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Giuseppe Candela

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An Overview of the Cosmology, Religion and Philosophical Universe of Giordano Bruno

While recent historical assessments have shed new light on the thought of Giordano Bruno, his standing in the pantheon of sixteenth-century philosophers remains in dispute. Even at a distance of four centuries his name still creates controversy among both denigrators and sympathizers. Given that in his writings he was obscure and ambiguous, it was almost inevitable that later generations would understand his books in a variety of ways, or worse, project modern attitudes on the past. The scholarly conflict arising from his discussions of cosmology and religion in the *Dialoghi italiani* is both typical and revelatory.

In the *Dialoghi* Bruno presented his interpretation of the oneness of God: everything was a direct emanation from Him. And because God had no limits in His faculties of creation and since the universe derived directly from Him, Bruno concluded that the universe also had no limits. Accepted thought posited two worlds: a supralunary world that was ethereal and incorruptible, and a sublunary world made of the four classic elements and that was thereby corruptible. In Bruno's universe there was only one world. Bruno saw God as nature, the nature of all natures, and, as such, one and indivisible. The essence of God was in all parts, even the smallest. Bruno thought that in an infinite universe, there was no center or periphery, no higher or lower. Other planets were the infinite effect of the infinite cause. Thus, man was also part of the cosmos, either as a microcosm or a macrocosm; and therefore, the search into man's nature was a search for the divinity.

Modern scholars are divided in their reaction to such ideas: some contend that Bruno prolonged the tradition of ancient thought, while others view him as a representative of modern science. He is portrayed either as an antiquated thinker, outside the mainstream of the modern world; or as a confused philosopher and exponent of doctrines only partially understood by us moderns. It is no doubt difficult today to make any definitive statement about Bruno's philosophy of the infinite worlds since it both affirms and, at the same time, denies

the new scientific vision of the universe. Nonetheless, without a broad perception of the major cultural shifts of the Renaissance, it is impossible to understand why Bruno's ideas led to his being burned at the stake. In Bruno's unconventional views of cosmology and religious matters are to be found both the reasons for his execution and the seeds of the deep revolution that altered the framework of our modern thought.

Alexander Koiré has reminded us that it was Bruno who, for the first time, presented us with the sketch, or outline, of the cosmology that has become dominant in the last two centuries; never before had the essential infinitude of space been asserted in such an outright, definite, and conscious manner (39). Not surprisingly, the metaphysical and epistemological concepts that followed from Bruno's cosmology made Church authorities uneasy and fixed his notoriety as an unorthodox thinker throughout the highest intellectual circles of Europe. Complicating still further the reception of his ideas was his reliance on mnemotechnic secrets and other pseudo-sciences, a reliance so dubious and disputable that it clouded the religious significance of the long trial that preceded his death. Together, these problems render questionable Bruno's intellectual standing in a modern world asked to accept his intuition of a universe derived from the notion that the powers of God are expressed through an infinite work of creation.

Many of the circumstances surrounding Bruno's life and works seem related to the martyrdom that secured his final, controversial place in history. Today, both defenders and detractors share a benign contempt of the Church, which persecuted him with such an unusual vigor. The result has been that, whatever the problems presented by lapses and lacunae in his writings, a great variety of readers still insist on seeing him as a martyr of modern science. This predisposition to favor science over religion has resulted in misinterpretations that fundamentally alter the very nature and meaning of Bruno's thought, misconstrue his true role in history, and hide the authentic flame of his genius. We can better grasp the Nolan's real place in Western intellectual history if we free ourselves of the idea that the opposition of science to religion was the primary issue in his trial; equally important was the opposition of modern and ancient religions that his writings revealed. That Bruno was an opponent of all three of the major Western Churches—Roman Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran—does not, in and of itself, warrant calling him a secular philosopher. To correctly place him in the history of Western thought, it is necessary to examine both his enthusiasm for Copernican theories and his yearning for arcane truths and mysterious revelations as well.

Bruno's writings suggest that the modern reader can find true meaning in cosmology and religion only outside the new scientific vision of the universe. Both cosmology and religion must be consid-

ered the metaphysical support for a different world view that challenged the rigid boundaries of knowledge associated with modern science and traditional humanism. While cosmology was essential to an imaginative intelligence, such as Bruno's, which could accept and then reject various Christian religions at different periods of his life, it proved most damaging to the Roman Catholic Church's credibility as the sole deliverer of metaphysical truths. Indeed, Hans Blumenberg explains Bruno's death as the result of a head-on confrontation of the Nolan's thought with "the center and the substance of the Christian system" (549). In this sense, the effects of the Brunonian reading of the universe on the gradual dissolution of the old *imago mundi* are less consequential than his new way of looking at the relationship between the heavens and the earth. In essence, while the Copernican view of the universe might be called a strictly mathematical concept, in Bruno's hands it became the means to an end—an attack on conventional religion.

Bruno eloquently proclaimed the intellectual and spiritual repercussions of the new ideas and, in so doing, confronted the pedants and scholars who sought a solution to the problems of the age in the major works of classical antiquity. He rejected not only traditional Christian religions but knowledge of the classics as well. And what he substituted for them was unacceptable:

... as the major works of ancient literature and philosophy failed to produce intellectual concord and only revealed deeper and deeper layers of conflict and uncertainty, people engaged in the humanistic enterprise of restoring ancient wisdom dug deeper and deeper into the literary remains of ancient civilization, credulously trusting that if the final wisdom was not to be found in Seneca and Cicero among the Latins and Plato and Aristotle among the Greeks, then it must be sought in the supposedly still more ancient texts of Egyptian Hermetism, Jewish Cabala, and Pythagorean mysticism. (Nauert 209–10)

Nauert thus helps us better appreciate the fundamental threat Bruno posed to the entire Christian framework of cosmology and theology embedded in the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic geocentric universe. While only one of a new breed of thinkers, Bruno was so very adroit at exploiting the implications of the Copernican hypothesis that he compelled the Church to take a stand.

When Bruno donned the mantle of a prophet of universal peace, he thereby delved into a new mode of investigation—a mode rooted in a distant past, full of the forbidden, and held together by a vision of the cosmos more emotional than scientific. As Ioan Peter Couliano explains it: "Fundamentally he belonged to a past too subtle, too complicated for the new spirit of rationalism: he was the descendant of

those who proclaimed the least accessible arcana of the era of phantasms: mnemotechnics and magic" (60). Couliano thus substantially confirms the work of Frances Yates who disagrees with those who see the Nolan as a herald of a scientific future, with those overly impressed by his impassioned defence of Copernicus. From the revisionism of Yates emerged the view of Bruno as the chief spokesman for the Hermetic "cultural revolution" that "aroused extraordinary interest from 1471 on and infiltrated all aspects of culture, poetry and the figurative arts, religious thought, and customs" (Garin, "Philosopher and Magus" 137).

But, if Bruno is not to be viewed as a herald of modern science, what is he then? Merely a gullible fool? No. Rather, he was a benign high priest of divine enthusiasm. Much of his outlook was indeed ancient. On the other hand, in his own day the physical and spiritual worlds were not entirely separate. The Renaissance world saw a living cosmos traversed by impulses and intentions. The continuous appeal of such ideas as divine plenitude, metaphysical hierarchies, and fundamental harmonies between the celestial and terrestrial worlds was exercised through a variety of spiritual agencies and intelligences. A bifurcation between scientific and philosophical cultures would not have made sense to Bruno and his contemporaries. Only with Galileo did the cosmological solution that had been growing throughout the Renaissance reach a triumphant conclusion. In his work we find the final and irrevocable reduction of science to measurement, quantity, and motion.

Readers familiar with the the *Dialoghi italiani* find in it an approach to life inspired by the ancients. Bruno's pantheon of planetary deities provides the dialogues with a heroic tension derived from his long familiarity with the learning and imaginative insight associated with the Hermetic world. In the driving force of his imagination shines his faith in the power of poetry to penetrate intuitively the structure of the universe. This divine enthusiasm does not, however, disqualify the "Hermetic" Bruno as a philosopher by vocation and an advocate of a particular kind of physical cosmos. Cosmology still represents his most enduring legacy although it is not the science of a modern astronomer or physicist.

The philosophical and religious consequences deriving from Bruno's theory of the universe go much further than the scientific findings of the extremely cautious Copernicus. Rather, it is apparent that the Nolan inhabited an intellectual universe obeying a logic unlike that of the coherent macrocosm of mutually agreed discourse. The chasm of thought separating Bruno from the modern thinker is most evident in the odd mixture of cunning and ingenuous rashness with which he declared an animation common to all living things in the infinity of space:

Sono dunque, infiniti motori, cossí come sono anime infinite di queste infinite sfere, le quali, perché sono forme ed atti intrinseci, in rispetto de quali tutti è un prencipe da cui tutti dipendono, è un primo il quale dona la virtù della motività a gli spirti, anime, dei, numi, motori, e dona la mobilità alla materia, al corpo, all'animato, alla natura inferiore, al mobile. (*De l'infinito* 519)¹

In this famous passage Bruno seeks to penetrate the deeper meaning of things not with the approach of the mathematician but that of a philosopher immersed in a totally different cultural atmosphere. He put the whole-souled ardor of his fanaticism at the service of the non-Christian religious attitudes that form the core of the Hermetic tradition.

It is generally agreed that the *Dialoghi italiani* lack a distinctive context while sharing a peculiar intellectual atmosphere and continuity of purpose. The sub-text weaves unorthodox strands of thought into a richly textured tapestry of imaginative and spiritual exaltation. The reader finds in unexpected contexts the most consistent indication of his natural indiscretion and audacity. Bruno announces his Hermetic metaphysical reform with the prophetic tone of a Renaissance *magus*. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to consider the logic of his mystical mode of thinking as the hallmark of an antiquated thinker.² Now, perhaps, the forgotten frontiers of the mystical relegate him to the boneyard of unscientific and regressive philosophical species. Yet it was not so during the last decades of the sixteenth century.

In new studies on the role of the *magus* in European intellectual history, scholars have rethought the consequences of partisan scientism and seemingly antiquated anthropological views.³ In Italy and elsewhere these simple beliefs have been subjected to more detailed scrutiny, and the grander role of magic in the sixteenth century has been acknowledged. Ficino provided Florentine humanism with a supposedly rational foundation for the use of pre-classical pseudosciences in forming a spiritualized religion; this has been explained as more than "an impulse to reform Christianity; it was also part of his [Ficino's] science, by no means something intrinsically unscientific; and above all it was erudite, as unlike anything that could be called primitive as one can imagine" (Copenhaver 80).

Whatever the physical theory subscribed to, the *magus* sought an explanation of the forces of nature becoming, in the process, an activist for religious reform. Bruno, Francesco Patrizi, and Tommaso Campanella, among others, believed that a reform operating through natural magic could unite dissidents in a new religion of nature ruled by the unifying symbol of the sun. Robert Westman sees the opposition met by such revisionist programs as plausible and inevitable because,

in its rituals, especially in the Mass with its central doctrine of transubstantiation, the Church had, as it were, its own form of magic and would tolerate no rival. The outcome of the conflict was disastrous for the reformers. Not only did they fail to achieve the reforms they sought, but they brought down the wrath of the Inquisition on themselves. . . . (6)

It is worth dwelling on this point because magic was more than a simple means of recovering the lost knowledge of antiquity with the intended purpose of moving civilization from its static position. The attempt to incorporate such officially rejected knowledge as heretical religions, obsolete sciences, and other "forbidden" modes of speculation was destined to encounter stern opposition. Nonetheless, a considerable number of scholars considered them on the cutting edge of human knowledge. The cluster of magicians, theosophists, and mystics active in the sixteenth century eagerly believed that by following their various systems they were emulating the saints of all cultures and religions in approaching Divinity. As strange as such magic may seem to the modern mind, in Bruno's time it spoke to basic universal needs for morality, religion, and social reform. Magic found a more favorable terrain than it had in earlier periods when the occult sciences were studied for solutions to crises of consciousness more personal than social in nature.

The critical difference between Bruno and other practitioners was his adoption of a philosophical and religious universalism that relativized all religions and jeopardized Christianity's claim to a unique status among religions. The new cosmological framework, stated hypothetically by Copernicus, included many propositions that experimental science has since proven to be accurate: that remains his undisputed merit. However, the revolution in the natural sciences that had released cosmology from its medieval shackles had a shattering effect on Copernicus's views. To begin with, the vast interrelationships he saw throughout space happened in a universe "uno, infinito, immobile" (*De la causa* 318). Bruno's insistence upon the unity of the whole was somewhat tempered by his conviction that the objective spirit of the universe could only be grasped through special faculties of the intellect: the senses were powerless to comprehend the essence of the whole. To this idealism he adds other attributes, including a universal intelligence "che è la prima e principal facultà de l'anima del mondo, la quale è forma universale di quello" (*De la causa* 231). The quintessence of this idea is perhaps stated even more definitively in an answer of his *alter ego* Teofilo:

Rispondo, che, quando diciamo Dio primo principio e prima causa, intendiamo una medesima cosa con diverse raggioni; quando diciamo nella natura principii e cause, diciamo diverse cose con sue diverse

raggioni. Diciamo Dio primo principio, in quanto tutte cose sono dopo lui, secondo certo ordine di priore e posteriore, o secondo la natura, o secondo la durazione, o secondo la dignità. (*De la causa* 229–30)

His investigation of God goes so far as to represent the divinity as an all-synthesizing principle of nature revealed to man through the natural universe. The Christian teaching of his times and of previous centuries had made the universe a creation out of nothing brought about by a fiat of God's inscrutable will. The will of God altogether transcended the world, yet revealed itself through the physical world and the human mind. Only by being lifted above the world and himself, in an act of divine grace, could man in any way attain God. For Roman Catholics, the appointed channel and repository of this grace was the same Church that had at all times jealously guarded and sometimes ruthlessly condemned any doctrine maintaining the immanence of God and the revelation of the divine essence through the world. The Church was founded upon God's transcendence and the human incapacity to reach Him through any faculty of its own. In Christianity the separation between God and man was essential.

But, in expounding the physics of an infinite universe unfolding in time and space, Bruno put considerable faith in the possibility of active human intervention. In so doing, he deviated wildly from Christian dogma. The cosmology that he pursued with reckless optimism was an integral part of a wider program called by Yates "a mission for establishing a universal religion of love which should do away with all religious differences, wars of religion, and persecutions" (*Ideas and Ideals* III 54). His goal did not require a necessary familiarity with the basic concepts of astronomy and mathematics; therefore, he was free to make the most extremist statements on the cosmos. By rejecting the earth as a privileged, fixed, central body, Copernicus had implicitly destroyed the Aristotelian distinctions between terrestrial and celestial regions. Bruno now pushed the complexities of Copernicanism even farther:

Conoscemo, che non è ch'un cielo, un'eterea reggione immensa, dove questi magnifici lumi serbano le proprie distanze, per comodità de la partecipazione de la perpetua vita. Questi fiammeggianti corpi son que' ambasciatori, che annunziano l'eccellenza de la gloria e maestà de Dio. Cossí siamo promossi a scuoprire l'infinito effetto dell'infinita causa, il vero e vivo vestigio de l'infinito vigore; ed abbiamo dottrina di non cercar la divinità rimossa da noi, se l'abbiamo appresso, anzi di dentro, più che noi medesmi siamo dentro a noi; non meno che gli coltori degli altri mondi non la denno cercare appresso di noi, l'avendo appresso e dentro di sé, atteso che non più la luna è cielo a noi, che noi alla luna. (*La cena* 34)

The main point of interest is the claim that philosophy in Bruno's times crossed paths with science and vice versa. To decide whether a given author spoke strictly as a philosopher or a scientist might well become in extreme cases a daunting task, but in that passage Bruno's "philosophical" attitude toward cosmology and toward the higher status accorded to philosophy as a mode of inquiry is eminently clear.

The free crossings between the physical and metaphysical world in his philosophy of a living earth moving around a divine sun clearly reveal the animist philosophy of a *magus* living in contact with the divine life of nature. This notion grew out of the observation of nature in the Renaissance and the renewed interest in the study of the physical world. But Bruno himself cautioned his readers not to see within that physical world an homogeneous and well-determined pattern of thought:

Non mi parrà però quella filosofia degna di essere rigettata, massime quando, sopra a qualsivoglia fundamento che ella presuppona, o forma d'edificio che si propona, venga ad effettuare la perfezione della scienza speculativa e cognizione di cose naturali, come invero è stato fatto da molti più antichi filosofi. Perché è cosa da ambizioso e cervello presuntuoso, vano e invidioso voler persuadere ad altri, che non sia che una sola via di investigare e venire alla cognizione della natura; ed è cosa da pazzo e uomo senza discorso donarlo ad intendere a se medesimo. (*De la causa* 275)

We can thus also assume that Bruno was neither the first nor the only philosopher to set foot in a new cosmology. Inherent in a Nature considered as the greatest depository of profound secrets was the possibility that philosophers subscribing to distinctive and often different approaches to nature could all—in no higher or worthier way—worship God by searching for the general laws upholding a universe of infinite worlds.

But Bruno's synthesis of then-new European cultural patrimony and the ancient patrimony he espoused does not qualify him *a posteriori* as an advocate of older sources of knowledge, the survivor of a distant past squeezed to the margins of Renaissance thought by a newer and more repressive rationalism.⁴ In the pivotal years immediately preceding the emergence of modern science, Bruno considered himself more on the cutting edge of a modernity than Copernicus. Witness this famous passage from *La cena de le ceneri*:

Il Nolano, per caggionar effetti al tutto contrarii, ha disciolto l'animo umano e la cognizione, che era rinchiusa ne l'artissimo carcere de l'aria turbulento; onde a pena, come per certi buchi, avea facultà de remirar le lontanissime stelle, e gli erano mozze l'ali, a fin che non volasse ad aprir il velame di queste nuvole e veder quello che veramente là su si

ritrovasse, e liberarse da le chimere di quei, che, essendo usciti dal fango e caverne de la terra, quasi Mercuri ed Apollini discesi dal cielo, con moltiforme impostura han ripieno il mondo tutto d'infinite pazzie. . . . (32)

In the strong Hermetic atmosphere surrounding the Brunonian idea of God in nature, we can see how easy it was for Bruno to cross the accepted boundaries of any religious faith. His enthusiastic adoption of Egyptianism—openly declared in the twin voices of both poetic and spiritual philosophers—had none of the typical syncretism of the Renaissance. His mediation of such diverse cultural experiences as science, philosophy, and the ancient “magic arts” had some historical validity, whatever it lacked in conciliation.

Bruno's criticism raised historical questions that no one had previously even considered. He defended Copernicanism against reactionary Aristotelism not on the basis of mathematical principles but on animistic and magical grounds. From the Copernican universe he received confirmation of the Egyptian philosophy of animation of the cosmos; he concluded that heliocentricity was a celestial portent of the approaching return of the Egyptian religion. And, from the Hermetic nature of this basic impulse toward the world grew his concept of a universe conceived in the form of a religious experience devoid of a divine mediator. That this philosophy bears the dual aspect of magic and religion is evident by the way he approached the cosmos as a living network:

. . . dal sole intelligibile a certi tempi piú ed a certi tempi meno, quando massima- e quando minimamente viene revelato al mondo. Il quale abito si chiama Magia: e questa, per quanto versa in principii soprannaturali, è divina; e . . . gli stupidi ed insensati idolatri non aveano ragione di ridersi del magico e divino culto degli Egizii; li quali in tutte le cose ed in tutti gli effetti, secondo le proprie raggioni di ciascuno, contemplavano la divinità; e sapeano per mezzo delle specie che sono nel grembo della natura, ricevere que' beneficii che desideravano da quella. . . . (*Spaccio* 782)

Such a revealing piece can be read as evidence of the philosophical and religious elements worked into the essentials of his cosmology. Through this significant admission we see how, in building an account of the solar system, Bruno tried to incorporate the hidden forces of nature that only a *magus* could manipulate.

Bruno's cosmology favored the ancient approach of the *magus* who perceived the meaning of religion in the inner logic and ethical significance of the myths and the cults of nature. By embracing, both during and after his stay at Geneva, a creed thus rooted in the Hermetic core, Bruno could change his personal convictions about any

Christian confession without regard to the possible consequences of his transgressions. In his view, the content of the human mind agreed with the laws of God because the new conjunction between reason and esoterism was not tied to a single cosmological or religious structure. This was the legitimate outlook of the philosopher who sought to reestablish communication between the divine and the terrestrial realm; it explains an essential feature of the Brunonian system: the division of religion into two different planes—a higher one characterized by a mixture of politics and religion and a lower one characterized by a religious interiority accessible to those who could not soar above the ghosts of their own imagination.

The Brunonian eulogies to the sun—represented in the Hermetic writings as a “god” symbol of unity, life, and renewal—connected the powerful image of the Renaissance as a period of rebirth to the restoration of classical ideals corrupted or lost during the Dark Ages (Westman 15–16). A philosopher like Marsilio Ficino—more attuned to the intellectual and edgy sensibilities of his times—professed religious ideas tied to a heliocentric universe and shrewdly insisted, with good reason, on the difference between *magia naturalis* and all other magical practices. This cautious attitude was espoused by post-Ficinian Hermeticists almost to a man; then Bruno cast discretion to the wind.⁵ A helpful guide on this account is that momentous historical revision in the *Dialoghi italiani* of the relationship between philosophy and religion in which Bruno burst the bounds of normal inquiry. In the dialogues, the safe discourse that his predecessors had barely maintained between the two disciplines was eroded to the point of becoming indistinguishable. Bruno, unlike Ficino, found a fundamental disharmony between Christianity and the wisdom of the ancients—no matter what he said at his trials.

Eventually, Bruno leaned toward a universal faith incompatible with any traditional Christian observance. In his much vaunted program of Hermetic religious reform, he sought a convergence of knowledge and action, a convergence which provided the psychological underpinning for his delusional fantasy of finding meaning in the political and religious life of his century. The only avenue he found open to him was that of spokesman for the intellectual dream of his age, the will for peace with nature. From this followed his advocacy of the elimination of the most absurd and incomprehensible aspects of Christian theology: “si annulleno gli culti, religioni, sacrificii e leggi inumane, porcine, selvatiche e bestiali; . . . per quanto cotali ribalderie son radicate, germogliate e moltiplicate al mondo” (*Spaccio* 807).

In his account of the solar system, Bruno reveals important elements of a viable alternative to the secret secularism of the *intelligent-*

sia and the superstitions of the masses. One of his mouthpieces gives to the philosopher the ability to influence the social and political bond:

Bene dici, o Sofia, che nessuna legge che non è ordinata alla pratica del convitto umano, deve essere accettata. . . . perché, o che vegna dal cielo, o che esca da la terra, non deve esser approvata, né accettata quella istituzione o legge che non apporta la utilità e commodità, che ne amena ad ottimo fine: del quale maggiore non possiamo comprendere che quello, che talmente indirizza gli animi e riforma gl'ingegni, che da quelli si producano frutti utili e necessari alla conversazione umana. . . . (*Spaccio* 654)

This is consistent with the unremitting flexibility toward the diverse Christian confessions of the countries where he resided and his prompt acquiescence to them. Logic can not explain his notorious indifference toward religious observance. But one point is worth making: because they were useful to the lower classes, Bruno consistently denied that he was attacking the social and educational function of revealed religions. The occasionally exhibited irritation toward religious confessions was not directed "al volgo, ma a sapienti soli che possono aver accesso all'intelligenza di nostri discorsi" (*De l'infinito* 387).⁶ He stood firm in his belief that the Church was honor-bound to respect the freedom of the philosopher. On such a point Giovanni Gentile wondered whether Bruno "fu ingenuo fino all'inverosimile; o fu un furbo, che volle giocare sulla ingenuità de' suoi giudici" (153–54).

We will probably never know if ingenuity or carelessness compelled Bruno to expand the philosophical elements of his cosmology to cult status. He admitted during his trial that he at one time had harbored doubts about such fundamental Christian dogmas as the Trinity and the Incarnation, but to the judges he vehemently denied that he intended to use philosophical speculation to undermine Christianity. As he insists in his writings,

gli veri, civili e bene accostumati filosofi sempre hanno faurito le religioni; perché gli uni e gli altri sanno che la fede si richiede per l'istituzione di rozzi popoli che denno esser governati, e la dimostrazione per gli contemplativi che sanno governar sé ed altri. (*De l'infinito* 387)

Carefully examined, however, this statement amounts to an admission of an anti-Catholic stand since he puts the truth of the philosopher on an intellectual plane much higher than the truth of any revealed religion. To mitigate his stance, he stated "gli non men dotti

che religiosi teologi giamai han pregiudicato alla libertà de filosofi" (*De l'infinito* 387).⁷

A further indication of Bruno's thought on elements common to all religions can be found in his attitude toward the reconciliation of humanistic philosophy and Christian revelations of faith:

la medesima Scrittura è in mano di giudei, cristiani e mahumetisti, sette tanto differenti e contrarie, che ne parturiscono altre innumerabili contrariissime e differentissime; le quali tutte vi san trovare quel proposito che gli piace e meglio gli vien comodo: non solo il proposito diverso e differente, ma ancor tutto il contrario, facendo di un sí un non, e di un non un sí, come, verbigrazia, in certi passi, dove dicono che Dio parla per ironia. (*La cena* 126)

In this significant passage, Bruno defends religious toleration and, consequently, the freedom of the philosopher. While the Church must of necessity be dogmatic, scholars must remain unencumbered by matters of religious observance. A philosopher must be allowed the freedom to investigate freely without fear of civil or religious retribution since "dalla censura di onorati spiriti, veri religiosi, ed anco naturalmente uomini da bene, amici della civile conversazione e buone dottrine non si de' temere" (*La cena* 126). Historical circumstances were the only conditioning element in the choice of a philosophy which "piú comoda-e altamente effettua la perfezion de l'intelletto umano, ed è piú corrispondente alla verità della natura" (*De la causa* 277).

Having concluded that Copernicus had not fully realized the consequences of his discovery, Bruno arrived at his new mission as *magus*: to comprehend the entire meaning of Copernicus's discovery. Copernicus had translated the language of nature into mathematical signs, but he was like the *indovino* "che vedeva, ma non intendeva" when compared to the "cieco, ma divino interprete" (*La cena* 27). Discussing this passage, Alfonso Ingegno concluded that Copernicus was to be identified with Manto and Bruno himself with Tiresia. In addition, Ingegno assigns Bruno a most significant role:

In tal modo la missione del Bruno acquista una dimensione religiosa precisa ed egli può presentarsi come colui che distribuisce la vera cena, quella cena beatifica di cui parlava a conclusione dello *Spaccio*, e lo fa nel giorno delle Ceneri . . . ; la sua *Cena* riguarda un futuro che si apre solo riconoscendo tutta la vacuità e gli errori del passato. (42)

The Brunonian magus thus acquires the precise religious mission of one who distributes the true beatific supper announced in the conclu-

sion of the *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*; and if he is the only one who can distribute that beatific supper, Bruno becomes as important as Christ. To summarize the reasoning of Ingegno: if one takes literally the title of the work "Spaccio" and believes that the new worlds Bruno discusses refer not to the discoveries of the navigators but to the work of Copernicus as a blind instrument of divine will, it is Bruno himself who will reveal the hidden meaning of the word. It is Bruno who identifies for the first time the real *bestia triumphans* of the Apocalypse, and it is he who can be the instrument of her "spaccio."⁸

In the Brunonian imagination human thought always presses toward total conceptions and dares to mediate between the terrestrial and the divine. Thus, outward signs inform him of new portents:

La rivoluzion dunque, ed anno grande del mondo, è quel spacio di tempo in cui da abiti ed effetti diversissimi per gli opposti mezzi e contrarii si ritorna al medesimo: come veggiamo ne gli anni particolari, qual è quello del sole, dove il principio d'una disposizione contraria è fine de l'altra, ed il fine di questa è principio di quella. Però ora che siamo stati nella feccia delle scienze, che hanno parturita la feccia delle opinioni, le quali son causa della feccia de gli costumi ed opre, possiamo certo aspettare de ritornare a miglior stati. (*Eroici furori* 1072-73)

The flavor of Hermeticism exuding from the text tells us that Bruno's intentions were far from ending the confusion among competing theories of the universe. On the contrary, he was struck by the confident notion that he was ready to take the fatal step forward and become the precursor of truth who holds the true knowledge of "divine things."⁹ The same attitude is also revealed in the polemicizing of the character Filoteo against the purely passive behavior of the modern clergy:

A questi tempi la massima parte di sacerdoti son tali, che son spreggiati essi, e per essi son spreggiate le leggi divine; son tali quasi tutti quei che veggiamo filosofi, che essi son vilipesi, e per essi le scienze vegnono vilipese. (*De la causa* 203)

In the modern approach Bruno sees the decadence of the spirit of religion, or rather, of the faith in it. This cannot be said, however, of the followers of ancient knowledge since they were "ne la contemplazione giudiziosi, ne la divinazione singolari, ne la magia miracolosi, ne le superstizioni providi, ne le leggi osservanti, ne la moralità irreprensibili, ne la teologia divini, in tutti effetti eroici" (*La cena* 44). Contrary to Ficino's suggestion that the Hermetic texts were forerun-

ners of the coming of Christianity, the revaluation of the magic called for by Bruno was not a polemical pendant but a vindication of the true spirit of ancient religion. As John Scarborough has pointed out, a theological showdown was inevitable: "Sooner or later, the Church would take notice, even though Bruno firmly believed his new religion could be encompassed within a Catholic framework" (21).

The radical novelty brought by Bruno to the new account of the solar system was the historicizing of the ancient practices of magic. The confrontation between the ancient magic and Christian beliefs confirms Stephen McKnight's conclusion that "Bruno was condemned for his belief that the Egyptian religion was the highest religion given by God, reversing the view of Ficino and others that the ancient theology pointed the way to the fuller revelation of Christianity" (122). The confrontation also explains why Bruno harbored doubts about the civic and religious value of Christianity in contrast to a religion in which people could communicate directly with the gods. He made no secret of his desire to return to that divinity "che si trova in tutte le cose, la quale, come in modi innumerabili si diffonde e comunica" (*Spaccio* 781). That the *Hermetica*—where the Egyptian was considered a positive model of civilization—was in his time held in such extraordinary esteem only strengthened Bruno's convictions. As Fulvio Papi writes,

il mito di quella civiltà antichissima gli appare come l'espressione storica nella quale più efficacemente la religione si mondanizzava e agiva per il bene comune, affrancata dalle degenerazioni teologiche e dottrinali che sono la causa di sette, divisioni che compromettono la pace civile e provocano la disobbedienza politica. (151–52)

For Bruno, a return to Hermetic magical religion was the cure for the wars, persecutions, the social miseries of contemporary Europe, and certainly an improvement over the bloody feuds of Western Christendom.

By following this path Bruno was far removed from the harmless Christian Hermeticism of Ficino. Unfortunately, there was no historical precedent for the concept of freedom of inquiry that he sought. In a world dominated by Roman Catholicism, intellectuals might hold etherodox views in private, but could not expound them in books or lecture halls without risk. The kind of freedom of expression Bruno espoused was unthinkable among the bitter religious rivalries of the time. And it was not the only point of departure in his significant break from acceptable theology. On that fateful day when he—Prometheus come again—stood amidst the burning flames with his arms crossed and his eyes open, there was hardly a single issue with which he had not aroused "cannibalistic instincts" in his audiences

(Westman 25). He knew that in his unending quest for spiritual enlightenment he was destined to clash with a religious tyranny that had destroyed the freedom of the philosopher and, to his mind, freedom was essential to true civilization. Thus viewed, we can better understand Couliano's comment on the meaning of Bruno's death, a death which still haunts the conscience of Italian and European intellectuals:

If he sought to be the apostle of a new religion, Bruno no doubt accomplished that wish. . . . The place where Bruno's statue now stands . . . , the site of his stake, has remained by tradition the rendezvous of the anarchists of Rome. Unfortunately, all those who transformed him into the champion of their social and political cause misunderstood his work and his personality, only recalling his martyrdom in the struggle against the Church. Bruno, indeed, has become the prophet of a religion of which he would never have approved, whose ideals were, on the contrary, diametrically opposed to his own. He, the most anti-democratic of thinkers, winds up a symbol of democracy! (78)

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the wielders of power were in their element. If we can avoid thinking of magic and its practices in dismissive terms, we will see that the Church was fighting an enemy that it feared might still win. The exhausting demands made on the human spirit by the Inquisition afforded free thinkers like Bruno few options. There could be but one result of his seeming heresies. The Church fought fire with fire. The fire that consumed Bruno's body was to have ended his baleful influence. Instead, his reputation has risen Phoenix-like from the flames.

GIUSEPPE CANDELA
Arizona State University

NOTE

¹All quotations from Bruno's works are from the edition of the *Dialoghi italiani* by Giovanni Aquilecchia.

²According to Garin, magic was a demonic temptation in the Medieval universe. During the Renaissance "it assumed a new garb and began to occupy the minds of all great scientists and thinkers" (*Science and Civic Life* 147).

³See, for instance, the discussion in Burke 95-100.

⁴Aquilecchia believes that, in some ways, Bruno anticipates Galileo and Kepler and, at the end, "approda a una concezione originale dell'universo che per molti rispetti trova analogia con quella elaborata scientificamente nei secoli seguenti" (37).

⁵The enthusiasm exuding from Bruno's works led Frances Yates to state that he openly preached a religious reformation based on Egyptian magic (*Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*).

⁶A most significant indication of the orientation given by Bruno to his defense can be found in Vincenzo Spampanato: "La materia de tutti questi libri, parlando in generale, è materia filosofica . . . e credo che in essi non si ritrova cosa per la quale possa esser giudicato, che de professo più tosto voglia impugnar la religione che essaltar la filosofia, quantonque molte cose impie fondate nel lume mio naturale possa aver esplicato" (9).

⁷Between the sacred texts and heliocentrism he sees no conflict because "the Scriptures deal with moral law for the masses, not with natural philosophy" (McKnight 119).

⁸Ingegno points to the timing of the Copernican theory and the works of Bruno himself, wondering if the Nolan was sufficiently aware of the coincidence of his work and the appearance of the Antichrist, declared born somewhere in Europe by some writers.

⁹See, for instance, the discussion in Ciliberto 64–65.

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