

**Conflict and religion –
secularity as a standard for authentic religion**

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Actual religion, as it is understood and practised, has always been the cause of conflict in the world. And if we consider our contemporary world we can see that this is still true. In this article I wish to argue that this need not be the case. In fact I want to go further and suggest that it is only in our contemporary world that the conditions at last exist where religion, instead of being the cause of conflict, can be the way of overcoming it. But for that to happen religious people will have to change the way they understand and practise their religion. And this will mean changing themselves.

This is not as outrageous a suggestion as it may sound. As august an organisation as the Parliament of the World's Religions has as its rationale the idea that there can be no true peace in the world unless there is peace between the world's religions. And there can be no peace between religions unless there is dialogue between them. Hence the need for a parliament. Implied in such a rationale is that religions have at least something to learn. I wonder though how many of the moving spirits in the Parliament believe that it is precisely our scientific and secular age that has something to teach them, something of transforming importance.

I wish to note at the beginning of this article how my conviction that this is so has been made more secure by my recent reading of Charles Taylor's extraordinary book *A secular age*. The rest of this article will I hope reveal the depth of my indebtedness to him; its inadequacies however remain my own.

The identification, indeed the condemnation, of religion as the source of all human conflict, is found in the religious text that lies at the root of European culture, namely the Book of Genesis, in the stories of the first eleven chapters. These stories are well known but usually not well understood. They were put together fairly late in the history of Israel, from at least four different oral and literary traditions, to provide an insight into the predicament from which, according to the editors, Israel (and indeed humanity) needs to be saved. The final story – that of the Tower of Babel – best illustrates the point I wish to make.

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Throughout the earth men spoke the same language, with the same vocabulary. As they moved eastwards they found a plain where they settled. They said to one another, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top reaching heaven. Let us make a name for ourselves, so that we may not be scattered about the whole earth." Then Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower that the sons of man had built. "So they are all a single people with a single language!" said Yahweh. "This is but the start of their undertakings! There will be nothing too hard for them to do. Come, let us go down and confuse their language on the spot so that they can no longer understand one another." In this way they were scattered over the whole face of the earth, and they stopped building the city. And so it was named Babel, because there Yahweh confused the language of the whole earth. From there Yahweh scattered them over the whole face of the earth" (Genesis 11:1-9).

The first thing to understand about this story is that it presents us with a perfect picture of what the biblical authors believe is their god's purpose in creating us. It is their conviction that Yahweh intends humanity to achieve its true identity in a single community of mutual understanding and love in intimate union with him. Don't be misled by the jealous psychopath who plays the part of Yahweh in the story. This is simply the way that Yahweh appears to the eyes of sin. For this is what the story is really about: sin. And the essence of sin is idolatry, self-worship. Humanity is trying to be like its creator. Paradoxically this too is what our creator intends. The key to cracking the code of these Genesis stories is the idea that we are created to be the creator's image. There is no space in this article for me to prove this point. But a glance at the Adam and Eve story should show I am right. The thought structure of that story is the same as the story of Babel: Adam tries to be like his god and Yahweh is jealous and prevents him. To cut a long story short, it is the way in which we try to realise the image of the creator in ourselves that is the problem. It is something that can only be done by Yahweh himself; he has created us to be like him and it is only his power that can achieve this. We attempt the same project with the powers under our control, in self-assertive separation from the only kind of power that could succeed. This is the essence of idolatry in the thought-world of the bible. The idol itself, the god, has no power but what we give it. It is under our control, but we become enslaved to it. Idolatry is really self-worship though not understood as such. And the inevitable result of that is conflict: conflict between self-centred selves but also and, more seriously, conflict within us as well.

This dip into a sacred text might be considered irrelevant to dealing with the problems of a secular age. But I think not. The biblical identification of idolatry as the source of all conflict, both between and within us, has clear connections with the thought of the key figures in the secularisation process in European philosophy. Kant's criticism of what he called 'positive' religion

(by which he meant any religion that was based on external authority), Feuerbach's understanding of religion as 'projection', even Marx's idea of religion as a form of 'alienation' and Sartre's as a form of 'bad faith' use language very different from that of the biblical prophets. But they have this in common, and in common with the biblical authors, that they see religion as involving a loss of freedom, that freedom that is the essence of our humanity. The only difference between these secularising thinkers and the biblical authors is that the latter think that religion need not be like that. They believe that these idolatrous religions are mistaken answers to a real need.

Before we leave the story of Babel it is worth noting how close its identification of linguistic diversity as the prime symbol of human disunity is to the reality of prehistory. Although the earliest recorded linguistic material is only 6 000 years old, some authorities assert the existence of human language of a kind as early as two and a half million years ago. Most, however, make a far more modest claim: 120 000 years ago with the appearance of anatomically modern humans, or even later with the existence of deliberate burial and art. What all agree on is that when language does make its appearance on earth it is in literally thousands of different forms. Each small human grouping had its own language. And this perhaps explains why human history is uniquely one of intra-specific conflict and warfare from the start. Unlike other species humanity is bound by its nature to be not merely a genetic community but a linguistic one as well. But a linguistic community is a human creation. And the earliest human groups would find their identity in their own specific language. It would symbolise the bond between members of the group and a way of distinguishing it from its competitors, and thus enemies, in an environment of scarcity.

This line of thinking is confirmed by what Herbert McCabe (1968:110) has shown in his profound study of our capacity for language in *Law, love and language*.

The problem for the linguistic animal is that the linguistic social community, the group within which [there] can be established relationships of communication, is never co-extensive with the genetic community. Men are not able to communicate with each other simply by virtue of being of one species, but only if they belong to one particular group. It was no doubt inevitable that this should be so. Systems of conventional signs would be developed in very local communities, and it is not at all surprising that communication should be achieved in one group at the expense of others, so that linguistic communities are not merely separate from each other but mutually hostile ... Those who at one time shared your

language and other customs may drift away so that separate, competing and finally hostile groups are formed.

And he concludes, "Because of this the development of communication, the growth of human culture, is not a simple or single story. It consists, in fact, of a series of attempts to establish a stable human community, a stable area of communication, all of which attempts have ended in failure" (McCabe 1968:111).

In the light of this the story of Babel gains added power as a depiction of the human predicament. And the notion of a universal language that would unite the whole of humanity in a genuine community at last is a powerful symbol for a conflict-ridden world.

To get a clearer view of religion as both the cause of conflict in the world and also the possible solution to it, one needs to take a closer, and philosophical, look at religion. The historical sciences have provided abundant data on religion. All human cultures until our own are religious in the sense that they believe in and attempt to access and enact sources of power that transcend human capacities to fulfil our most important needs. These are their gods. And in spite of the huge diversity of religions and differences in their gods, two needs, and desires, stand out as universal: the need to overcome sickness and death, and the need to overcome human conflict of every sort. Whatever else they are concerned with, the historical religions have all attempted to provide solutions to these predicaments.

Because the god of a particular religion is always seen as possessing power transcending human powers but still precisely suited to fulfilling the deepest needs of human nature, the conception any religion has of its god and the conception it has of human nature and its needs are always intrinsically linked. As in the book of Genesis, if humanity is the 'image of God', so also is God the 'image of man' as pointed out by Feuerbach. This is a philosophically important observation since, although knowledge of the gods is beyond the capabilities of philosophy, knowledge of human nature is not. Insight into our own humanity can thus possibly provide us with a standard for assessing both the credibility and the adequacy of a particular conception of a god.

The history of religion is after all littered with the graves of the gods, gods that were unable to fulfil our needs, or gods discarded because we had learnt to fulfil our needs ourselves. But the history of religion also sees an evolution in humanity's conception of a god that parallels the evolution of our understanding of ourselves, a deepening insight into human nature, its capacities and needs.

It is generally agreed that the thousand years or so leading up to the beginning of the Common Era saw what is now called the Axial revolution in human culture and religion. The best known case of this is of course that

which took place in the history of Israel. But something similar seems to have happened in the East, in India and China, and, though in a slightly different way, with the Greeks. This evolution in consciousness is exhaustively documented and analysed in Eric Voegelin's magisterial *Order and history*. As he describes it, it was a move from a cosmological to an anthropological view of the order of the world. As far as religion is concerned it was the discovery of transcendence, both in the sphere of the gods and in that of humanity as well. By speaking of transcendence in this connection I am not referring to the feature of religion I have already identified by that term, namely that the gods are always seen as possessing powers that transcend our own. The Axial discovery is of a transcendence of an absolute kind, a transcendence of the world itself.

Yahweh, the god of Israel, unlike the gods of 'the nations', is not an inhabitant of the world but its transcendent creator. And humanity too, as Yahweh's image, also is possessed of a certain transcendence and creativity, though, as befits an image, one that can only be realised in total dependence on Yahweh. In the history of Israel this insight is traditionally ascribed to Moses, though it probably developed at a much later date in the prophetic tradition, possibly as late as Second Isaiah. Of course it was by no means universally accepted or understood, and the writings of the Old Testament, and even the New Testament, document the struggle between this new conception and the primal religion of the people. We see Paul, for instance, scolding the Galatians for their inclination to 'turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits ... that by nature are no gods' (Galatians 4:8-9). In biblical religion this development reaches its paradoxical-appearing climax in John's gospel's identification of Jesus as the personal presence of the Father: "He who has seen me has seen the Father ... I am in the Father and the Father in me." (John 14:9-10) Even then it took several centuries for Christian theology to spell out the absolute transcendence that this identification involved. Remnants of primal religion lasted well into the Middle Ages. Indeed, as we shall see, they are still with us today.

The idea of the union of creator and creature in Jesus, made possible by the absolute transcendence of the creator and the dependent transcendence of the creature, had no parallel in any other religion. In Greek culture, however, something similar took place, though superficially it appears very different. I am thinking of the progressive disappearance of the Greek gods in favour of philosophy. Socrates I think was still a 'believer'. Plato was not, although he used quasi-religious myths to express his deepest insights. And Aristotle, although he uses the term 'god' to speak of the metaphysical origin of the universe, does not think of it as a god. He has no religion. It is Plato perhaps who gives us the best expression of the Greek discovery of transcendence in his idea of the immateriality of the human soul and its *eros* towards the transcendent Form of the Good; though it is Aristotle's argument

for the reality of a transcendent cause of the universe that is used by Aquinas to give what is the definitive expression of this insight in Western thought. Plato's twin conceptions of the Form of the Good and the immateriality of the human soul represent the form in which a philosophical conception of transcendence enters the history of European thought.

In spite of the Axial discovery, the conception of a genuinely transcendent reality, whether in a religious or a philosophical context, struggled to become inculturated in the pre-modern culture of Europe. All pre-modern cultures, and that includes the whole of human history, have a sacral world-view. By that I mean that the world is seen as filled with spirits, namely beings rather like us with intelligence and will but with all sorts of powers that we don't have. They are also quite different from us, being for the most part invisible and not subject to the usual constraints that we are. But in every pre-modern culture the really important thing about these non-human spirits is that they can influence our lives for good or ill. They can for instance cause fertility in crops and livestock or in us. They can also cause drought and floods. They can kill us or save us from death; they can even control our thoughts and feelings.

Because the spiritual beings of the sacral world-view have powers that go beyond human power they are usually termed supernatural by those who study pre-modern cultures. But that is not how they are thought of in sacral societies themselves. These do not make a distinction between natural and supernatural. These spirits are seen simply as part, indeed the most important part, of their world. A lot of the energy of sacral societies is spent in trying to influence the spirits, by magic or by ritual, so that they will fulfil the needs and desires that people feel to be beyond their own power to fulfil. This is the form that religion takes in sacral societies; these supernatural spirits are the gods of sacral societies.

As I have already mentioned, both the Old Testament prophets and the followers of Jesus still lived in a sacral society in which the gods were seen as supernatural spirits connected with some or other thing or place. Even the prophets and the followers of Jesus believed in the *existence* of these supernatural spirits, as can be seen in the quotation from Paul. Their concern was that they shouldn't be treated as gods. When people did that they did themselves terrible damage, lost their freedom, died a psychological death.

The same was true of the Greek (and Roman) world. Ordinary people, including emperors but excluding philosophers, still lived within a sacral view of the world, worshipping supposedly supernatural spirits. In fact Christianity itself, in spite of Jesus' teaching about the only god that was worthy of our faith, once it became the official religion of Europe soon inculturated itself in the sacral world-view of medieval Europe. Jews and Christians, and now Muslims as well, continued to believe in supernatural spirits. Although they were forbidden by their religious authorities to treat these supernatural

spirits as gods there is no doubt that they did so, putting their real faith in rituals and miracles and visions and relics and shrines, and even in the religious officials themselves. In the sacral world of medieval Europe the Christian teaching was that all spiritual power came from the transcendent god of Jesus that had been defined so carefully in the councils of the early Church. In practice, however, this conception of a god and its relations with us came itself to be sacralised and treated in an idolatrous and superstitious way.

The attempt of theologians who were also philosophers to combine their philosophy with their religion in pre-modern Europe was in fact focused on the notion of transcendence, the absolute transcendence of our god and the derived transcendence of our human nature. Aquinas' use of Aristotle on both issues represents the culmination of the pre-modern development.

In his famous 'Five Ways' (of demonstrating the existence of God) and in all his writing on God, Aquinas is concerned to convey what he calls the incommensurability of God and the universe. Note here that I am using a capital letter for the word 'god'. I am in fact using it as a proper name to refer to the god of Jesus and Christianity. And of course this god is a certain kind of being, different in important ways from other gods. It is precisely this difference that the notion of incommensurability is designed to convey. It means that you cannot add God and the universe and get two. Not because either is unreal, or because they are one and the same, but because the reality of each is so different. There is no common measure in terms of which they could be compared or added to each other. A good example of Aquinas' conception is that of a poet composing a poem in which he also appears. There is the poet composing, who is 'in' the poem as its creator, and the poet in the poem, who is (Christians would say) the 'incarnation' of the poet. But it makes no sense to say they are two poets. The reality of the one, though identical to the other, is wholly derivative. The reality of the other is creative. God is the creator of the universe. For Aquinas this doesn't simply mean that God started it going, but that God causes it to be at each moment that it exists. The pair of terms 'transcendent' and 'immanent' are used together to define this relationship between creator and creature: to say that God is transcendent is to say that God is not the universe nor any part of it; to say that God is immanent is to say that he is in the universe and is in every part of it as he is causing it to be, as the poet is in the poem he is composing.

This notion of God's incommensurability is of the first importance, not only because it preserves and refines the Axial insight into transcendence, but also because it makes a complete and final break with a sacral world-view possible. And it is also the only possible way of accommodating a notion of a god to the insight into *human* transcendence that is the other side of the Axial revolution.

Aquinas also uses Aristotle to elaborate on his understanding of the transcendent element in human nature. Aristotle had defined human beings as rational animals, where rationality was the specific difference between us and other animals. And for Aquinas it is rationality that is the transcendent element in human nature. His theory of human nature can appear dualistic, as with Plato: an immaterial mind in a material body. But Aquinas is at pains to distinguish his view from Plato's, and indeed from that of Augustine. In spite of his strong arguments for the immateriality of the intellect, he is equally insistent that bodiliness is an essential part of our humanity. His formula is the same as that of Aristotle: mind and body are related as form to matter in constituting the individual human being. Only the composite is real.

To properly understand Aquinas' identification of the transcendent element in human nature with our rationality one must remember that rationality had a very different meaning for him and Aristotle than it has for modern thinkers. For the modern thinkers rationality comes to be merely our reasoning ability. It does not imply a kind of knowledge or insight that goes beyond sensation. Not so for Aquinas. Following Plato and Aristotle he saw the human mind as having a capacity for the real which, though it was bound to use the senses, was able to go beyond them to achieve a deeper kind of (metaphysical) knowledge. He was fond of using the Aristotelian tag that "through sense and intellect man is in a way all things". We were not creators of the universe, but we could contain it in our minds! It was this lack of limitation to the human intellect that led Aquinas to identify rationality with transcendence. In spite of all his attempts the language in which he formulated his view was always open to dualistic misinterpretations, and to the preservation of an aspect of a sacral world-view in the idea of a separate spiritual soul that was the real human person.

In spite of the work of philosophical theologians like Aquinas the actual religious belief and practice of Europe remained firmly rooted in a sacral world-view. It was for this reason that the revolution in consciousness we call secularisation came to be seen as, and actually had the effect of, the destruction of religion. Insofar as one's religion was understood and expressed in terms of a sacral world-view it was precisely that. It is to an understanding of the phenomenon of secularisation that we must now turn. I have already acknowledged Charles Taylor's influence on my approach to this topic and I want to quote him at the start of this part of this article to emphasise the precise point at which my approach coincides with his. In contrasting his own view with the standard understanding of secularisation, whereby an increased (scientific) understanding of the world leads to its 'disenchantment' and hence to the end of religion, he has this to say: "But I don't think this can suffice as the main story behind secularity. There is another important piece, which deals with the thrust to complete the Axial revolution; I mean Reform, which strives to end the post-Axial equilibrium,

that is, the balance and complementarity between pre- and post-Axial elements in all higher civilisations. It is this process, occurring in Latin Christendom, which I have been focusing on, through the various social and cultural changes which have been generated on the way. Let's refer to this as the Reform Master Narrative" (Taylor 2007:774).

I am sure it is right to see the secularisation process as a continuation and universalisation of the Axial discovery of transcendence. In what follows I will try to explain why.

I think I have already said enough to give a sufficient idea of a sacral world-view (and of the sacral world-view of pre-modern Europe), with which to contrast the secular world-view that began to take shape in Europe around about the 1400s. Like any large-scale human phenomenon it didn't happen all at once. And like any human phenomenon it involved both a change in consciousness and culture as well as a change in human life and society in every sphere. With hindsight we can now see it as part of the process of the evolution of humanity, an evolution that did not cease with the appearance of *homo sapiens*, but now takes a more than biological form.

Secularisation, because of its holistic character, has many different aspects. The development of science is just one, though a supremely important one, of these. The unbroken line from Copernicus through Galileo to Newton forms a bridge between the medieval and the modern world. The new scientific approach to gaining knowledge and the world-view that it produced must be seen as a continuation of that begun by Greek philosophy and continued through the pre-modern period by chiefly Muslim thinkers but also by Jewish and Christian ones. Genuine knowledge was the work of human reason discovering the true causes of things, rather than the creation of the mythopoeic imagination telling stories about the gods. It differed from these earlier forms of rationality, however, in being much more down to earth, insisting that knowledge must be based on experience and experiment and formulated in objective, and ideally in mathematical, terms rather than idealistic speculation. Physics replaced metaphysics, if you like.

The new world-view introduced by the pioneers of modern science involved a complete rejection of the sacral view of the world. Reality was what could be known by science; all else was simply the creation of imagination. You must not think, however, that the rejection of the sacral world-view involved the rejection of religion. Most of the early scientists remained religious believers; this was because they recognised that the Christian god was not a supernatural spirit in a sacral world, but the transcendent creator of it. For them the creator of the world could not be part of it, nor did the creator intervene in its workings; they had no time for miracles or revelation from on high. The world worked according to the laws its creator had built in to it and which it was the work of science to discover and to put to good use. So religion continued, but it was religion without revelation or

supernatural happenings. As a result it was called by its adherents natural or rational religion, and by its opponents, who were unhappy that their god had been excluded from their world, deism. Needless to say religion of this kind had very little in common with the traditional religious beliefs and practices of ordinary folk.

It is not too difficult to see that this new scientific approach to knowledge involved a rejection of authority in the name of the freedom to follow one's own reason wherever it might lead. In the medieval period Aristotle had been enthroned as the ultimate authority in the sphere of knowledge. Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, Jewish thinkers like Moses Maimonides and Islamic ones like Ibn Rushd all deferred to Aristotle. Science in the modern period was now free of this constraint. Human reason had to be free if it were to gain real knowledge of the world. The scientific attitude was thus based on a faith in human powers, in this case reason, a faith that included a recognition of freedom as an absolute human value.

It is in fact the notion of freedom as the most important fact about human nature and the most important value for human life that is the heart of the phenomenon of secularisation. An eloquent expression of this is given by the Renaissance poet and philosopher Pico della Mirandola. In his *Oration on the dignity of man* God is speaking to Adam:

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is yours alone nor any function peculiar to yourself have we given you Adam, to the end that according to your longing and according to your judgement you may have and possess what abode, what form, what functions you yourself shall desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. You, constrained by no limits, in accordance with your own free will, in whose hand We have placed you, shall ordain for yourself the limits of your nature. We have set you at the world's centre that you may from there more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honour, as though the maker and moulder of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever shape you shall prefer (Taylor 1989:199-200).

This notion of the absolute importance of an individual's freedom of choice was not only embodied in the new status of human reason in science. It also entered the sphere of religion itself. The Protestant Reformation involved a rejection of authority in the religious sphere, in this case that of religious officialdom in the Christian Church, in the name of the freedom of the individual believers in their relationship with their god, a relationship that

was not mediated by an authoritative tradition. In spite of the fact that it was essentially a religious movement, Protestantism also involved a wholesale rejection of many of the sacral elements in contemporary Christian culture. Luther too, as well as Copernicus, can thus be considered as one of the founding fathers of a secular culture. Although their immediate interest and sphere of influence were different there is something in common between the religious reformers and humanist scholars like Erasmus and Melancthon.

The notion of humanism is in fact very helpful in understanding the phenomenon of secularisation and the way in which a secular world-view differs from a sacral one. In a sacral world-view people experience themselves as being subject to the power of supernatural spirits. The course of their lives depends on powers other than their own. In the secular world-view all that has changed. Non-human nature is no longer the home of supernatural spiritual powers; the spirit and the power are now perceived to be in us. Nature has been laid open to our inspection and use by science and technology. Its supernatural character has evaporated and we are now in control of our own lives.

This exaltation of humanity at the expense of the supernatural spirits of the sacral world can also be seen in the realm of art. Although angels and demons still appear in the work of the artists of the Renaissance, there can be no question that even the most religious art of Leonardo and Michelangelo and others is a celebration of humanity itself. It is the human figure that is seen as the best image of the divine. Human freedom of choice has given us a godlike character; self-determination is akin to self-creation, as the quotation from Pico above so eloquently shows.

Secularisation also had its effects in the moral and political spheres. The notion of human rights made its first appearance in moral and political theory. This idea was closely linked to that of human freedom, both as the central fact about human nature and the most important value in human life. The fundamental rights of the individual to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', together with a number of others that followed from them, were considered essential to the individual's exercise of that freedom and in this sense 'natural', derived from human nature's capacity for freedom, and so absolute, objective and universal to be recognised by individuals and governments alike. It was also the importance now attaching to human freedom that led to the idea of the ideal form of government being a 'government of the people by the people for the people'. It was only in such a society that the laws to which one was subject were the laws of one's own making (through one's free participation in the law-making process) and therefore did not represent a destruction or diminution of one's freedom. What a far cry this is from such a notion that the political authority, the emperor, is a god, or even a belief in the divine right of kings to rule, so characteristic of a sacral culture.

The deepest effect of secularisation was perhaps that on philosophy, philosophy now separate from science as a form of reflection on one's own capacity for science, one's capacity for thought and choice. A primary focus of this new kind of philosophy was religion, as the sphere in which all the fundamental human powers of understanding, choice and feeling were involved. And the effort of philosophy in the new secular culture to become more conscious, more consistent and more critical about one's religious beliefs led to a transformation of the understanding of religion as a human activity.

In the first place none of the distinctively sacral elements of religion could remain. There was no place for spirits, demons or angels, visions or miracles, even revelation or sacred texts, in the new approach. Kant was the first great modern philosopher to attempt to give a complete philosophical theory of religion. The title of the essay in which he sketches the outlines of this gives a good idea of the new approach. He called his book *Religion within the limits of reason alone*. He (and all the philosophers who followed him) took Christianity as the classical example of a religion. And they took it in the pre-modern sacral form in which its doctrines were formulated and in which it was still practised.

It is important to recognise that secularising philosophers like Kant did not reject religion as merely a feature of a sacral culture that had been superseded. On the contrary they recognised religion as a central concern in human life. But they saw it as needing to be understood in a new, and they thought, more accurate way, a way different from that in which those who practised it still understood it. So they embarked on a process of what came to be known as demythologisation. They saw this as getting at the essential truth that the myths and other sacral elements were based on but which they expressed in a pre-modern way.

As I have said, the religion that was focused on was Christianity. These philosophers considered Christianity to be the religion that contained the most important truths, but what they said about religion they intended to apply to all religions, not just Christianity. For Kant the essence of Christianity was its morality, which he saw as teaching the absolute value of human individuals as such, whatever their particular achievements or status. He expressed this moral insight by saying that one ought always to treat persons as ends in themselves, never simply as means to an end. He demythologised traditional Christian teaching about the divinity of Jesus by saying that this meant that Jesus was a perfect example of one whose life embodied this morality and who could act as an inspiration to others to do the same. Although Kant demythologised Christianity in this way he also argued that living this morality authentically implied a belief in human freedom, the immortality of the soul and the existence of a really transcendent god.

Thinkers who followed him, however, went even further in their attempts to thoroughly desacralise religion.

Hegel, while still insisting that Christianity contained a vitally important truth in mythological form, took the final step of demythologising the notion of a god, as a being other than human with power transcending human power to fulfil our human nature. What Christianity believed about our god, Hegel argued was true, but true of us. In an exhaustive series of lectures on the philosophy of religion he explained the essential doctrines of Christianity as revealing a profound insight into the nature of humanity itself. The central doctrine of our creator's incarnation in Jesus he understood as expressing the deep insight into the nature of man as Spirit. I write this word with a capital letter as Hegel did to show that for him it meant something different from the notion of spirit in the sacral world-view. Hegel got the idea from the Christian notion of our god as creator, saviour and sanctifier as expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. To say that humanity is Spirit, for Hegel, meant that humanity was self-creative and capable of fulfilling its own nature as a being with a capacity for self-consciousness and self-determination in the course of human history. He saw the whole of human history as humanity's growth in becoming conscious of this capacity and beginning to exercise it so as to become fully human. Christianity had held this knowledge in mythological form. Now in the secular society it had emerged into full consciousness and for the first time in human history humanity could now live in its light.

Of course Hegel's 'translation' of Christianity out of the language of a sacral world-view into the secular language of his own philosophy was not acceptable to those who taught or practised traditional Christianity. Whatever truth it might contain regarding humanity and its powers it certainly had no room for the Christian god. In fact Hegel's rejection of the traditional notion of a god and of religion soon became the foundation of an ever more stringent criticism of Christianity, and indeed all religion, as incompatible with human freedom. Feuerbach, in his *The essence of Christianity* (enthusiastically translated into English by the novelist George Eliot), was the first to explain religion as 'projection', humanity projecting its own real but undeveloped powers onto a transcendent being in whom these powers were realised. He was followed by Marx who saw religion as the expression of humanity's alienation from its true essence by a society from which most people were excluded by the way in which the economy was controlled by a few. Religion was the projection into a heavenly realm of an ideal future of human solidarity without oppression of any kind. In the classless society at which everyone ought to aim there would be no need for the illusory consolation of religion and it would simply wither away.

When one looks back on the secularisation process that began with people like Copernicus, Leonardo da Vinci, Luther and Machiavelli and ended with nineteenth-century thinkers like Kant and Hegel, Feuerbach and

Marx one is presented with a transformation of consciousness and culture that must be one of the greatest humanity has ever undergone. By the time the twentieth century dawned the sacral world-view had virtually vanished from the European scene. Belief in a world dominated by supernatural spirits could not co-exist with the discoveries of science and the world-view that grew from them. At least in theory it could not. In fact it does, and even increasingly so, as the varieties of contemporary fundamentalism show.

Nevertheless there is a built-in limitation to the scientific world-view because of the methods of science. It is true as far as it goes, and it would be a mistake to believe things that are incompatible with it. But it is not the whole truth. And here it is sensible to reconsider the sacral world-view, which after all is the way in which humanity saw the world for the whole of human history, except the last few hundred years, *and still does* – except for a small sophisticated group of people like myself (and some if not most of you) who have grown up in a scientific-technological milieu. The belief in a supernatural spiritual realm is so universal to humanity that it is difficult to believe that it is simply a mistake. And here it is well to remember that the demythologising philosophers I have mentioned all thought that there was indeed something of supreme importance that the sacral terminology was trying to convey. And in one way or another I think that they more or less discovered what it was.

What Kant and Hegel and others came to understand (though not fully as I will presently argue) was that the supernatural realm of spirits was real after all, though not in the world in the way imagined in the sacral world-view, but *in us!* There was something in human beings that transcended the world of nature, something real that was beyond the reach of science. Kant was so sure of this transcendent, spiritual dimension, although he shared the materialistic deterministic world-view of the science of his time, that he was forced to be a dualist. Hegel went one step further, so convinced was he of the reality of this transcendent spiritual side of human beings. He saw it as underlying the whole process of evolution and history, and only surfacing fully in modern human self-consciousness and self-determination. Everything was an incipient form of Spirit.

As I have said, I think that these secularising philosophers grasped an important truth that was implicit though misconceived in the sacral view of the world and its religion. I also think they failed to do justice to it. This was because their view of religion was still too much tied to the sacral world-view that they rejected. The increasingly radical critiques of religion of Kant and Hegel, and Feuerbach and Marx who followed them, were all directed at a thoroughly sacral view of religion, as well of course at the actual practice of religious believers. They seem ignorant of the fact that the Old Testament prophets, as well as the writers of the New Testament, had voiced very similar criticisms of the sacral idolatry of their time over a thousand years

before, and done so in the name of their religion. These secularising philosophers were attacking and defeating 'a paper tiger'. The result was that their demythologised understanding of religion, 'religion within the limits of reason alone', was a seriously inadequate one. In moving the spirits from nature into humanity they took a step in the right direction but they did not go far enough. In the last resort I think that their inadequate view of religion stems from their inadequate philosophy of humanity.

Philosophy in the modern period developed in two different traditions, that of empiricism and that of rationalism. The empiricist tradition was closely allied to science, especially the physical and natural sciences. As these sciences progressed, discovering more and more lawlike connections between what happened in the world through observation and measurement by increasingly sophisticated instruments, a mechanistic world-view developed. Only what was observable and measurable was real; this was materialism. Everything was subject to the laws the sciences were progressively discovering; this was determinism. Such a world-view had no place in it for a spiritual reality or for freedom.

Rationalism was in many ways a reaction to this mechanistic world-view. Its solution to the problem posed by materialism was dualism. The world of nature was as the scientist and the empiricist philosophers described, a world of matter in motion. And as bodily beings we humans too were part of that deterministic system. But as beings with minds capable of rational thought we transcended matter, were a different kind of being altogether, part of a wholly immaterial, spiritual realm. Thus a human being was a composite of matter and mind. Descartes was the first to make this dualism famous but it persisted throughout the modern period at least until the time of Kant. It received great support from religious thinkers since it made possible a belief in human freedom and accountability and in the idea of life after death.

Neither materialism nor dualism is an adequate account of human nature. Materialism can't cope with human freedom; dualism with the essential unity of a human person. Nevertheless each contains a truth about humanity that a more adequate account will have to do justice to. The truth of materialism is our inextricable solidarity with non-human nature. We are bound to this by all the causal links that the sciences discover. Even the most abstract thought requires images, images imply senses, and senses imply sense organs that are parts of a body. The truth of dualism is our capacity for free choice, for self-determination.

Self-determination and other-dependence: is it possible to combine these two truths into a more comprehensive view of human nature? I think it is. And if one wants to correct the secularising philosophers' view of religion, a view that in the last resort is based on their idea of human nature, one will have to try. One can only improve on theirs with a better one. This is what I will try to do.

Our contemporary scientific and secular culture is characterised by what Charles Taylor calls 'the immanent frame'; the transcendent seems to have disappeared from contemporary experience. The story I have been telling is at least a partial explanation of this. And in the light of this situation two different ways of living it have emerged: fundamentalism and atheism. The various forms of religious fundamentalism are attempts to restore a pre-modern sacral consciousness to religion. These attempts must be judged mistaken; we can no longer take the sacral stories literally. If we do, it is at the price of authenticity. We do violence to ourselves. And often this results in violence to others too.

Atheism is another story. We are right to reject the gods of the sacral world. But too often we transfer an equally absolute faith to an equally mistaken secular god. This is usually an ideology, Marxism for instance, or the free market. But often it is science itself. Science, it is believed, is the only valid form of knowledge. Reality is thus conceived of as what science is able to know. And so at a stroke our world is diminished and made more superficial. Our inner life, the depth of intersubjective relationships, and the wisdom of art and philosophy are lost to us.

Faith of this kind in science is also a kind of fundamentalism. It has this in common with religious fundamentalism: its object is something that is really under our control. Hence the (illusory) security it affords. Whether the object is a sacred book or some religious authority or the authority of science, our absolute commitment to it makes it into an idol and entails our loss of freedom. This affirmation of an illusory security is thus at its root a form of self-worship, and results in the inner and outer forms of conflict so well documented in the biblical literature.

Atheism of the kind described above can be seen to have a natural affinity with materialism. Fundamentalism in our age is inseparable from dualism. The opposition it believes exists between science and religion is expressed in a separation of body and soul, of this world and the next.

Against both atheism and fundamentalism I wish to see our scientific and secular culture, in spite of all its aberrations, among which I include materialism of both a theoretical and practical kind, as well as the individualism that Taylor documents so well in *The sources of the self* and criticises so thoroughly in *A secular age*, the culmination of the process that began in the Axial age and whose development I have sketched above. It is a process that represents the evolution of humanity's self-understanding, of necessity developed by a small group of thinkers and seers, but progressively permeating European culture (and now beyond). If I am right it is a progressive deepening of our understanding of a genuinely transcendent dimension in human nature, and hence of the necessity of something similar in any god worthy of our faith. Progressively we have come to realise that we have needs, and deep desires, that are natural to us, but which only an

absolutely transcendent power (that is at least personal in the strict sense) could fulfil.

I have said that neither materialism nor dualism, the conceptions of human nature produced by the empiricist and rationalist traditions in modern philosophy, is an adequate account of what we really are. Yet each contains a truth, but a truth twisted out of true by virtue of its separation from the complementary truth of the other. The truth of dualism is its affirmation of human transcendence, though usually reduced to mythology by the dualism. Human transcendence in a dualistic setting is usually seen as an unlimited, literally godlike quality. This is most often apparent in the dualist's understanding of death. At death the spiritual soul, which is the real person, simply continues to exist by virtue of its own transcendent power. It is not dependent on a god for its immortality.

Against this I would like to argue for our dependence as well as for our transcendence, in fact our dependence *for* our transcendence on a truly transcendent cause. The heart of the secularisation process is the modern insight into humanity's capacity for self-determination. This entails our freedom from complete determination by any system of natural or social causes such as the sciences discover. Not that these systems cease to operate when we act freely (when we judge or decide on something for a reason), but though they may be necessary they can never be sufficient as causes of an act that is free. I am truly self-determining and so transcendent of all other kinds of causality. But what is true of my free acts must also be true of my capacity for free action, the capacity I am born with and that is part of my nature as a human being. That too, precisely because it is a capacity for *free* acts, cannot be the product of the kind of causes the sciences can discover, the causes involved in the evolution of human beings from pre-human animal species, or in the growth of a human individual in the womb. Once again one has to say that though they are necessary they are not sufficient to produce a nature of this kind.

I am trying to show that the existence of beings such as we are, possessed of a transcendence that is limited and dependent, that in the last resort is *given* us, entails the existence of a cause that is not limited in that way, an absolutely transcendent being whose causality, because of that, would be incommensurable with our own. Such a being would be in no sense an enemy of our freedom, but the necessary condition for it to be real at all. Thus if it is our capacity for self-determination that we desire to exercise, develop and fulfil, a transcendent cause of the kind I have described is well-suited to be our god.

Considerations of this kind might seem ultra-abstract. Nevertheless they are necessary if I am to provide an account of religion in a secular culture that is an authentic expression of our humanity. I do not wish to regress to the supernatural spirits of the sacral world-view. So I have to try to

find a source of transcendence in the very heart of secularity. And I think I have. It is there in the very notion of human freedom. But once one has discerned it there one's eyes are open to it everywhere. The transition from pre-human to human beings is perhaps the clearest case of the operation of a strictly transcendent cause, but it is certainly not the only one. The transition from pre-living to living beings is another. And so of course is that from nothing to something, from the 'initial singularity' (whatever that might be) to the Big Bang. None of these transitions can be explained by the kind of causes that science could discover to be already operating at the time they happened.

In fact, what appears in all these transitions, and is indubitable in our case, is something that is going on all the time, a permanent feature of the evolution of the cosmos. I mean the emergence at every stage of world process of real *newness*. Really new forms of being that cannot in principle be explained by what preceded them are continually coming into being through a transformation of what preceded them. And still are. From the heart of the quantum vacuum, new space and time are pouring into existence, producing the expansion of the universe and, what is more to the point, new forms of consciousness, culture and community are coming to be in us.

The idea of evolution was originally developed in the sphere of biology. Eventually it was generalised to cosmology, so that we can speak of an evolution in the physical realm from few simple formations to multiple complex ones, from particles to atoms, from molecules to cells. We need now to recognise that the process has not come to an end with the production of humanity. But of course it now happens in a different way; evolution does not take the same form in the physical sphere as in the biological, or in the human as in the biological. In our case it can only operate through our freedom. Nevertheless it is the same world-transcendent energy that is at work. Each new kind of being comes into existence through a transformation of what has preceded it. It contains it but is 'more' than it. Human beings are the most complex beings in the universe we know. Thus each of us contains in oneself all the simpler levels of reality as well. So each of us is a kind of microcosm of the universe. But more than that: we are able to contain the universe in consciousness, in our minds, and to change it in our creative action upon it. Not just a microcosm, but a centre and a cause.

I am emphasising these somewhat obvious points (points that are quite consonant with contemporary cosmology) because I want to offer an alternative to the materialist myth that what is real is material. I want to say that the material is an aspect of what is real. Matter in itself (whatever that could be) or by itself could not be real. It is only real as an aspect of us. Ultimately the universe consists of human persons in a medium in which they can communicate (or not) with each other, a medium which of course contains animals and plants and less complex things as well. So when we talk about

evolution in the human sphere, in human history and human lives, we are not talking about some particular process that is occurring in some small part of the universe to one kind of thing among others. We are talking about the universe as a whole. The evolution of consciousness, culture and forms of community is the latest transformation of the universe, and the process of secularisation is the form that it is taking.

If one takes seriously the idea that a transformation of pre-human reality resulted in humanity, and that this was but a striking example of previous transformations that produced really new kinds of being, one should be prepared to see transformation (of various kinds) as the very mechanism by which the universe evolves, and hence to expect and be open to yet further kinds of transformation in its continuing evolution within humanity itself. It is in fact precisely a failure to recognise this possibility that Charles Taylor sees as the source of the atheistic 'spin' that 'exclusive humanism' gives to the 'immanent frame' of our secular age. The 'closed world system' of contemporary atheism is closed to "the perspective of a transformation of human beings which takes them beyond or outside of whatever is normally understood as human flourishing, even in a context of reasonable mutuality (that is where we work for each other's flourishing). In the Christian case this means our participating in the love (*agape*) of God for human beings, which is by definition a love which goes way beyond any possible mutuality, a self-giving not bounded by some measure of fairness" (Taylor 2007:430). In fact Taylor accords such importance to the notion of transformation in the sense of transcendence that he uses it to define secularisation itself. He concludes his treatment of the negative aspects of this process as follows: "So we could zero in on the following proposition as the heart of 'secularization': modernity has led to a decline of the transformation perspective" (Taylor 2007:431).

The genuine mysteriousness that attaches to the emergence of human freedom (and hence science – and religion) in the evolution of the cosmos is a sign of a truly transcendent cause at work within the evolutionary process. But I think that there is a further step one can take that will help one to see the relevance of such transcendence for religion more clearly. In a sense the step has already been taken in the Axial age, and reached an unsurpassable climax in the teaching of Jesus. But it is only now, when the sacral world-view has been so thoroughly superseded, that one is able to recognise it fully.

The history of philosophy in the modern period left us with two insights into human nature that appear incompatible – our dependence on things and forces other than ourselves for all that we are and do, and a capacity for self-determination which is a freedom to determine what we shall become. Self-determination and other-dependence – I will now try to show that this is not the contradiction that it appears to be but a paradox, a paradox that expresses a most important truth about our humanity, and which

also reveals the most comprehensive and intimate way in which we are able to experience the presence and activity of a truly transcendent being in a truly secular world.² In doing so I am making an attempt to construct a conception of humanity and a god that does justice to the insights of the history I have sketched and offers a framework for understanding (and judging) religion in our contemporary scientific and secular culture.

Against the individualism that seems an intrinsic part of ‘the immanent frame’ I want to argue that persons exercise their powers, and are extended, to the fullest in their relationships with other persons. In fact we depend on other persons for the exercise, development and fulfilment of those capacities that are most central to our being persons, namely our capacities for self-consciousness and self-determination.³ Perhaps the clearest case of this dependence is that of a new-born child on its parents. A human child is the most helpless of all new-born things, virtually naked of the instincts that control and protect the lives of new-born animals. There are a few cases of so-called ‘wild children’ that have been recorded and studied.⁴ These are new-borns who have been left to die at birth and have not died, but have grown to physical maturity totally outside human society. In some cases it is known they were cared for by animals. When they were found and recovered it was possible to assess their development. And in none of the cases studied had these children developed the normal human abilities that we take for granted: awareness of themselves as subjects and agents, conceptual thought, a sense of responsibility. These children clearly needed the presence of other persons in order to develop their distinctively human capacities.

Another example of our total dependence on other persons for our own development as persons is that of what is called ‘hospitalism’ in babies who, for various reasons, have been separated from their parents soon after birth and put in an institution.⁵ In a typical institution the ratio of the number

² I have attempted this in a more rigorous and comprehensive way in two articles in *Modern Theology* Oxford: Blackwells: 1984 “What Makes Us Persons” *Modern Theology Vol 1* pp. 67-79 and 1987 “A New Argument for the Existence of God” *Modern Theology vol 3* pp. 157-177.

³ This idea, of the ontological interdependence of persons on each other, and of the ethics that flows from that, is absolutely central to traditional African thought, as such authors as the following make clear: Apostel L, Menkiti I, Mulago V, Ruch E, Anyanwu K, Senghor L, Taylor J and Tempels P. It is this characteristic of African thought that makes it such a peculiarly apt vehicle for religion, even in a secular age.

⁴ An excellent account of some of these cases and a discussion of the philosophical significance of the phenomenon is to be found in Suzanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* pp. 103-143.

⁵ A detailed treatment of this topic is to be found in Ver Eecke’s 1975 essay “The Look, the Body and the Other” where he analyses the work of Spitz and others in orphanages and other similar institutions in the United States. His purpose in this work is to provide evidence against the plausibility of Sartre’s analysis of ‘the look’ and of the intersubjective relations of persons in general.

of babies to the number of nurses is so high that the nurses are unable to do more than keep the babies clean and fed and medicated. They do not have the time to do what a normal parent would, namely to relate personally to the baby *as a person*, recognising and valuing it as such. And in every case the personal development of the babies is drastically retarded. At the age of two or three they show the mental development of an imbecile. And they are desperately unhappy.

What these examples show is that it is not the mere presence of another person that is necessary in order to develop our capacity for personhood. The attitude of the other person is all-important for the development of the self. They must recognise and value me as a person. And in order to do this they must themselves open up to me so that I can get to know that they know and value me. A positive attitude on the part of the other sets up a complex interpersonal relationship between us that enables my capacities for self-consciousness and self-determination to develop, through my coming to know and affirm the other who both knows and affirms me.

It is important to recognise that in the interpersonal relationship that produces personal growth in me it is the other person who has the initiative in the process. It is the mother, the person who has already developed as a person, who must take the initiative in the interpersonal transaction with the child. And this raises a question: how did she develop as a person? Clearly in dependence on some other already developed person, her mother for instance. And how did that person develop? It seems there is a regress. If all persons depend on other persons to develop as persons how does personal development ever take place at all? The logic is the same as the cosmological argument of Aquinas, but now in the personal realm.

It is a little difficult to feel the force of the question in view of the very limited example I have used, an example of the bare exercise of our capacity for personhood. And, like the cosmological argument, I am not really concerned with the *beginning* of personal development but with the necessary real conditions for it. If we were to continue our analysis of the necessary conditions for personal growth the problem would become clearer still. We only grow as persons, which is to grow in self-knowledge and self-affirmation, by virtue of the influence on us of persons in whom these have already been developed. And the same is true if we consider the fulfilment towards which genuine personal development tends. This is the (ideal) situation in which fully developed persons relate to one another in an interpersonal community of mutual and reciprocal knowledge and affirmation – in more concrete terms: complete understanding and love.

I have set out elsewhere in much more detail an account of the necessary conditions for personal growth.⁶ Here I can only give a concrete example to bring out their essential character. It focuses on the natural human desire to love and be loved. From what I have already said above it should be evident that I can only develop the capacity to love another for their own sake (with gift-love rather than need-love, one could say) to the extent that I am myself loved in that way. All persons are in the same situation, desiring to be loved and only capable of loving if they are. How then is genuine unselfish love of each other even possible? Only if there is somewhere a source of love that does not need to be loved in order to love, that is capable of giving love without receiving it. Such a source would not be human, or finite in any way, but strictly transcendent, an uncaused cause in the personal sphere. Such a being would be able to be our god because it would be able to fulfil what is arguably the deepest of our deep desires.

To remove any appearance of superficiality from the bare logic of what I have just said I need to point out one feature of my analysis of the necessary conditions for personal growth that is highly significant but might well have been overlooked. If the above sketch I have given is more or less accurate then it is clear that the more I come under a certain kind of influence (a positive, affirming one) of another person the more I am enabled to develop as a person myself. But to develop as a person is to develop one's capacity for self-determination. And here is the paradox: the more dependent on the other I am, the more self-determining I am. This is the paradoxical logic of what I like to call 'interpersonal causality': my freedom is developed in direct (and not inverse) proportion to my dependence on *a certain kind* of influence of the other. It is paradoxical because in all the causal systems discovered by the sciences, the more that is done by one cause the less another needs to do. Two oxen pulling a plough at a steady rate, for example. Or a billiard ball striking another to set it in motion. Action and reaction are equal and opposite. And in general this would be true of any system of *finite* causes whatsoever. The more my action is caused by the other the less it is my own.

It should not be difficult to see that we have here what amounts to a more complex case of that incommensurability we noted both in the cosmological argument for a transcendent cause of the existence of the universe and in the argument for a transcendent cause of human freedom. In fact the

⁶ In chapter seven of my book *Philosophy for Africa* Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press 1993, the approach I adopt is derived from the work of a number of others, and especially the following:

John Macmurray's Gifford lectures *The Form of the Personal* published in two volumes *The Self as Agent* 1957 and *Persons in Relation* 1959, especially the latter; Maurice Nedoncelle 1966 *Love and the Person* New York: Sheed and Ward; Robert Johann 1966 *The Meaning of Love* New Jersey: Paulist; and of course Martin Buber's *I and Thou*.

phenomenon of interpersonal causality is to be seen precisely as a more concrete and comprehensive example of this. In the interpersonal transaction that brings about personal growth in us, and which tends towards the community described above, we experience the presence and influence of a transcendent personal power, not as something separate from the human persons involved but as mediated and expressed through their most personal attitudes and acts. And this is the fullest manifestation of a strictly transcendent power in human life. It is experienced in our sheer existence, in our capacity for freedom, and here, most fully, in our personal growth and the community with others that that brings into being. It is only the source of power of this kind that is worthy of being recognised as our god.

If the above account of the necessary conditions for personal growth and community is accurate then we are forced to recognise the reality of a desire that is natural to humankind that only a strictly transcendent power could satisfy. I think that the universality and persistence of the desire for personal growth and community that I have described show it to be natural to humankind, as natural as the desire for food, and that therefore the conditions for the possibility of its fulfilment do exist. I would go further. I think there are experiences that justify our believing that personal growth as I have described it does occur and that the community it makes possible can be achieved.

Such experiences have two sides to them. The first is the experience of personal growth – in oneself. We experience being empowered by another person to be ourselves. We recognise that, in certain particular respects, they know us better than we knew ourselves. We feel a freedom in their presence, able to do things we deeply wanted to but have never before dared. We feel *more ourselves*. This experience brings with it a conviction of their goodness and a determination to be ‘on their side’ whatever happens. And this is the second side, the experience of communion with them. It is often fleeting but it inspires a trust in being part of something that is stronger even than death. The fear of actual death is diminished and replaced by trust, trust in the power of the life we share.

Whatever particular circumstances characterise such experiences, and whether it is recognised or not, they are experiences of a transcendent power that is really operative in human life and are, therefore, a form of religious faith. In a secular world this is the form that religious faith most commonly takes, a kind of personal knowledge, of oneself in relation to another or others. It is not objective knowledge of a kind that could be verified by another, but only by oneself, since it only comes in the way that all personal knowledge of persons is gained, by a kind of opening up or ‘surrender’ to the offer of the other. I have called it a kind of religious faith. That is not quite accurate since faith in this sense is the total attitude of a person. It is, to be precise, the cognitive element in such an attitude and is only made possible

by a concomitant volitional ‘opening up’ and brings with it an emotional element of ‘surrender’. It is often said, in a religious context, that faith is a gift. The complex interpersonal relationship I have described explains this terminology. In such an interpersonal transaction it is often difficult to distinguish one agent from the other, or to decide who is at any moment the active and who the passive partner. In fact it is the presence of transcendent power and agency, in both self and other, and the consequent incommensurability of their action upon each other that accounts for this.

In this article I am concerned to show that far from religion being impossible in a secular society, it is only in a secular society that a form of religion and a conception of a god adequate to a full understanding of human freedom becomes possible. It is only in such a culture, in which all aspects of the supernatural have been demythologised, that we are able to recognise the presence and activity of a genuinely transcendent power in all that happens, in nature and society, but most fully and most intimately in the drama of personal relationships.

My way of understanding the phenomenology of the intersubjective relations of persons, though worked out over many years on my own, has a marked similarity to that of Taylor. He too is concerned to expose the illusory individualism of contemporary secular culture. In *A secular age* he quotes with approval Nancy Huston’s description of having and bringing up a child: “I saw the slow emergence of language, or personality, the incredible construction of a being, its way of ingesting the world, of making it its own, of entering into relation with it” (Taylor 2007:700).⁷ He then goes on to formulate his own account of what is happening:

This is, in fact, one side of something bigger. The child is being led by a parent along a path of growth. But this is not just a service performed by one human being for another. It only succeeds when it is other and more than this, where a bond of love arises. This is a bond where each is a gift to the other, where each gives and receives, and where the line between giving and receiving is blurred. We are quite outside the range of ‘altruistic’ unilateralism (Taylor 2007:702).

He points out that “A Christian would say that what the parent sees in the growing child is some facet of the image of God’ (Taylor 2007:701), and then relates the whole matter to the issue of religion in a secular society: “Now one might conclude that this kind of response to the image of God in others is not really a possibility for us humans, and one might not be able to make sense of this notion of our being given to each other. I think this can be

⁷ Quoted from Nancy Huston, *Professeurs de desespoir* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2004).

real for us, but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God, which means in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by exclusive humanisms. If one does believe that, then one has something very important to say to modern times, something that addresses the fragility of what all of us, believer and unbeliever alike, most value in these times” (Taylor 2007:702).

This concludes my attempt to outline a conception of human nature, and of the necessary conditions for its fulfilment, that has a place for the transcendent, and also some account of how this can be experienced by us. It is this that I would like to offer as a foundation for dialogue between different religions and also, so it seems to me, as a standard for judging both the essential truth and value of the different traditions.

Although different religions have different conceptions of a god there is always a connection (as I have tried to show) between the conception they have of their god and the conception they have of human nature, its capacities and needs. A conception of human nature is implicit in every religion. It is for this reason that there is a basis for real dialogue between them. We all share the same human nature, and it is open to scientific investigation and philosophical reflection. Different aspects of this common nature may be emphasised in the different religions; the same aspects may be presented from different points of view. If human beings do indeed have a transcendent dimension to them it would be unrealistic to expect a simple expression or formula to contain the whole truth about us. On the contrary, the fact that different religions have developed in different regions of the earth and in different cultures can be a positive factor in our ongoing attempt to understand ourselves and the limitless possibilities of human nature.

This being the case, there are two virtues that require cultivation if a creative conversation is to replace religious conflict in the contemporary world. These are genuine openness to the insights of other traditions and a candidly self-critical attitude towards our own. At the present time these virtues are very rare. Yet wherever they do exist one discovers that it is not the fringe-adherents of the different religions who have most in common with each other (as one might suppose) but those most committed to the deep central insights of a tradition who are closest to each other.

That must give one hope for the possibility of a genuine community rather than a forced one between the religions of the world.

It is nevertheless true that religion remains the source of serious conflict in our day and one cannot avoid the responsibility of identifying it. And here the conception of our transcendent humanity that provided a basis for dialogue between religions can also act as standard for judging them.

Although all religions have the same humanity and human nature as their foundation, they arise in very different social and cultural circumstances at different points of history. So their understanding and living out of the religious dimension of our common humanity can be very different: different

religious authorities, different revelations and doctrines, different forms of worship and rules of life. What I have described above constitutes a standard for judging all these manifestations with respect to their humanity: whether they are adequate or inadequate means towards and expressions of personal growth and community. Just as some political ideologies and programmes must be judged inhuman and dehumanising, so too will some religious beliefs and practices.

An evaluation of religion will be more concerned with the religious way of life than with the doctrines or authorities. Because in the sphere of religion we are dealing with something transcendent, the language used to express it and its relationship with us is inevitably symbolic and analogical. Different symbols from different religions could well be expressing the same reality or different aspects of it. There is of course a critical study of this language to be made. But that is not my concern in this article. I am not so much concerned with which religious doctrines are true as with which religious ways of life are good. The two are closely connected of course, but one can't do everything at once.

The history of religion is a very ambiguous one. There is both humanity and inhumanity. I am not here concerned with what is *actually* done in the name of religion. We all suffer to a greater or lesser extent from weakness of will. We all have psychic wounds. We are all subject to social conditioning and pressure. We all fail to practise what we preach. I am concerned with what religions say we *ought* to do. And clearly there is a religious justification of inhumanity that we must recognise and overcome.

War is the clearest sign of inhumanity in religion. There can be just wars but no-one would argue that all religious wars were just. And very few religions are innocent of promoting unjust war. To this one could add a host of inhuman punishments and practices: the religious justification of torture and killing in Christian inquisitions, the Hindu caste system and suttee, Muslim punishments and mutilation, the inhuman penalties in Jewish and Muslim law – the list is endless. Indeed, because of the nature of the power that is alone capable of developing our capacity for self-determination and creating personal community, any attempt by religion to espouse force of any kind for religious purposes must be rejected. I am not only thinking of the force of arms, but any coercive power whatsoever. Any exercise of authority (especially by religious leaders) to enforce obedience by social, or even certain kinds of psychological, pressure is destructive of our humanity and the enemy of authentic faith. The force of example alone is permitted.

But there is a more fundamental manifestation of inhumanity in religion. This is the denial of human freedom, the failure to treat persons as self-determining beings whose growth and fulfilment depends on the development of precisely this capacity. This denial shows itself in all sorts of ways, including those practices mentioned above. All of them illustrate the failure

to treat persons as persons. But by far the most universal form of the failure to recognise human freedom by religion is its denial to women. In almost every religion known to history, and certainly in the major religions of the contemporary world, the full humanity of women is contradicted both by doctrines and by sanctioned practice. Until women and men have the same authority and responsibility to define doctrine and prescribe a religious way of life in the different religions, they cannot develop their common humanity to the full. Quite apart from actual laws that are inhuman, such as polygamy, the denial of authority to make the laws under which they live is most seriously dehumanising for women. The complementarity of the different genders entails *equality* of participation by women and men in those spheres of life – such as health-care, education and policing – that are directly concerned with personal growth and community in society. And religion is foremost among these.

The dehumanisation of women promoted and sanctioned by all the major religions is a sign of a still deeper failure to achieve an authentic religious expression of our humanity. It is a sign of the religious denial of human freedom in its fundamental teaching about the relationship between us and God. And this in turn is intimately connected with different actual conceptions of their god and their god's power. Briefly stated, the failure of most religions to recognise human freedom is connected to an idolatrous conception of a god as a less than wholly transcendent being. Our god's activity and ours are simply contrasted and opposed, just as two finite worldly powers would be.

There is another sign of the inhumanity of religion which is the opposite of this denial of human freedom. It is the denial of human community, the failure to recognise that every form of religion must serve our common humanity. And that humanity can only be fulfilled in community, a community that is inherently universal. Insofar as the different religions are determined to see themselves as competitors, fixed in exclusive structures and traditions, they deny the destination of our humanity in a universal community. Every religion should recognise the limitations of its forms of doctrine, authority and life, and be concerned that the central dynamism of its life is open to other traditions. Not that it should be uncritical, especially of itself. A critical attitude is an essential aspect of authentic religion. But it should be able to recognise authentic faith in whatever way it is expressed or in whatever tradition it is at home.

If religion is in fact to supply the spiritual power to enable personal growth to take place and community to be created in the different spheres of life, then these two aspects that are lacking in the sphere of religion must be overcome. The main impediments are a mistaken idea of God and God's relation to us that affects our understanding of human freedom, and a moral failure to release the familiar symbols of security in our own religious tradi-

tions. Certainly there cannot be a closing of the gap between the developed and undeveloped countries without a movement towards community between the different religious traditions of the world. And they can only do this by recognising and valuing what they have in common, namely our humanity and its fulfillment.

Secularisation is the acid test of the humanity of a religious tradition because it puts self-determining humanity at the centre of its world-view as the source of knowledge and power. Only a religion that can recognise human freedom to the full, both as a fact about human nature and as a value for human life, can survive in a scientific age. And any religion whose gods are in any way in competition with humanity for control of the world, any set of supernatural powers whatever, is unable to do this. Only a power incommensurable with human power in the way I have explained above is compatible with the existence and enactment of human freedom. And such a power is not part of or in the world in any way, not different from or opposed to human powers in the way that supernatural powers are conceived to be. Supernatural powers are unreal but God is not.

Many religions have yet to pass this test. They will have to take it. The secular world-view is here to stay, because the science and the technology on which it is based are here to stay. All religions will have to go through the "brook of fire" in which all gods incompatible with human freedom are destroyed. (This "brook of fire" is Marx's reference to Ludwig Feuerbach, whose book *The essence of Christianity* (1955) was one of the first attempts to make room for religion in a secular world-view.)

Christianity, as the dominant European religion, has as a whole suffered most and also progressed furthest in its engagement with secularisation. There are, however, Christian denominations that are, of all religious communities, among the most resistant to this process. Fundamentalism, the literal understanding of all religious language, in revelation, scripture or dogma, is a sign of this inability to come to terms with a secular world-view. It is a real threat to genuine faith as well as a denial of human freedom. It fits very well with Freud's description of religion as a neurosis, a mechanism of projection and wish-fulfilment, as well as Marx's understanding of it as an expression of alienation, or Sartre's seeing it as a form of 'bad faith'. It is ironic that Christian fundamentalists do not see that their religion would be identified as idolatry by the prophets of the Old Testament of which they claim to be the only true interpreters.

Other religious traditions, such as Islam, have still a long way to go in this direction. Traditional African religions have, on the face of it, even further to go, coming as they do from an even more sacral background. But the non-dualistic character of African thought is an advantage here, and there are signs that these religions can adapt more easily to a secular world than those that have grown up in contact with and in opposition to it. To the extent

that all religious traditions in South Africa absorb the spirit of the African notion of *ubuntu* (which means humanity as a quality of a person and which is the central notion in traditional African ethics), the process of secularisation will be easier. And it is certainly essential if the different religious traditions in South Africa (and the world?) are to make genuine contact with one another and so make possible a single humane society with many different cultures in one country. From what I have argued in this article it should be evident that only authentic religion can supply the kind of power that can do this.

A good example of this, drawn from recent South African history, is the role played by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in our Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For all its faults the Commission was a powerful symbolic bridge, over which our minds could cross from an apartheid state to a new democratic South Africa. And it was animated by the humane spirit, the spirit of *ubuntu*, of a religious leader. This spirit shines out from the pages of his book on the Commission, *No future without forgiveness*. I conclude this overlong essay with its closing words:

Our experiment is going to succeed because God wants us to succeed, not for our glory and aggrandisement but for the sake of God's world. God wants to show that there is life after conflict and repression – that because of forgiveness there is a future (Tutu 1999:223).

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