is difficult to judge the influence contact with Asia and Africa had on the philosophies of the Greco-Roman world, but, at the very least, this contact contributed to the development of cosmopolitan thought and the conception of a human being as a citizen of the world.

Coming into the Christian, medieval world, the distinction between Europe and non-Europe is less clear and relevant than that between Christian and non-Christian, as non-Christian cultures became the "other" to Western Christian identity. This complex relationship of indebtedness and distance had a determinative impact on Western thought, as it partly drove the attempt to distinguish philosophy from theology. Medieval thinkers from Augustine to Aquinas took philosophy as that enterprise developed in its highest form by the Greeks. For them, the attempt to validate

[1] Donald Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965–70), vol. I, part i, pp. 11–15.

and circumscribe philosophy was at the same time the attempt to validate and circumscribe pagan thought. Later, whenever the thought of other cultures is encountered, the very same distinctions – between philosophy and theology or natural and revealed theology – are deployed, as will be seen in Europe's reaction to Confucianism. We should also note that, in general, non-Western cultures lack a clear separation between religion and philosophy. This lack is often presented as a flaw, but a more likely explanation is that the distinction between religion and philosophy is a peculiarity of a culture that defines itself by faith in certain texts that go beyond and perhaps even conflict with reason, but also valorizes the thought of a culture that lacked access to those texts. In other words, the separation of religion and philosophy – with all of its consequences for what it means to be a philosopher – results from the need to create a space for pagan thought.

The multi-cultural, cosmopolitan world of the Mediterranean fragmented and shrank with the decline of the Roman empire. Trade continued from Asia, but through intermediaries in Egypt and West Asia. The first significant break came with the Mongol empire, which at its height ran from Poland to China. Marco Polo is the most famous of those to cross the Mongol empire, arriving in China in 1275, and China under Kublai Khan was cosmopolitan enough for Polo to work in the service of the emperor. Franciscan monks established Christian communities in China and in India and a Beijing-born Nestorian Christian became probably the first Chinese to reach Europe.[2] Genoese and Venetian merchants were well-enough established in China and India by the early fourteenth century that a friar heading for China could say that in Venice he had already heard Hangzhou described by a number of people who had seen it first hand.[3] Direct contact with Asia declined with the rise of the Ottoman empire, but Chinese, Arabic, and Jewish merchants continued trading around the southern shores of Asia and the west coast of Africa. Europe remained part of this network, isolated by the monopoly held by Egypt as the connection to this world, and by the Venetians as the connection to Egypt. Intellectually, the deepest contact with non-Christian cultures came with the influx of Arabic and Greek texts into Europe. From Sicily and Spain came the influence of Islamic culture. "Arabic" numbers, coming through the Arabs from India, were introduced in 1202, and Euclid's *Elements* was translated near the end of the twelfth century. The full corpus of Aristotle had been translated by the end of the thirteenth century, as had commentaries from

[2] Lach, *Asia in the Making,* vol. I, part i, p. 39.   [3] Lach, *Asia in the Making,* vol. I, part i, pp. 43–44.

Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd). These texts soon generated controversies about the relationship between theology and philosophy and the potential value of pagan thought. As time went on more and more Greek texts became available, particularly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The spread of these Neo-Platonic and so-called Hermetic texts raised new problems for the place of pagan thought.

Europe's contact with other cultures increased exponentially with the expansion of sea travel, led by the attempt to sidestep the monopolies on Asian trade held by the Venetians and Egyptians. Contact with Africa began with the seizing of Ceuta in Morocco in 1415, after which the Portuguese edged down the coast of Africa, in search of gold and slaves. By the 1480s, the Portuguese had direct trading relationships with the kingdoms of Mali, Benin, and Kongo.[4] In 1498 Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope, reached Calicut in India, and returned safely to Portugal, with a profit. In a short period of time, the Portuguese defeated Egyptian, Arab, and Indian forces, and established forts or trading posts in Sofala (Mozambique), Ormuz (Iran), Goa (India), and Malacca (Malaysia), so that, by the mid-1500s, Portugal had fifty fortified areas and approximately 10,000 people living abroad.[5] At this same time, Europeans expanded westward. Columbus reached the Caribbean in 1492; in 1521 the Aztec empire was decimated by Hernan Cortes. From strongholds in Mexico and Peru, the Spanish reached Asia from the west, founding Manila in 1571. Other nations, particularly the Dutch and English, soon joined the rush for colonies and globalized trade. France was far behind by the time Leibniz encouraged Louis XIV to invade Egypt in 1672.

Much could be said about this expansion, but we should note the extent to which Europeans were quickly in close contact with a great variety of cultures. By the time of Leibniz, hundreds of thousands of Europeans were living abroad, spread across all the continents but Antarctica. Some lived in enclosed communities, but many had close contact with local cultures, integrating themselves into established economies. The Portuguese traded slaves for gold within Africa, while other Europeans acted as intermediaries between Japan and China. Through European expansion, immense numbers of people were living between cultures: some by choice, some by force. Some cases were of extreme immersion, ranging from Indians and Africans who spent years in Europe training for service in the Church, to French

[4] David Birmingham, *Trade and Empire in the Atlantic, 1400–1600* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 27–47.
[5] George Raudzens, *Empires: Europe and Globalization 1492–1788* (Phoenix Mill [UK]: Sutton, 1999), p. 34.

traders living among the Hurons, to Jesuits spending their adult lives deep
in China, to African slaves forced to labor in the Americas. Perhaps a sym-
bol of this mixing of cultures is the Jesuit college in Goa, India. In 1546, the
students came from eleven countries, including China, Japan, Malaysia,
and Ethiopia, all being trained for service in the Catholic Church.[6]

In spite of this deep contact, goods from the rest of the world entered
Europe more quickly than knowledge of the world's cultures. Even so,
the contact with other cultures impacted late medieval and Renaissance
thought, primarily through newly discovered Greek texts, which raised the
problem of pagan wisdom and forced a clarification of the relationship
between philosophy and theology. In the process of encountering the non-
European world, paradigms developed for accommodating the thought of
other cultures. Coming into the modern age, as knowledge of China deep-
ened, China was encountered through "lenses" ground in these earlier en-
counters. The first and most important of these lenses is "natural theology,"
which refers to knowledge that can be had "naturally," without the aid of
revelation. Natural theology originated in the classical world, as Christians
used Neo-Platonic pagan writers, but it was refined as Islamic and Greek
texts entered Europe from Spain. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) provides an
excellent example. As Aquinas realized, the difficulty in creating a space for
non-Christian thought is its boundaries. One potential point of separation
is methodology, but Aquinas rejects this division because he takes both the-
ology and philosophy as sciences. In the *In Boethium De Trinitate*, which
deals with the relationships among disciplines, Aquinas defines a science:
"The nature of science consists in this, that from things already known
conclusions about other matters follow of necessity."[7] Following Aristotle's
episteme, the essence of science lies in the necessary progression from
basic principles, a progression used both in theology and in philosophy.
A second possible point of division is by content. In part, Aquinas accepts
this point of division. The *Summa Contra Gentiles*, which directly considers
philosophy as a common ground between cultures or as the means to prove
truths to non-believers, begins with a division:

There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths
about God exceed all the ability of the human reason. Such is the truth that God
is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach.
Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about

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[6] Lach, *Asia in the Making,* vol. I, part i, pp. 262–63.
[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Faith, Reason, and Theology.* Trans. by Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute
of Medieaval Studies, 1987), p. 41.

God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason.[8]

The fundamental division between theology and philosophy cannot rest on content, however, because they often treat the same topics. This overlap is clearer if we consider the division between theology and philosophy rather as between revealed and natural theology. Aquinas explains: "Hence there is no reason why those things which are treated by the philosophical sciences, so far as they can be known by the light of natural reason, may not also be treated by another science so far as they are known by the light of divine revelation."[9]

This remark suggests where the division lies for Aquinas. What defines a science is that its conclusions follow necessarily from principles, but the principles themselves can come from reflection on experience or from other sources. Aquinas argues in the *Summa Theologica* that theological science is distinct from philosophical science because its principles are not given by natural reason or experience, but by divine revelation through faith.[10] The analysis of sacred doctrine in *In Boethium de Trinitate* is the same. Philosophical science proceeds by necessity from principles of sensible things. Sacred doctrine also proceeds by necessity, but derives its principles from the divine realities themselves, through faith.[11] This separation of philosophy and sacred doctrine has powerful consequences for the encounter with other cultures, as it allows some principles of ethics, science, and theology to be discovered by any people. This application to other cultures is no coincidence; the separation itself came from a sense that the Greeks had developed philosophy further than any Christian thinker up to that point. Although Aquinas examines only the thought that grew around the Mediterranean, nothing precludes more distant cultures from developing philosophy, and natural theology became the guiding approach for the Jesuits entering China. Natural theology was not a direct threat to revealed theology, because both come from God, so that reason cannot contradict faith.[12] Philosophy assists theology by proving what it can about God and by showing the flaws in any argument against faith. The *Summa Contra Gentiles* explicitly proceeds along these two lines. *In Boethium de Trinitate* deals with the specific uses of philosophy in sacred doctrine, which are given

[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4 vols. Trans. by Anton Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 63.
[9] Thomas Aquinas, *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*. Trans. by Anton Pegis (New York: Modern Library, 1948), p. 5.
[10] Aquinas, *Introduction*, pp. 4–5.   [11] Aquinas, *Faith*, pp. 41–42.
[12] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, pp. 74–75.

as three: it can establish certain preambles presupposed by faith, such as
God's existence and unity; it can clarify the contents of faith by analogy to
creatures; it can argue against unbelievers.[13] The assistance of philosophy,
though, comes at a cost, as the Church could maintain exclusive authority
over freethinkers and other cultures only by establishing the inadequacy of
natural theology, which Aquinas thus works to circumscribe and contain.
In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, he argues why some matters must be in prin-
ciple beyond reason and thus are only answerable by faith. The importance
of the Church and the status of other cultures depended on showing that
this excess beyond natural theology was essential to religion and salvation.
We can see this threat in Spinoza, who follows the form set up by Aquinas
but sees what exceeds natural theology as irrelevant to true religion, thus
freeing religion from the Church and from the particularities of culture.
Even in those matters accessible to reason, however, Aquinas argues that
we require faith, for three reasons. First, some people are unable to develop
their reason sufficiently, due to lack of ability, free time, or dedication.
Second, even those who can develop philosophy only do so late in life, but
matters of religion must be known much earlier. Third, human reason is
liable to error, so that even learned people will sometimes accept false argu-
ments.[14] Only the third of these reasons applies absolutely to philosophy
or natural theology.

For its role in freeing philosophy from theology, the doctrine of natu-
ral theology was of tremendous importance in the formation of modern
thought, and it results from encounters with the non-Christian others of
medieval thought. The latter point is often ignored, but not by Leibniz. In
the *Theodicy*, he explicitly attributes the conflict between faith and reason
to medieval thinkers accommodating Plato and Aristotle (PD 6–7). Even
so, the separation of natural theology from its intercultural origins is well
established in the writings of Descartes. As an approach to other cultures,
natural theology was largely lost by the collapse of arguments from uni-
versal consent, which came with greater knowledge of cultural diversity. It
lingers only in popular culture, as in Alduous Huxley's *Perrenial Philoso-
phy*, or the common claim that all religions basically say "the same thing."
Yet if we take natural theology more broadly as the position that reason
or experience allow us all to reach certain truths about the ultimate na-
ture of things, then we can see that natural theology remains a significant
approach.

[13] Aquinas, *Faith*, p. 49.
[14] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, pp. 66–68 (book I, ch. 4); cf. Aquinas, *Faith*, pp. 66–67.

The second lens for encountering other cultures is typified in the Renaissance tradition that has become known as *prisca theologia*, or "ancient theology." As with natural theology, this approach is grounded in the early church fathers' attempts to place Christianity in relation to pagan thought. Those early fathers wished to show that the wisdom in Plato and Neo-Platonism derived ultimately from the Judeo-Christian tradition.[15] Augustine himself suggests this approach in several places, as in *The City of God*, where he writes:

Therefore, on that voyage of his [to Egypt], Plato could neither have seen Jeremiah, who was dead so long before, nor have read those same scriptures which had not yet been translated into the Greek language, of which he was a master, unless, indeed, we say that, as he was most earnest in the pursuit of knowledge, he also studied those writings through an interpreter, as he did those of the Egyptians. . . .[16]

He supports this view with similarities between Moses and Plato. As with natural theology, "ancient theology" developed rapidly with the influx of new pagan texts, coming primarily from the fall of Byzantium to the Turks. Marsilio Ficino's Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was published in 1471. The writings of Plato, other Neo-Platonists, and many church fathers were translated around the same time. In its various forms, this tradition took in writings thought to be from Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, Dionysius the Areopagite, and various Neo-Platonists.[17] All these sources were taken as versions of Christianity, derived from Biblical truth and able to provide new perspectives on that truth. As a hermeneutic approach, these texts were read with the goal of finding hidden or "figured" Christian truths.

The plausibility of "ancient theology" depends on several mistaken assumptions. The most crucial is the origin of the texts, which were assumed to have been written over several millennia across several cultures. In fact, all of the texts are Greek in origin, with Plato's as the oldest, and the others written in the first three centuries of the common era, originating in a time with strong syncretic tendencies, and a world-view that combined Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, and various mysticisms.[18] Interpreters also

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[15] The church fathers most often cited were Lactantius, Clement of Alexander, and Eusebius. See D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 1–4.

[16] Augustine, *The City of God*. Trans. by Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1993), VIII, xi, p. 256.

[17] Walker, *Ancient Theology*, p. 20.

[18] Francis Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 4–6.

failed to realize the extent to which medieval Christianity had been shaped
by Greek thought. The similarities between Plato and Christianity exceed
what could be dismissed as coincidence, but they are explained because
Christianity developed in a Platonic world, not because Plato predicted
Christianity from indirect access to Moses. We would expect notable simi-
larities between the hermetic texts, orphic poems, Neo-Platonic texts, and
early Christians, because all of these express the same cultural milieu. These
similarities become perplexing, though, if the texts are thought to represent
diverse times and cultures. A third assumption that made this view plau-
sible was an underlying view of history. From the perspective of the Old
Testament – taken as the only perspective on ancient history – the world
is relatively young and all cultures and peoples come from one origin: first
Adam, then Noah. Cultural and linguistic diversity emerges even later, at
the Tower of Babel. On this Biblical view of history, all wisdom comes
originally from Biblical figures. History follows a path of decline and frag-
mentation, so that the goal in reading later texts is to recover and piece
together these original truths and sometimes even this original "Adamic"
language. The older the text, the closer it is to its Biblical origins, the more
likely it is to contain truth.

The hermetic tradition and ancient theology declined in early modern
times, particularly as the *Corpus Hermeticum* was correctly dated by Isaac
Casaubon in 1614, but this tradition had a powerful influence on how Euro-
peans first encountered some other cultures, namely, those with a supposed
ancient history. The same forces that led to the value of the *Corpus Her-
meticum* also led to the importance of ancient Egyptian culture, particu-
larly the hieroglyphs, and then China. Those Europeans first interested
in Chinese culture were proto-Egyptologists, like the Jesuit Athanasius
Kircher, considered an authority on both Egypt and China.[19] Paul Beurrier
and Gottlieb Spitzel were two other early authors who made this connec-
tion.[20] The most relevant example to Leibniz is the Jesuit Joachim Bouvet,
who spent his adult life as a missionary in China and was Leibniz's main
correspondent there. Bouvet first traveled to China in 1685 and was already
a prominent mathematician and member of the Paris Academy of Science.
In China, he mastered Chinese and Manchu and dedicated himself to

[19] Athanasius Kircher published *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* in 1652 and *China Monumentis . . . Illustrata* in
1667.
[20] Paul Beurrier published his *Speculum christianne religionis in triplici lege naturalii, mosaica et evangelica*
in 1663, linking Zoroaster, Hermes, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and the ancient Chinese. (Claudia
von Collani, *Joachim Bouvet S.J. Sein Leben und Sein Werk*, [Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1985], pp. 120–
21.) Spizel wrote *De Re Litteraria Sinensium Commentarius* in 1661. Leibniz had a brief correspondence
with both Kircher and Spizel.

the ancient Chinese classics; the Emperor Kangxi commented that he was perhaps the only Westerner to be really conversant with Chinese literature.[21] Bouvet's approach to the classics was rooted in ancient theology and hermetism, and was later known as "Figurism."[22] Following Kircher and Beurrier, Bouvet connected Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters, believing they represented the language used before the Deluge (W 73). In an essay on the classical Chinese work the *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes), sent to Leibniz and the Jesuit Charles Le Gobien in 1700, he claims that the system of this ancient book contains "many precious remains of the debris of the most ancient and most excellent philosophy taught by the first Patriarchs of the world to their descendants, since corrupted and almost entirely obscured by the course of time" (W 123). The similarity between this system and ideas presented obscurely in Pythagoras and Plato shows that they all represent the same system, a system also represented in Cabbala (W 125). A few years later, Bouvet no longer presented his work on the *Yi Jing* as a study of Chinese culture but as a study of the culture of the Patriarchs (W 125). Bouvet's claims now seem bizarre, but they make more sense within the Biblical conception of history. According to Bouvet, Fuxi, the legendary creator of the *Yi Jing*, lived 4,600 years earlier, putting him chronologically near Noah. At that time, he argues, knowledge of the creation must have been fresh and Fuxi's ideas would have been rejected had they been false (W 126). The power of Bouvet's approach depends partly on legitimate traces of monotheism in early Chinese texts, but more on the ambiguity of those texts and his ability to identify parallel patterns. A particularly ingenious example of his method is a discussion of the identity of Fuxi. Given that Fuxi's system is so similar to "our ancient authors," he is probably the same person as either Zoroaster, Hermes, or Enoch. Even the name "Fuxi" supports this connection, he says, because the character *fu* is made up of two other characters, one meaning "dog" (*quan*) and the other meaning "man" (*ren*). This name obviously refers to Hermes, traditionally pictured with the head of a dog and the body of a human being (W 125–26).

Because both natural theology and "ancient theology" allow the possibility of religious truths in pagan writings, the approaches can be difficult to distinguish.[23] Almost all in the Jesuit mission agreed that the Chinese

[21] Jonathon Spence, *Emperor of China: Self-portrait of K'ang-Hsi* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 75.
[22] The best work on the Figurists in China is by Claudia von Collani, particularly *Die Figuristen in der Chinamission* (Frankfurt: Verlag Peter D. Lang, 1981); and *Joachim Bouvet S.J.* For a broader view of Figurism in the Hermetic Tradition, see Walker, *Ancient Theology*.
[23] For example, Walker makes no fundamental distinction between them, and thus sees the entire Jesuit mission as based on "ancient theology." Walker, *Ancient Theology*, pp. 196–202.

had some knowledge of God, but some, such as the mission's founder
Matteo Ricci, believed they had achieved this knowledge with the natu-
ral light of reason, while others, such as Bouvet, believed they had this
knowledge from ancient revelation. The positions have radically different
consequences. The hermetic tradition leaves one dependent on texts, mak-
ing hermeneutics the main skill for finding truth. Natural theology leads in
the opposite direction, allowing for freedom from history and texts through
the autonomy of reason. Bouvet and Descartes could hardly be more dif-
ferent. As an approach to other cultures, the two views share a tolerance
and respect for pagan thought, but they differ as the kinds of truths that
can be discovered differ on the two accounts. Natural theology places strict
limits on reason, so that things like the trinity cannot be discovered; while
in the hermetic tradition, any religious details can be found in any text,
as Bouvet sees the use of six lines in the symbols of the *Yi Jing* as a refe-
rence to the six days of creation (W 155). More importantly, the depen-
dence on texts in the hermetic traditions yields an imperative to uncover
and study diverse texts. Texts are all we have, so if we find some ancient texts
in China, nothing could be more important than studying them. Natural
theology allows for truth in these texts, but sees no necessity in studying
them. In practice, early advocates of natural theology like Aquinas saw the
need to study pagan thought, which exceeded what a lone independent
thinker might achieve, but this dependence was rejected by early modern
thinkers like Descartes. Leibniz's hermeneutics, with its focus on finding
reason in various cultural expressions, is in some ways a descendant of the
"hermetic" approach. This connection is not merely a coincidence. Christia
Mercer shows that, while Leibniz's earliest influences rejected the hermetic
tradition, they followed a related Renaissance tradition of "conciliatory
eclecticism." This conciliatory eclecticism was one of the primary forces
shaping Leibniz's philosophy.[24]

The third lens, unlike the first two, focuses primarily on cultural differ-
ence. Michel de Montaigne provides the best example. Montaigne shows
the kind of interest in other cultures that we would expect a curious in-
tellectual at that time to have. He made remarkably close contact with
the discoveries in the Americas, noting that he long had "a man in his
house" who spent ten or so years in the French colonies in Brazil, and
that Montaigne himself once spoke with some native Americans through
an interpreter.[25] Montaigne uses his knowledge of other cultures in several

[24] Christia Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Cambridge University
Press, 2001), pp. 23–59.
[25] He mentions both facts in his essay "On Cannibals."