

Immanent transcendence in a postfoundational religion: an impossible dream?

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Introduction

Is it possible to find immanent transcendence in a postfoundational religion? This paper argues that there are good reasons for seriously exploring the option of a Christian theology which is based upon this world alone. I am going to clarify the concepts of foundationalism, transcendence and post-foundationalism as they are applied to the study of the Christian religion as well as supply a broad review of the literature on the topic of this article. Thereafter I will make some remarks on human beings as essentially in search of meaning. The distinction between two types of discourse, *mythos* and *logos*, is explained next. This is of paramount importance, as traditional Christian theology regards the Bible as *logos* (unquestionable truths) and not as *mythos* (symbolic language used to talk about life's basic questions).

The following section deals specifically with problems arising when the Bible is read as *logos* and not as *mythos*. This affects the status of doctrines deduced from the Bible. The stages of faith people go through and which undermine a literalistic reading of the Bible are discussed next. Finally, an outline of a liberal theology is supplied, based upon a secular understanding of reality, as well as reading strategies which are willing to deconstruct the Biblical texts. It is concluded that such a Christianity is not an impossible dream.

Foundationalism and transcendence

Foundationalism is an epistemological theory about how beliefs, expressed as propositions, are justified.¹ Foundationalists argue that beliefs are justified in two ways: inferential (that is, beliefs deduced from others) and non-inferential (that is, beliefs that are self-evident, are not deduced from others and are, therefore, foundational). Such beliefs have to be either incorrigible (that is, they cannot be 'corrected', for example belief in one's own existence), or self-evident (for example, the mathematical truth that $1+1=2$, or the logical principle of non-contradiction).² The origins of foundationalism go back to Plato, who argued that beliefs founded on opinions are inferior to those founded on pure reason.³

Broadly speaking, traditional theologians argue that the Protestant religion is based on a set of foundational beliefs, like the following.⁴

- There exists a supernatural world outside of this sensory world.
- God exists as a person in this supernatural reality.
- God is the creator of everything.
- God revealed Godself in the Bible.
- Human beings have an immortal soul.
- God intervenes on behalf of the faithful through miracles.
- History is unfolding according to God's intelligent design in a fairly determinist fashion.
- The pattern of history is broadly that of the Creation, the Fall, the Incarnation of Jesus, Redemption by Jesus, the Return of Jesus and the Final Judgement.
- The Bible contains the answers to life's ultimate questions, like where we come from, where we are going, how we should behave and why we are here.

¹ See Conee & Feldman (2004), especially chapter 8 (Feldman 2004), for a detailed discussion of foundationalism.

² In symbolic logic this is expressed as $\sim (P \wedge \sim P)$, "P and non-P is not possible."

³ See especially Plato, *Republic* (504a-541b), the last part of Book VI and the whole of Book VII (the analogy of the line and the allegory of the cave).

⁴ Any traditional confession of faith, like the Heidelberg Catechism, would make reference to these basic propositions (see, e.g., Bierma et al. 2005). Mawson (2005:1-109) reduces foundational beliefs about God to the notion that God is a personal being, transcendent, immanent, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, perfectly free, perfectly good, and necessary; and non essentially creator of the world and of value; revealer of Godself; and offerer of everlasting life.

- The Old Testament stands to the New Testament in a prophecy-fulfilment schema.
- Prayer is effective in communicating with God.

A recent spate of books has attacked religion in general and Christianity specifically for propagating beliefs for which no sufficient evidence is presented⁵. In response to this critique, and taking these arguments deadly seriously, a postfoundationalist approach to religion agrees to reject any form of revealed or scriptural authority for specific actions or beliefs. It argues, on the contrary, for a supporting rationale.

DZ Phillips⁶ contends that religious mystery is not necessary equivalent to an epistemological mystery. One has to understand that religious language is a discourse reflecting on the mystery of human life as it is lived. Similarly, Karen Armstrong⁷ treats the question of religious truth as relative to two types of discourse, *mythos* and *logos*. She contends that religious talk is *mythos*, that is, a symbolic way to talk about physical reality.

The concept of a transcendent reality, as a dimension in which this sensory reality is grounded and which does not exhibit a physical existence, is done away with. Don Cupitt⁸, for example, formulates his new religious creed (article 3) as: “True religion is pure solar affirmation of life, in full acknowledgement of its utter gratuitousness, its contingency, its transience, and even its nothingness.” For him, true religion does not appeal to supernatural reality, beings or forces at all. It is based upon the realisation that we are on our own,⁹ that life is essentially meaningless and that we find our own meaning.

Humans beings as in search of meaning

Mario Simmel introduces his novel, *Mich wundert, dass ich so fröhlich bin*, with the following words:¹⁰

*Ich bin, ich weiss nicht wer.
Ich komme, ich weiss nicht woher.
Ich gehe, ich weiss nicht wohin.
Mich wundert, dass ich so fröhlich bin.*

I am, I don't know who.
I come, I don't know whence.
I go, I don't know whither.
I am amazed that I am so happy!

Simmel's novel, written against the chaos and disruption of the Second World War in Berlin, finds that these words express a tenet of human beings which assists us to survive even the direst of circumstances. According to Don Cupitt,¹¹ our human existence is basically meaningless. He expresses it as temporality, contingency and finitude. This means that we are caught up in time (everything happens only once and there are no retakes); we are controlled by chance (any project we undertake is vulnerable and so we can never get complete control of our own lives; there is no inherent theodicy); and we can die at any time (so it is very difficult to make long-term plans).

Religion can be described as the sum total of our attempts to come to terms with the basic nihilism of our existence as it supplies answers to our basic questions about life: who we are, where we come from, where we are going, and how we should live to be happy. Karen Armstrong¹² states that human beings are essentially meaning-seeking, and unless we find “some pattern or significance in our lives, we very easily fall into despair”. To address this despair we can make use of two types of discourse, *mythos* and *logos*.

⁵ See, for example, Harris (2004); Dawkins (2006); Harris (2007); Hitchens (2007); Onfray (2007).

⁶ Phillips (1995).

⁷ Armstrong (2001; 2009).

⁸ Cupitt (2006:3).

⁹ For a similar view of religion, see, for example, Holloway (1999) and Spong (2007, 2009).

¹⁰ Simmel (1949). In an interview, he cited its origin as coming from a German monastery. I have been informed by some German acquaintances that these words actually stem from Angelus Silesius, the 17th century German religious poet and mystic, from his book *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* (1675).

¹¹ These views were expressed in an interview (Gordon & Wilkinson, 2008:50).

¹² Armstrong (2007:1).

Mythos and logos

One of the most famous hypothetical sentences the linguist Noam Chomsky created was: 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'.¹³ He did it to demonstrate that this is not a well-formed sentence. Although on the level of grammar and syntax the sentence is acceptable, it does not make any sense semantically, due to the rules of selection restriction. The noun *idea* for example cannot be combined with an adjective denoting colour, for the noun is abstract and not concrete. Only concrete things can have colour. *Idea* cannot be used with a verb like *sleep*, because this noun has the semantic feature of being inanimate, and, of course, we accept that lifeless things cannot sleep.

An interesting debate followed of which the gist of the general reply was that this sentence is meaningful if a context is supplied which allows the sentence to be interpreted in a figurative sense (e.g. as 'insipid immature ideas are in a state of potential explosiveness').¹⁴ This debate reminds one of the distinction between *mythos* and *logos* drawn by the ancient Greeks,¹⁵ the first being a story involving supernatural characters, whilst the second has to do with scientific discourse explaining phenomena not from another heavenly realm, but from reality itself.

Hesiod¹⁶ and Homer¹⁷ in the ninth century BCE supply excellent examples of *mythoi*. Departing from the well-known three-storeyed world vision, they collected and wrote stories attempting to explain or pattern reality in terms of supernatural realities called heaven (or Olympus) and Hades (or the underworld). Characters from these supernatural realms, gods and heroes,¹⁸ interact with ordinary human beings and are responsible for what happens on earth.

From around 650 BCE a fundamental change in world vision took place: the world was now also explained as *logos*, from itself, as is evident in the pre-Socratic philosophers.¹⁹ Anaximander (610-546 BCE), for example, declared that human beings developed from fish.²⁰ In the only fragment we have of his writings,²¹ Anaximander states that death is a return to the elements from which the body originated: "From which elements the origins of things are, so also their destruction happens according to the law of necessity."²²

The Bible read as logos

The Bible supplying a master narrative

The Bible reflects various mythologies, or patternings of reality.²³ Christianity systemised it into a master narrative²⁴ which reads more or less as follows: God as the almighty creator of heaven and earth inspired various authors to write down his words which were collected into the Bible. The Bible, collected as a reference system with book titles, chapter numbers and verses, can therefore be consulted and supplies the answer to life's basic questions. The question of where we come from is answered in the creation story of Genesis. The question of how we should behave is supplied mainly in the Decalogue, as well as the household codes²⁵ of the New Testament (prescribing the patriarchal household as the God-given pattern). God intervenes through miracles on behalf of the faithful and in response to prayer. The question of who we are is answered with the creation story: we consist of a body and soul; and further developed in the doctrine of the Fall of Humankind. To cancel out the Fall, God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins and to be resurrected for our justification. He will return on the clouds and judge the living and the dead, destining them for heaven or hell. Time is divided into that of prophecy (Old Testament) and fulfilment (New Testament).

¹³ Chomsky (1957:15). See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colorless_green_ideas_sleep_furiously for an interesting discussion of the debates which followed.

¹⁴ See for example, the discussion of Oller (1972).

¹⁵ E.g. Plato *Protagoras* 320c2-7.

¹⁶ See Hesiod's works, *Erga kai Hēmerai* (*Works and Days*), as well as his *Theogonia* (*Origins of the Gods*).

¹⁷ See Homer's epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

¹⁸ In many cases these were personifications of natural processes. Zeus, for example, was regarded as the god of thunder and lightning, and therefore also as the god of justice. Personification seems to be a very basic process which we use to interpret reality.

¹⁹ Kirk *et al.* (1983).

²⁰ According to Censorinus, *De Die Natali* (IV, 7).

²¹ Quoted by Simplicius, *Phys.* 24.13.

²² My own translation for *ex hōn de hē genesis esti tois ousi, kai tēn pthoran eis tauta ginesthai kata to chreōn*.

²³ For a more detailed discussion, see Armstrong (2007).

²⁴ See the first section of this article on Christianity's foundational beliefs.

²⁵ See, most notably, 1 Timothy 2:8-15, Ephesians 5:18-6:9, Colossians 3:1-4:6, Titus 2:1-10, and 1 Peter 2:11-3:22. It should be clear that these codes institutionalise authoritarianism. The fact that instances of child abuse committed by church officials remained unreported for so long demonstrates the dangers of teaching that authority should not be questioned.

The Bible promoting intolerance

The history of the church is littered with debates and struggles based upon the premises that the scriptures be read as *logos*, not as *mythos*, that is, as literally true and not true on a figurative level. A good example is that of Michael Servetus.²⁶ He was burnt at the stake in Geneva on 27 October 1553 with the approval of Calvin for denying the Trinity. Calvin differed from Servetus on the placement of one adjective in the following proposition:

Jesus is the eternal Son of God (Calvin).

Jesus is the Son of the eternal God (Servetus).

Calvin had green wood used during the execution to make Servetus's death slower and more painful. These examples can be multiplied from the persecution of Galileo Galilei in the seventeenth century for his heliocentric world vision through to the current intolerance from, especially, the side of evangelical Christians of the theory of evolution. The Christian religion exhibits a history of opposing freedom of speech and free intellectual inquiry.

The Bible as dubious source of moral behaviour

Literalist readings of the Bible leads to various moral problems.²⁷ The mythical view that nature was created to be ruled over and used by human beings (Genesis 1) is partly responsible for the current destruction of our environment. Some churches still regard birth control as a sin (based upon Genesis 38:8–10) and this leads to overpopulation. Passages like 1 Timothy 2:12 gave rise to a long tradition of misogyny in the Church which led to the burning of witches.²⁸ Slavery was defended on the basis of texts like Titus 2:9, apartheid with reference to Acts 17:26, and 'Palestine for the Jews' with texts like Genesis 15:18–21.

The Bible seems to condone events like genocide (Deuteronomy 20), selling one's daughter off as a sex slave to cover one's debt (Exodus 21:7–11), religious intolerance leading to the execution of heretics (2 Kings 23:20–25); human sacrifice (Judges 11:29–40); and discrimination against the physically challenged (Leviticus 21:17–23). It is therefore impossible to accept the Bible any longer as the ultimate source of moral behaviour.

The myth of Jesus prophesied in the Old Testament

Biblical scholarship has also proven decisively that there are no prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament, contrary to what is taught in the New Testament. Peter, for example, in his speech on Pentecost (Acts 2:33–34) quotes Psalm 110 as proof that God spoke to Jesus in heaven promising that Jesus would ascend to heaven until his return to judge his enemies. The King James Version, indeed, translates it as such: "The LORD [i.e. God] said unto my Lord [i.e. Jesus Christ], sit thou on my right hand until I make thy foes thy footstool." It is, in fact, an enthronement psalm and should be interpreted as Yahweh saying to the new king that he should serve him, and, in return, his enemies will be defeated!

The Bible as the source of religious dualisms

The books of the Bible are all based upon the pre-modern three-storeyed view of the world. The essence of *mythos* is to anchor this sensory world in supernatural realms (heaven and the underworld). Therefore, typical of the Bible would be dualisms like that between this world and the supernatural world, body and soul, and this life and the afterlife. There seems to be no rational foundation for these viewpoints.

The traditional Christian dichotomy between body and soul is not accepted any more. Evolutionary biologists state that common ancestors exist for human beings, plants and animals. The implication is clear: if we share an ancestry with other primates, no stage can be indicated during which the 'soul' was added during the process of evolution. There is no credible evidence for a soul existing independently of the body. Cognitive neuroscientists are discovering that there exist physical correlates between our brain structures and our genes on the one hand, and feelings like empathy, disgust and joy

²⁶ See Hillar & Allen (2002) for the full story.

²⁷ See Spong (2005) for the devastating effect these still have on culture.

²⁸ The book, *The hammer of the witches*, was written as a guide in the persecution of women. See Mackay (2006).

– not only in people, but in animals as well.²⁹ Research which ‘proves’ communication with the dead has been exposed as downright fraudulent.³⁰

The editorial of the journal *Nature*³¹ has the headline: “With all deference to the sensibilities of religious people, the idea that man was created in the image of God can surely be put aside” – in other words, it is nothing but superstition.

The same holds true for the dualisms between this life and the hereafter, as well as for mythological entities like heaven and hell. There is no evidence to regard them as ontological realities.

Biblical doctrines do not have a rational basis

The doctrine of an almighty theistic creator God

Already in the sixth century BCE, the Greek poet and philosopher, Xenophanes, (570 to 478 BCE), levelled a scathing attack against popular conceptions of the gods of his time. His most significant criticism, a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, was that mortals imagine their gods to be like themselves:

Mortals suppose that the gods are born and have clothes and voices and shapes like their own.³²

The Ethiopians consider the gods flat-nosed and black; the Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired.³³

In his discussion of Xenophanes, Fairbanks (1889:65–85) argues that Xenophanes comes very close to the concept of *pantheism*. Nothing meaningful can be known about the divine. What is, always existed and was not derived from any prior principle. Anthropomorphic gods, certainly, do not exist and are figments of the human imagination.

Bertrand Russell's collection of essays *Why I am not a Christian* was first published in 1957. In 2005 it was reprinted and the book received a substantial audience. In chapter twelve, “The existence of God – a debate between Bertrand Russell and Father FC Copleston, SJ”, Russell describes himself as an agnostic – that the non-existence of God cannot be proven, but that the worship of such a God does not make any contribution to morals, ethics and cannot act as a cure for our troubles.

The Cambridge philosopher of religion, Don Cupitt, also announced the death of the theist (personal) God especially in two books, *Taking leave of God* (1980, reprinted in 2001), and *After God: the future of religion* (1997). He redefines God as:³⁴

... the mythical embodiment of all that one is concerned with in the spiritual life. God is the religious demand and ideal, the pearl of great price and the enshriner of values. He is needed – but as a myth.

“The God of Christians is love”, taking human form in Jesus (Cupitt 1997:127). For Cupitt, therefore, the concept of God, redefined as a super, overarching symbol for all that is good, exemplified in the work and person of Jesus, is the only viable way forward for religion.

Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist and professed atheist, however, has no need for God. He defines the anthropomorphic (also called ‘theist’) notion of God as:

... a person, who listens to your thoughts, listens to your prayers, forgive your sins, knows what you're thinking, knows what you're doing, punishes you if you do wrong
...³⁵

We could add to this definition, a God who is entirely comprehensible to our minds, created the cosmos and still intervenes from time to time in its workings.

In her most recent book, Karen Armstrong makes *The case for God*. Departing from the ancient distinction between *mythos* and *logos*,³⁶ she argues that we should understand that God-talk, or theology, is part and parcel of the discourse of *mythos* and not of *logos*. Human beings need scientific

²⁹ For a digestible introduction to the evolutionary development of the human mind, see Coyne (2009:207–240).

³⁰ See, e.g., Nickel (2009).

³¹ *Nature* 447, 753 (14 June 2007).

³² Fragment 3, Fairbanks (1889:70).

³³ Fragment 4, Fairbanks (1889:70).

³⁴ Cupitt (1980:180).

³⁵ Gordon & Wilkinson (2008:120).

³⁶ See especially, Armstrong (2009:1–10).

discourse (*logos*) to control their environment (to make weapons; draw maps; organise society). However, it is the discourse type of *mythos* which helps us to explore matters like our own personal demons, grief and suffering, our own mortality, the meaning of life, and, ultimately, a *modus vivendi*. She concludes her inquiry with this question: "And how best can we move beyond pre-modern theism into a perception of 'God' that truly speaks to all the complex realities and needs of our time?"³⁷ She points in the direction of God as a symbol for what human beings yearn for: "absolute beauty, peace, justice and selfless love".³⁸

Edward Wilson, a biologist, propagates the idea of consilience, the synthesis of knowledge from different specialised fields of research.³⁹

... the existence of a biological God, one who directs organic evolution and intervenes in human affairs (as envisioned by theism) is increasingly contravened by biology and the brain sciences.

From the side of philosophy, science and theology, therefore, the traditional theist concept of God has increasingly come under fire, whilst new concepts of God are being explored.⁴⁰

The doctrine of an intervening God who reacts to prayer

The traditional view that God intervenes in reaction to the prayer of the faithful has also been decisively undermined. Hamilton & Leeman (2008) unconditionally accept the traditional propositions of prayer:

People pray to God because they believe that he is mighty to save, able to change the course of events, and willing to respond to the prayers of his people.

On the other hand, scientific research seems to indicate the exact opposite. The John Templeton Foundation was established in 1987 to support a broad range of activities aimed at finding common ground between science and religion.⁴¹ A few years ago, the foundation granted \$2.4m to a group of researchers headed by Dr. Herbert Benson⁴² to study⁴³ the effect of intercessory prayer on the recovery of 1 802 patients who received coronary bypass surgery. Patients at six hospitals in the USA were randomly assigned to one of three groups: 604 received intercessory prayer after being informed that they might or might not receive prayer; 597 did not receive intercessory prayer, also after being informed that they might or might not receive prayer; and 601 received intercessory prayer after being informed they would receive prayer.

Intercessory prayer was provided for 14 days, starting the night before surgery by the congregations of three churches in Minnesota, Massachusetts and Missouri. The primary outcome was the presence of any complication within 30 days of surgery. Secondary outcomes were any major event and mortality. According to the results, there was no difference between those patients who received prayers and those who did not. However, those who knew that they received intercessory prayer developed more complications.⁴⁴

This research shows that the proposition of miraculous intervention by God in response to prayer by the faithful is not supported by facts. Believers who object that God should not be 'tempted' in this way conveniently forget that a very similar prayer experiment is described in 1 Kings 18:16–45, where the prophet Elijah challenges the prophets of the fertility God, Baal, to a prayer contest. The results of this experiment vindicate Elijah when God answers his prayer immediately, and the prophets of Baal are slaughtered. Of course, in this case, no scientific controls were built into the exercise.

Mention should be made here of a similar study at Columbia University in the USA, and published in 2001.⁴⁵ Infertile women were divided into two groups, one who were prayed for by

³⁷ Armstrong (2009:303).

³⁸ Armstrong (2009:302).

³⁹ Wilson (1998:241).

⁴⁰ See, further, Altizer (2006); Caputo et al (2007); and Taylor (2007).

⁴¹ Its website address is <http://www.templeton.org/>. Its late founder was a dedicated fundamentalist Christian, who in his later years became attracted to pantheism. His son, who now directs the foundation, is an evangelical.

⁴² Benson et al (2006).

⁴³ A similar but cruder experiment is found in 1 Kings 18:16–45 where the prophet Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a prayer contest.

⁴⁴ Probably because the knowledge increased their stress levels: they suffered from "performance anxiety", thinking their recovery would make a case for God.

⁴⁵ Cha et al (2001).

Christian prayer groups, and the other who did not have people praying for them. The study, boasting a virtually foolproof scientific methodology, concluded that prayer resulted in twice as many pregnancies among those prayed for than among those not prayed for. However, it later transpired that the study was riddled with error and fraud. One of its authors is on his way to federal prison for fraud and conspiracy.⁴⁶

The doctrine of an intervening God who performs miracles

Regarding the miracle stories in the Bible, Günther Bornkamm⁴⁷ and Ernst Käsemann⁴⁸ argued that they should be read as story, not as history; as fiction, not as fact. In the words of Käsemann:

Over few subjects has there been such a bitter battle among the New Testament scholars of the last two centuries as over the miracle stories of the Gospels ... We may say today that the battle is over, not perhaps as yet in the arena of church life, but certainly in the field of theological science. It has ended in the defeat of the concept of miracle which has been traditional in the church.⁴⁹

Karen Armstrong has shown that the literal reading of the Bible is a fairly recent development amongst fundamentalist Christians and dates this to about the end of the 19th century.⁵⁰ She demonstrates that the scriptures of both the Old and New Testament in its history were interpreted through various non-literal reading strategies like allegory and typology.

We have to include here the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Gerd Lüdemann⁵¹ demonstrates that the sources for the story are in contradiction and shows the typical features of a myth. Most recently Dag Øistein Endsjø⁵² demonstrated that the success of early Christianity was, in part, due to the fact that its ideas of a bodily resurrection resonated with Greco-Roman popular religion. In 2002 I argued that the story of Jesus's resurrection was the result of Jesus being interpreted into the typical Greek pattern of the hero (who was supposed to have had a virgin birth, went on a journey, died, descended to Hades, was resurrected and ascended into heaven).⁵³ The implication should be clear: resurrection narratives should be read as *mythoi*. Voltaire's well-known words come to mind:⁵⁴ "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

The doctrine of divine inspiration

The proposition that the Bible is God's revelation is also becoming untenable. It is told that late one night at an asylum for the insane, an inmate broke the silence with, "I am Napoleon! You must do what I say." Another one shouted, "How do you know?" The first inmate bellowed, "God told me so!" A voice from another room cried, "No, I did not!" This story illustrates the impossibility of discerning which of a variety of religions is right when claiming to be the voice of God. In 1 Chronicles 21:1 it is said that the Devil prodded King David to hold a census, while in 2 Samuel 24:1, describing the same incident, it is said that it was God. According to Matthew 27:9–10, Judas committed suicide. According to Acts 1:18 God killed him. These contradictions in the Bible itself concern not only events, but also theologies (God viewed as a tribal God, or as the God of all humanity), and extend to extra-biblical claims of divine authority assigned to other books, like the Qur'an.

Barth Ehrman, therefore, reasonably concludes:⁵⁵

It would be impossible, I should think, to argue that the Bible is a unified whole, inerrant in all its parts, inspired by God in every way. It can't be that. There are too many divergences, discrepancies, contradictions ... God did not write the Bible, people did ... But they were not inspired in the sense that God somehow guided them to write what they wrote.

⁴⁶ See Flamm (2009) for a discussion of the whole debacle.

⁴⁷ Bornkamm (1959)

⁴⁸ Käsemann (1964)

⁴⁹ Käsemann (1964:48).

⁵⁰ Armstrong (2007:197-201)

⁵¹ Lüdemann (2004).

⁵² Endsjø (2009).

⁵³ Wolmarans (2002:196-224).

⁵⁴ Quote accessed on the 16th March 2010 at <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/26816.html>.

⁵⁵ Ehrman (2009:279).

The doctrine of the Fall

Brokenness and evil in this world is traditionally explained as having its cause in the disobedience of Adam and Eve in paradise, which gave rise to their expulsion. This doctrine of the Fall lies at the basis of sickness, death and labour. However, the theory of evolution has proven that there never was such a paradisiacal period in the history of humankind.⁵⁶ In fact, the doctrine of humankind's fallen condition can lead to excessive feelings of guilt and their manipulation by the unscrupulous to control people's minds and purses.

The doctrine of the virgin birth

In 1 Thessalonians 4:4, Paul says that, to avoid fornication, every man should acquire his own *skeuos* (vessel/container), referring to a wife. The same metaphor is also found in 1 Peter 3:7, where the expression: "weaker vessel, the female one" is used. What this vessel is to contain, is the male's seed. According to Luke 1:24, the pregnancy of Elizabeth is explained as her womb 'accepting' seed. Hebrews 11:11 refers to Sarah's pregnancy as the *katabolê spermatos* 'sowing/putting down of seed'.

Implicit in the metaphor of the woman as a vessel is a deficient understanding of the role of the female in the process of procreation. According to Aristotle,⁵⁷ the female supplies the 'field' in which the male seed is planted, and does not make any significant contribution to the child's nature. The female is a mutilated or deficient male.⁵⁸ This reflects the 'flower pot theory' of procreation. The only contribution of the female is to supply a passive 'field' in which the seed planted by the male can grow. The function of the woman, therefore, was mainly to provide a container for the male seed. She did not add to the substance of new life.

This pre-modern understanding of reproduction played a role in the creation of various myths of virgin births in antiquity. To assert divine origins of important males, the human father had to be taken out of the equation and replaced by a divine agent, as in the cases of Dionysus and Hercules. It was only in the 18th century that it became understood that females provide an egg cell which contributes exactly fifty percent of the genetic make-up of a baby. The idea of the virgin birth (Matthew 1:23) is therefore based upon a misogynistic view of the female.

The New Testament does not stop here. This little honour bestowed on the female as the carrier of the seed, the bearer of life, is reversed. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul, rewriting the second creation story of Genesis 2:6–23, contends that it was actually the male that gave birth to the female. The female was extracted from the male. From the first creation story of Genesis 1:26, he takes the idea that it was only the male who was created in God's image. Men, therefore, should go about without head coverings, for they reflect God's image. Women should cover up, because they reflect her husband's image. This idea is also found in 2 Corinthians 3:13, where the face of Moses is said to have reflected the glory of God. For this reason males reveal the glory of God with uncovered faces (2 Corinthians 3:18). Because the female was created from the male, she is two steps from God and therefore does not replicate something unseen (1 Corinthians 11:7). In fact, she reflects the glory of the man, who is visible on earth; therefore she should be veiled. She was also created for the sake of the male and should therefore wear a veil.

This myth of the reversed order (the male giving birth to the female), supplies the underpinning of Paul's argument in 1 Timothy 2:13–14 why women should not teach but listen. Adam was created first, and Eve, a lesser being, was deceived, not Adam. Therefore a male has a better chance of delivering the correct teachings.

This negative view of the female's procreative abilities resulted in the development of the notion of rebirth. In 1 Peter 1:23 the word of God is the seed planted in the mind that leads to rebirth. "You have been born again of seed which is immortal." John 3 also reflects the notion that this spiritual rebirth is of much higher value than natural birth. This formed the basis of asceticism, based upon contempt for women and sex.

The doctrine of redemptive violence

On a moral level there are a number of criticisms against Christianity's foundational truths. The Christian mantra, for example, that "Christ died for our sins" is based upon the idea of redemptive

⁵⁶ See Coyne (2009) for the different periods during which life on earth evolved.

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *De generatio animalium*, I.728a.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *De generatio animalium*, I.737a.

violence. It raises the question of what type of God would have his own son sacrificed to make him feel better about the sins of others. For good reason, this can be called a doctrine of divine child abuse.

The doctrine of Christianity's uniqueness

Claims that Christianity is the only true religion are also being frowned upon for the obvious reason that this is not provable. The fact that Christians argue among themselves about who owns the absolute truth, not to mention their disputes with other religions, is enough proof that there exist no reasonable grounds for viewing only one religion as correct.

Stages of faith

In the book of Hebrews (5:12–13) two stages of faith are distinguished, the milk phase and the solid foods phase. In the first part of Chapter 6 the infant stage is associated with doctrines like repentance, baptism, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement. The second or adult phase is associated with a moral life of perfection.

The theologian and developmental psychologist, James Fowler⁵⁹ did research on the stages of faith through which people progress. He distinguishes seven phases:⁶⁰ (i) the undifferentiated proto-faith of the toddler; (ii) the intuitive-projective phase of children between the ages of three and six, carried by fantasy and stories; (iii) the mythical-literal phase of the primary school child, based upon reciprocity (I will be good in order to be rewarded); (iv) the synthetic-conventional phase of the secondary school child (the child's faith is in conformity with that of others and authority is accepted uncritically). In my own experience of popular faith in South Africa, the majority of the faithful fall in the category of phases three and four; (v) the individuating-reflective stage of the thirties and forties when all sources of external authority are questioned as faith enters a critical phase and some people become agnostics; (vi) the stage of conjunctive faith developing in the middle years in which reason and faith are integrated, a broader tolerance of other faith systems develops and symbolic interpretations come to the fore; (vii) the final stage of a universal faith where people develop a strong sense of transcendent moral values like justice, inclusivity, sympathy with the marginalised and a sense of being one with the universe.

The implications seem to be that, numerically speaking, these stages form a pyramid, with very few people at the top and many at the bottom. In our next section, the possibilities of a secular theology, specifically for people who are not satisfied with the superstitious and dualistic aspects of traditional theology, are explored.

Outline of a liberal theology

Imagining God

To imagine and worship God as a person capable of intervening against natural law is, to use traditional theological language, idolatry. The theologian Paul Tillich,⁶¹ before the middle of the 20th century, suggested that we should not imagine God as external to us, but in a secularised way, as God who is the very core, the ground of all being opening us up to the meaning of life. It comes very close to Acts 17:28 where the Greek poet Epimenides is quoted, "In God we live and move and have our being."⁶²

Viewed in this way, the traditional distinction between God's providence and human responsibility falls away; they are two sides of the same coin. We, so to say, have to do what we traditionally wanted God to do; we are to become Christs to each other.

Dualisms abandoned

It is time to take leave of the distinctions between this life and the afterlife, body and soul, heaven and hell. This life is all we have; this is our home; this our destiny. The universe itself is amoral, just as Jesus declared according to Matthew 5:44-45, that God makes his sun to shine on the good and the evil, and lets his rain fall upon the just and the unjust. This will allow people to look at suffering in a fresh

⁵⁹ Fowler (1995).

⁶⁰ It should be emphasised that not all believers move through all stages. Some remain stuck at, e.g., stage four.

⁶¹ See Tillich (1962; 1963; 1953-1964).

⁶² The *New International Version* is used for all quotes from the Bible, except where indicated differently.

way, not as punishment from a puppeteer God, but as part of the vagaries of life. It will lead Christians not to ask in a transcendental sense, 'Why me?' but rather, 'Why not me?'

Prayer

Prayer for intervention does not make sense any more. While not denying that some forms of prayer may goad the person praying into action (that is, it is more a prayer to oneself than to a theistic God), practices like contemplation and meditation could also be explored. These are based upon a need to connect better with ourselves and our environment. Michel Quoist, a Catholic priest, published some wonderful contemplations. The following is called 'The telephone'.⁶³

I have just hung up; why did he telephone?
I don't know ... O! I get it ...

I talked a lot and listened very little.

Forgive me, Lord, it was a monologue and not a dialogue.
I explained my idea and did not get his;
Since I didn't listen, I learned nothing,
Since I didn't listen, I didn't help,
Since I didn't listen, we didn't commune.

Forgive me, Lord, for we were connected, and now we are cut off.

The authority of the Bible

Although the Bible is a product of culture, it is important to enlightened Christians as the foundational document of Christianity. As such it should be contextualised and be subjected to critical reading and deconstructive reading strategies. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:6 are interesting: that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Instances of statements like *X raised Y from death* should therefore not be interpreted literally, but culturally. Taking the pre-modern world-view underlying this sentence into account, it can be read (depending on the context) as:

⁶³ Quoist (1999:19).

Plants die and their seeds come to life again⁶⁴ (i.e. as a nature myth);
Product X is changed into product Y⁶⁵
X successfully transitioned from one phase of life to another⁶⁶
Y should be regarded as special⁶⁷
Those affected by Y's death found new meaning in life⁶⁸

Interfaith dialogue

A feature of an emerging Christianity is that it is in conversation with other faiths, not about who has the 'correct' doctrines, but about the values espoused by different religions (for example, the position of women and the treatment of homosexuals). Listening to other voices also include hearing the groans of nature and working for our reconciliation with it. Two sets of values should inform this dialogue: that of the Axial Age (compassion, justice and love) and also those of the Enlightenment (democracy, the separation of church and state, human rights, free speech, equity, creativity and imagination).

Italo Calvino expresses something of this in the last paragraph of his book *Invisible cities*. Listening to the stories of Marco Polo, Kublai Khan asks about the inferno, and Polo tells him that it is already here. Our work is to distinguish between what is inferno and what is not inferno, then to 'give it space, make it endure'.

The Emperor] said: "It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us."

And Polo said: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension; seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."

Morality based on reason

Based upon the insight that moral behaviour is not 'revealed', but a human construct, resting on consent, and as something which is continually renegotiated, a liberal theology will confront issues like the treatment of women, children and gays, abortion, surrogacy and stem cell research.⁶⁹

Letting go of the doctrine of the Fall

There is no place any more for the doctrine of the Fall. We are emerging as human beings and have to come to terms with our animal past: the egotistical struggle for survival; the violent competition with other species; and the cruelty out of which we emerged.

Letting go of the doctrine of the virgin birth

The doctrine of the virgin birth is not only insulting to common sense, but also misogynistic. It should be abandoned.

Letting go of the doctrine of redemptive violence

⁶⁴ The myth of Demeter and Persephone is based on this natural phenomenon.

⁶⁵ The *sparagmos* myth of Dionysus, who was torn to pieces and reconstituted, reflects the turning of rotten grapes into a new and exciting product: wine.

⁶⁶ In Mark 5:21-43 the raising of Jairus's daughter from death probably signifies her transition from childhood to maidenhood. With her menarche or first menses, she thought she was dead. Jesus facilitated this rite of passage. Some images of Dionysus show an older person with a younger alter ego. It expresses the same truth that humans can reinvent themselves.

⁶⁷ Seven days after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, Halley's Comet appeared in the sky. Caesar's successor, the emperor Augustus, immediately issued a coin depicting the comet and interpreted it as the soul of Julius Caesar ascending into heaven. Augustus therefore could refer to himself as "Son of a god".

⁶⁸ To my mind, this is the most acceptable explanation of the stories surrounding the resurrection of Jesus: that it was, in fact, his disciples and followers who were resurrected to a new life.

⁶⁹ See Holloway (1999) for an approach to morality which is not founded on God's revelation.

What Jesus did, historically speaking, should be of paramount importance for Christians. The violent doctrine of the crucifixion as redemption for our sins should be abandoned. There exists indeed a scriptural base for this. In Hosea 6:6, for example, God says "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings." In Psalm 51:16-17 it is stated, "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Christian rituals

Rites of passage (birth; coming of age, marriage; divorce; death) are still important in human life and can be meaningfully handled in a liberal Christianity. Baptism can be more meaningfully seen as a name-giving ceremony; celebrating the arrival of a new life; acknowledging the uniqueness of a child; and giving parents and the community the opportunity to renew their responsibility for the creation of a nurturing environment.

In marriage ceremonies it would be irresponsible to exact promises of female subjugation, or 'till death do us part'. They should be based upon the principles of synergy, equity, negotiation and dialogue. An alternative translation of the introduction to the Gospel of John comes to mind: "In the beginning was the conversation and the conversation was God ... and in the fullness of time that conversation entered into our flesh."

Regarding funerals, they should be more a celebration of the life of the deceased than the provision of consolation with the traditional 'better off in heaven' or 'we'll meet again in heaven' approach. The British journalist, John Diamond, was an atheist. Diagnosed with terminal cancer, his tongue was removed, and he lived in constant pain. On 31 November 2000 he wrote in his column in the London *Observer* about his own secular response to his illness (he died on 2 March 2001): "I neither feel the need of, nor can I discover any comfort in religious faith ... and yet, most of the time, and within the usual limits, I seem to be happy." For him, suffering and consolation is not about heaven or hell, punishment or reward, but about things like:

- random acts of kindness
- to be loving and to be loved
- to do the right thing
- to share a good movie with friends
- to know that you are going to be missed when you're gone

In conclusion

This article argues that the traditional foundationalist beliefs of Christianity, based upon a dualistic and pre-modern view of the world, are becoming increasingly irrelevant not only as a result of advances in science, philosophy and theology and biblical scholarship, but also from the perspective of morality. A huge mistake on the part of traditional Christianity was to read the Bible as *logos* and not as *mythos*. The traditional master narrative of Christianity has been shown to be false in all aspects: the Inspiration of Scriptures; the Fall of humankind; the Incarnation of Jesus; and the doctrine of Atonement.

The pre-modern dualistic vision of world which underlies the Bible, does not hold for the twenty-first century. The dualisms between body and soul, this life and the hereafter, this reality and a supernatural realm can be fruitfully abandoned in favour of a secular vision. Miracles are impossible. A theistic, intervening God does not exist. Prayer makes only sense as prayer to the self. Alternative practices like contemplation and meditation are more meaningful ways to help people gain connection with reality and to come to terms with their environment.

Christian rituals can also be productively reorganised to accompany people in a meaningful way through rites of passage without, again, referring to a supernatural reality. The Bible as a unique source of moral behaviour is seriously questionable. Based upon values of the Axial Age as well as the Enlightenment, new rational codes of moral behaviour can be developed in dialogue with tradition. Interfaith dialogue is necessary to promote tolerance, inclusivity and humanistic values.

It is, therefore, not an impossible dream to devise a postfoundational liberal theology which is immanent, this-worldly and secular. As the American poet Walt Whitman formulated so well in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*:⁷⁰

*This is what you should do: Love the earth and sun and animals,
despise riches, give alms to everyone who asks,
stand up for the stupid and crazy,
devote your income and labour to others, hate tyrants,
argue not concerning God,
have patience and indulgence toward the people,
re-examine all you have been told in school or church
or any book,*

⁷⁰ See Cowley (1986).

*dismiss what insults your very soul,
and your flesh shall become a great poem.*

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