Chapter 8

Making Sense of the Two Versions of Secularism as Public Policy: A Perspective from Philosophical Theology[1]

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Introduction: Shift in Philosophical Framework

My starting point is James Leatt's recent theological memoir *Conjectures* (2021), outlining his journey from Methodism to a non-Christian spirituality. The context is our secular culture, one in which, on his account, the cards are stacked against any version of the Christian faith. Leatt has to confront: a concept of God that is, for Analytic philosophers, problematically vacuous; the impossibility of justifying divine benevolence in the face of the Holocaust; the scandalous supposed particularity of Christianity in a plural culture; and an awareness, through the sociology of religion, of the social (rather than truth-linked) determinants of anyone's faith.

Given the weakening pull of traditional Christianity, any attempt to develop a secular spirituality must be welcomed. But one can question whether Leatt[2] has adequately interrogated how the religion at issue here is put to one side in contemporary secular culture, pushing him to go east, to find symbols that allow people to reach beyond themselves.[3]

1 A version of this chapter was published as "A Theological Response to Secularism as Public Policy." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 88.4 (2023): 340-356.

2 James Leatt, *Conjectures. Living with Questions* (Cape Town: Karavan Press, 2021), 172–173.

3 Leatt, *Conjectures*, 137.

This chapter will suggest, in contrast, that at the heart of secularity are symbols that draw us towards the transcendent, a transcendence that has much to do with the Christian religious traditions from which the culture emerged. This point could be missed if one buys into the exclusive secular picture. In the face of this, the struggle would be to bring out the transcendence central to the humanist project. This will mean, as argued in section three below, interrogating the oversight, in secular culture, of the value of solidarity. The vision of a secular society governed not through force but by democratic consensus presupposes the commitment to solidarity on the part of the citizens. This would imply a widespread attitude that puts the community of dialogue above simply getting one's own way. This, as will be argued, reveals a specific religious dimension in "ordinary" secular culture.

Paradoxically, we can trace the neglect of this dimension to the oversights of the religious traditions themselves from which public society seeks to distance itself. And this in two different ways, corresponding to the two versions of the Christian religion which the public body puts to one side. Very roughly, this is the Protestant and the Catholic, but in each case carrying the burden – precisely because it attempts to be authentic and orthodox – of a philosophical framework that no longer has purchase in contemporary culture. It is crucial, then, in any theology that seeks to speak not only to "insiders," to uncover the philosophical issues at stake.

First, however, it is important to highlight the mostly overlooked transcendent dimension that attaches to the secular culture, its elements of re-enchantment. For the broad background to the emergence of secularity is the shift from a cosmological frame of thinking to the frame of subjectivity. This shift is associated with the rise of science, in particular Galileo's turn from a geocentric to a heliocentric model, bringing to the fore our critical awareness of our perspective, our subjectivity. This critical awareness arguably has its remote origins in the emergence of a more humanist understanding of religion in the Axial Age of the major world religions, 800 – 200 BCE and taken

further after that. For Charles Taylor,[4] this move of the Axial Age is complemented by a transcendent understanding of the divine, by the development of second-order thinking, and by a globality of vision. Among the examples are the post-exilic Hebrew prophets, Gautama's simplification of the Hindu tradition, and the breakthrough in the classic Greek philosophical culture.[5] This can lead to seeing secular society precisely as emerging *from* Christianity, as for example Marcel Gauchet does,[6] describing Christianity as, in his phrase, "la religion de la sortie de la religion," the religion that exits from religion.[7] For this reason it is plausible that along with what appears as "disenchantment" there will also be, in contemporary culture, much "re-enchantment"; one commentator points to Heidegger, Rilke, and Musil, as examples of writers giving expression to this.[8]

The shift in philosophical framework has a crucial impact on theological reflection. What we are talking about is a new horizon for such reflection, which we can provisionally refer to as that of "interiority." We are no longer spectators of a world already there, but internally co-creative of the world; we are also self-consciously historical. The new horizon takes shape as an awakening to this interior world of meaning in terms of which our freedom of self-determination is given expression and put into effect. A random quote from the point of view of the art of painting gives the flavour of the new orientation, shifting from observing to participating. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' Romantic Movement this frame of reference is "discovered," as Coleridge formulates it: "In looking at objects of nature… as at yonder moon, dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane,

4 Charles, Taylor "What was the Axial Revolution?" in R. Bellah and H. Joas (eds.), *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap, 2012), 30–31.

5 Cf. Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation* (Anchor Books, 2006); Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap, 2011).

6 Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantment du Monde* (Paris : Gallimard, 1985), 197.

7 Cf. Patrick Giddy, "Is the Essence of Christianity a Disenchanted World? A Critical Discussion of Marcel Gauchet." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 38 (2019): 313–329.

8 Peter Watson, *The Age of Nothing* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), 243.

I seem rather to be seeking a symbolic language for something within me that forever and already exists, than observing anything new, a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature."[9]

The divide between subject as observer on the one side and observed object on the other, is challenged by the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, associated with Hegel. In this view, consciousness is never simply closed in its subjective self but is always reaching out to the world. Suzanne Langer, again, affirms this whole shift in mental approach, seeing reality not simply as "there" but in terms of symbolic transformation.[10] This "new key" to philosophy, in her book's title, describes her research into "the symbolism of reason, rite, and art." The "view from above," the cosmic view of "man" as below the angels, above the beasts, is here superseded. A new slant on the normativity of human lives is called for, one that still has to be properly thematised in secular culture.

All this throws up a problem for the religions. The defining doctrines and the rules constitutive of how the religion takes institutional form, are now seen as relative to the personal journeying that is our new horizon of reflection. Of the religious symbol it is noted by Eugene Webb: "To call it by a name and speak of it as though it had a specific entative status is not to know it as an entity, but to give metaphysical expression to an aspiration; it is to aim toward and seek to 'evoke' fidelity to the goal of the dynamic process."[11] What can be lost in the process of institutionalising the religion is clarity about the analogical character of the symbols and their limitations. Voegelin phrases the problem in terms of "the general deformation of experiential symbols into doctrines."[12]

9 Quoted in Peter Quennell, *Romantic England. Writing and Painting 1717-1851* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 174–174.

10 Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

11 Eugene Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness: Polanyi, Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur, Girard, Kierkegaard* (Seattle, Wa.: University of Washington Press, 2014), 93.

12 Eric Voegelin, *Order and History 4* in Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 107.

Similarly, Karl Jaspers: what is being sought, he says, is a way to structure our lives, *Existenzerhellung*, elucidation of our *Existenz*, not of a general "I at large". Jaspers explains the religious symbol:

> Not everyone will recognize himself in it, but each one does so more or less, both in adoption and rejection, by translating it into his own reality as this very individual. Its communication has many meanings and may be misunderstood. Its appeal to the man to whom it appeals at all will be to involve his self.[13]

If one goes along with this, a big shift is in order for the way the religions present themselves today. Of any religious person we are now more self-consciously aware of the dimension of their psychological reality, something unpicked by countless novelists. The case of the Baptist missionary in Barbara Kingsolver's (1998) *The Poisonwood Bible*, or, earlier, that of the pastor in Gide's (1919) *La Symphonie Pastorale* are well-known examples. Similarly, taking now the case of Catholic Christianity, religious communities may be found, as one does the necessary research,[14] to harbour real psychological abuse; an example here would be those bodies – properly seen as sects – that flourished under the papacy of John-Paul II, Liberation and Communion, Neocathecumenate, and Focolare, now being investigated by the Vatican.[15]

The distancing of ourselves from our "spectator" view of the world, our cosmocentricism, takes institutional form as empirical scientific method. Theology must therefore come to terms with this. In the first place we can note that the sciences offer not certain objective truths but hypotheses verified by the data so far as is at present known. That is to say, the active and collaborative judgement of the scientists is foregrounded.

13 Quoted in Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 119.
14 For example, G. Urquhart, *The Pope's Armada* (Corgi Books, 1996).
15 *National Catholic Reporter*, "Spiritual abuse occurs more frequently than believed, Vatican official says." From: https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/spiritual-abuse. Accessed 15th November 2021.

Secondly, the sciences, by virtue of their own nature, do not thematise the scientist themselves as agents, formulating the methods, affirming the value of evidence-based conclusions. For this, a different kind of discipline is needed. Philosophy finds its role in thematising our self-awareness, unpacking what is presupposed to any particular science, namely the scientist as self-conscious agent, deliberately deciding on their research topic and standing by the reasonableness of their findings. From the data of this intentionality there is described a phenomenology of taking up one's life, an outline of the necessary conditions for growth in self-understanding and in integrity of will. The secular context would thus seem to call up philosophy as a necessary and central frame of thinking. Whatever the findings of the particular sciences, biological, sociological and so on, these cannot, without an internal self-stultification, conclude to a picture that is reductionist, that denies this capacity to take up our lives in this partially self-determining way – and this includes any psychological unpacking of religious faith. Self-transcendence is part and parcel of an authentic secular approach. The fragile nature of the actual achievement of self-transcendence gives rise, as we shall see below, to the discipline of theology.

Two Versions of Secularist Public Policy

Secularism as public policy is an ethical move, associated with the value of free and democratic consensus, putting religion to one side. But we can distinguish, as mentioned above, two different ways of conceiving this policy. The version of secularity best known in our own context – which I am going to term Version B since the religious culture associated with it came on the scene later – is typical of Anglophone cultures and is based on a scepticism about any version of absolute truth; rather, each person has the right to put forward their understanding of personal truth, and so do the religions. The key principle is that of the equality of all such claims. Ethics is a matter of the principles of fairness. There is an imperative to act in a way that you can will it of any person, the principle of your action should be universalizable. For Kant, it is in this attitude that lies the dignity of the human person. The approach of the Enlightenment, central to Kant's

thinking, is summed up by the idea that each person should stand on their own feet: *sapere aude*, dare to be wise, is how Kant puts it. For this reason, there can be no determining religious authority in society. But at the same time, the state has no jurisdiction over what the religion holds to be true and of value. The slogan for this version of secular policy could be, "Leave them alone."

The blind spot in this ethical approach has to do with the problem of motivation. Without sanctions or framing of the kind that religion offers, there might not be the necessary motivation to follow those principles of fairness if one can flout them with impunity. In the secular-adjusted version of the religion, God may be seen as the ultimate fair judge. But this in turn throws up the problem of natural disasters such as plagues, by the nature of things not at all "fair" to the innocent victims. The "problem of evil" questions how this is possible and this has spawned the intellectual field of theodicy. The failure of theodicy would put the whole religion in doubt.

The second version, Version A, more typical of Francophone countries and termed *laïcité*, focuses on the human potential for free self-determination and on hence on the free formation of conscience in order to actualise this potential. This is the duty of the secular state, re-emphasised recently by Emmanuel Macron in a debate with Marine Le Pen, taking care to distinguish this from the citizen's free choice of religion and religious symbols in the civic public space: veil, soutane, turban, saffron robe, religious habit, and so on. (The near-complete covering of the face, as in the burka, is forbidden for reasons of public security[16]). Democracy is seen as resistance to heteronomy, and heteronomy is associated with religion. Which symbols will prevail, in the minds and hearts of the citizens, remains open, those of liberty and equality (symbolised in the recent pantheonisation of Josephine Baker), or those of religion (symbolised, for example, in the canonisation of John-Paul II). In this sense, *laïcité* can be seen in terms of the slogan, "Leave us alone."

16 As explained in Michel Miaille, *La Laïcité. Solutions d'Hier Problèmes d'Aujourd'hui* (Paris: Editions Dalloz, 2016), 76–77.

The blind spot of this ethical approach has to do not with motivation as such, but with the *quality* of such motivation: without the proper symbolisation of the capacity for self-determination, for transcendence, the culture will become shallow. But there is a problem, because the *normativity* of the freedom or self-transcendence (the basis for any judgement that the culture is "shallow") would seem bound up with the framing of a cosmic hierarchy – which is precisely what is being *resisted* in democracy. For this reason, one can expect a drift into the extremes of a transhumanism and, in reaction, a shift of citizens to the political right.[17] It leads also to philosophical theological critiques of modernity and the secular state as such.[18]

The two versions of secularity can be seen as derivative of the two distinct understandings of the religion that is now put aside. In Version A, that of *laïcité*, the classic religious perspective was founded on an understanding of the god as fully transcendent, answering to the anxiety of the Ancient World, felt to be at the hands of powers beyond their control, the anxiety of "fate." In the framing normative order now newly established, the natural human potential to flourish is given and brought into actualisation by divine grace, working through normal human capacities, and takes institutional form in hierarchies of power that reflect and symbolise the god's founding position.

In Version B, the religious perspective – now in the context of the rise of the new middle class and greater individualism – answered to the anxiety not of the cosmic order as such but of any person's particular place in the order of salvation: are they matching up to what is demanded of them as an individual. The old hierarchical order is seen as a block to this kind of critical self-awareness. It is an anxiety of guilt and condemnation and is founded on an understanding of human "fault," but God is the power that brings about a reversal of this, through – the central emphasis here – the believer's reorientation, made possible by

17 See, for example, Bertrand Vergely's discussion of transhumanism in French culture and law; Bertrand Vergely, *Transhumanisme: la Grande Illusion* (Paris : Le Passeur, 2019).

18 For example, discussed below, those of Remi Brague and Alasdair MacIntyre.

God's gratuitous and intervening gift of Christ. The key point is that of "justification" (by faith alone); the religion is in a sense defined by its opposition to the Catholic hierarchical picture.

In both cases, as we will see, there are elements of re-enchantment – in a secular frame of thinking. The secular upshot of the changes is not devoid of transcendence. But this is not the case with a third version of religion, Deism (influenced by Newtonian science and the new ethic of commerce). Deism has it that human beings function autonomously in a more or less closed system of physical and moral transactions; the distant God is there as a guarantee, a security blanket, as it were, for counter-examples to or failures of the system.[19] This is religion justified through theodicy, and it is a justification found inauthentic, and indeed to be resisted, by the central character in Albert Camus's *The Plague* (Dr Rieux in dialogue with a priest)[20] and likewise, more recently, in *Snow*, the novel by Ohran Pamuk (Ka in dialogue with an Islamic activist).[21]

If you subtract the religious dimension from this third version, you get to a secular culture of "closed immanence." Various forms of reductionism are seen as plausible: there is an absence of the validity of personal knowledge, an *Absence of Mind*, in the title of M. Robinson's short book.[22] If knowledge properly speaking is of objects (something we have suggested above is self-stultifying, leaving out the scientist as *agent*), then, as Hume argued and Leatt links to Buddhism, there is no "self" to be known as such. That means there is no subject of a possible re-enchantment. This impersonal and "closed" world is the dismal vision of Daniel Dennett.[23] It lurks in the background of the secular culture.

19 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap, 2007), Chapter 6.
20 Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. S. Gilbert (New York: Vintage, [1947] 1991).
21 Ohran Pamuk, *Snow*, trans. M. Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
22 Marilynne Robinson, *The Absence of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
23 Daniel Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (London: Penguin Books, 2017).

We turn now to the two more helpful versions of secularity. I start with the Version B religion. Eliding the religious dimension here, you arrive at the "Anglophone" version of secularity, described above: human beings are essentially blocked in the exercise of their intellect and of their power of willing, hampered in what they can know and in the scope of their willingness. There is a default scepticism about "grand narratives" (Popper). Religions have, of course, themselves an equal "right" to be respected in their beliefs, and not judged.

For Paul Tillich, from whose writings I have sketched the two versions of the Christian faith, neither of these has purchase in contemporary culture. "The contents of the tradition, however excellent, however praised, however loved once, lose their power to give content today."[24] But he points, in particular, to the Version B religion as problematic in putting to one side a philosophical anthropology that could ground a new expression of the tradition. The upshot of this (he is speaking of some Protestant theologians) is that "the doctrinal concepts of the biblical message were preached as objective truth without any attempt to mediate the message to man in his psychosomatic and psycho-social existence."[25] The choice of a "yes" or "no" to God is too abstracted from the actual intersubjective conditions of human growth.

The oversight is shared by the culture *and* the version of the religion associated with it. The take-away point here is then to see how, within these frames of thinking, one could integrate the "yay" or "nay," the basic orientation, in a philosophical anthropology. For example, Lonergan has argued that there is an ineluctable existential dialectic thrown up by the human condition, as one moves into the world of meaning and of value, issuing in moments of "conversion" on an intellectual and also psychic level.[26] Staying with our frame of interiority, the centrality of our symbolic world, we may point to the cross as a symbol of

24 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins, 1962), 55.
25 Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 131–132.
26 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (2nd ed. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), Chapter 10.

persons facing down rejection, and by a difficult inversion of one's immediate trajectory, giving hope.

Turning to Version A, if you elide the religious dimension, you arrive at the "Francophone" version of secularity: human beings have a natural capacity to determine their own lives. A good example of this kind of thinking is that of Luc Ferry's *La Revolution de l'Amour* (2010), "The Revolution of Love," subtitled, *Pour une spiritualité laique*, Toward a secular spirituality.[27] Religion is set aside as obstructing this through its heteronomous point of view, and its hierarchical forms of social arrangements. Growth in human self-understanding and in a more whole-hearted orientation towards true flourishing seem to be blocked by the hierarchical expressions of God's role and of the cosmology. But, as mentioned, without the proper symbolisation this orientation (to truth and charity) tends to evaporate; culture becomes shallow, the most marketable products tend to swallow up all the rest. Shrove Tuesday morphs into the Rio carnival.

The take-away point here, to be discussed in detail in the following section, is not to see normativity as inevitably linked to a pre-modern cosmology and theology, but to embrace its re-articulation within the new frame of thinking.

Religion and the Blind Spot of a Secular Culture

We have identified a blind spot in secular culture, of either kind: the difficulty of articulating, in a culture that has gone beyond the cosmocentric, "theological," framework, the human powers of self-determination and transcendence, the foundation of any commitment to solidarity. Lonergan compares the situation to that of the Trobriand islanders as described by Malinowski. While in matters of practical living the islanders exercise their rational faculties, Malinowski observes, beyond that realm intelligence yields to magic and myth. Our own scientific culture has similarly been content, Lonergan writes,

27 Luc Ferry, *La Révolution de l'Amour. Pour une spiritualité laique* (Paris: Plon, 2010); *Vaincre les Peurs* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007).

> merely to make more cultivated and more civilized the intelligent and rational part of Trobriand living, while maintaining a surrounding no man's land which used to be inhabited by myth and magic but which is now empty – we do not admit, Here be strange beasts; we simply do not bother about it.[28]

The Version A religion can be said to offer a positive contribution to this neglected dimension of the modern secular project, as envisioning for persons the growth of holiness. This contribution is, however, blocked by the inappropriate "fit" of the symbolisation of such holiness, namely in a hierarchical and authoritative – or authoritarian, heteronomous – idea of the actual genesis of such holiness. On the other hand, in Version B religion we have a recognition of the centrality of personal choice as a key element in the religion, but this contribution is hampered by a supernaturalistic framing of such authentic choice, bypassing the psychology of personal growth, as pointed out by Tillich.

We can now focus on this fundamental problematic of secular culture. The cosmocentric theological frame of thinking prescribing what the telos is of human "nature" has been dethroned in favour of the idea of the human person's self-creation through the world of symbols. Humans are *pour-soi* (for-itself) rather than *en-soi* (in-itself). There is no fixed mould into which we must fit, as argued at the very start of the modern period in Pic della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. God is here addressing Adam:

> Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other things is limited and constrained with the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, unconstrained by no limits, in accordance with thy own free will, in whose hands

28 *Understanding and Being*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 5 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1990), 101.

> we have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.[29]

To this, because of the neglect of the reenchanted, and transcendent, dimension to secularity, there has been a reaction, thinkers who would turn back to the pre-modern articulation of "human nature" given from above. As showing where Mirandola's picture tends towards, Remi Brague quotes Marlowe's Dr Faustus:

> O what a world of profit and delight
> Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
> Is promised to the studious artizans!...
> A sound magician is a mighty god.
> Here, Faustus, tire thy brains to gain a deity.[30]

The unconstrained freedom described by Mirandola is going to lead to the fantasy of a god-like power. Brague comments on the loss of all cosmological or theological context for understanding human nature: "Instead of the claim that it is man who ought to receive his norm from an external authority, it is he who determines what can claim authority over him. The relationship between man and the divine takes on the form of 'it's either him or me.' Humanism must thus tend to become an atheism."[31]

MacIntyre makes a similar point to that of Brague about the loss of normative human nature, exemplified in the eighteenth century in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, representative of modernity's hubris. Rameau's nephew cannot be persuaded to follow his uncle's set of norms: he simply appeals to a different set of desires. "What divides them," MacIntyre suggests, "is the question of precisely which of our desires are to be acknowledged as legitimate guides to action, and which on the other hand are to be inhibited, frustrated or re-educated; and clearly this question cannot be answered by trying to use our desires themselves as

29 Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. trans. A. R. Caponigri (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, [1496] 1956), 7.
30 Cited in Remi Brague, *The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and Failure of the Modern Project* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 58–59.
31 Brague, *The Kingdom of Man*, 30.

some sort of criterion."[32] Later, MacIntyre again refers to this text of Diderot as "the classic statement" of the problem. He comments that the unity of the self demands that one assent to some or other more or less arbitrary hierarchy of preferences, even if this requires the repression of inner conflict.[33]

But we have been introducing a frame of thinking that sees what it is that one has to become as discerned gradually through engagement with the world of symbolic meaning. The content of the normativity is not prescribed from the start by our reason, as the "correct desires." One discovers not a "what" but a "who." "Who is a man?" asks Lonergan,[34] "Who is to be a man? The answer is 'I', 'We'. ...What has to be a man is not just any instance of rational animal...." It is the journey that creates one's identity, and given the right intersubjective conditions, an ethos of solidarity, it can lead towards what makes for a flourishing life. Such an ethos cannot be said to be imposed from "above," for in this religious tradition the "above" is seen as fully transcendent, and the idea of an "external" as contrasted with an "internal" determination is not pertinent here – a point made by Bishop Hippolyte Simon.[35] God's "ought" cannot *rival* man's free choice. So, *pace* Brague, there is no necessary slide into atheism.

If the blind spot of post-secular religion B is a tendency to non-foundationalism and to a supernaturalism (seeing the "above" as able to countermand a determination from "below"), the blind spot of post-secular religion A is a tendency to see any normative human flourishing as to be rejected because it is necessarily bound up precisely with that pre-modern cosmology. It is important, therefore, for our project of philosophical theology in a secular context, to suggest how ethics may indeed have a foundation, a "natural" one, but not linked to an ontology that commits one to a premodern approach. Only if this is so, will there be solid grounds for eschewing the non-foundationalism and the supernaturalism of post-secular religion B.

32 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 46.
33 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1998), 346.
34 Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education*. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 10 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1993), 81.
35 *Vaincre les Peurs*, 182.

What is "natural" to human persons, in our secular framework, is the demand on oneself to make something of oneself, the world of interiority and self-discovery described earlier by Coleridge. But how does one judge the quality of any such self-making? The very question presupposes a commitment to developing a community of meaning. Walking down a crowded street I feel a sharp pain in my side and see a stranger had tripped and tried to correct his fall; or I see hurrying away the colleague with whom I had harsh words at this morning's departmental meeting. From the point of view of "what happened" (my pain) the intention makes no difference. From the point of view of what it means, that is to say ethics, the intention makes all the difference, qualifying the act as mean or vindictive – or else simply clumsy. No *external* account of ethics is strictly speaking possible – for example, conforming to "human nature" thought of in terms of biology or as value-neutral. The ethical terms picking out the "quality" of the act, only make sense in a community of meaning.

The upshot is that the condition of possibility of ethics is that I must be able to "get" the other's intention and vice-versa. This means that implicit in my ethical intentionality is a commitment to this community of dialogue. It is this commitment that is the foundation for ethics rather than anything "objective," "human nature" as thought of in the cosmological frame of reference. The foundational act is affirming myself as a participant in co-creating our common world of value. It is a question of identity but not in the sense of a conflictual "identity politics." It is also and foremost a natural response to the other person's commitment to a community of dialogue.

Secular culture, tainted by the post-religion oversights of A and of B, neglects this basic need for such commitment to solidarity (Habermas). This is the dimension that Taylor refers to as the need for recognition, and its neglect spawns the unhelpful "politics of identity."[36] That need for solidarity and for recognition was met in a pre-secular culture by the given

36 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

social roles in a hierarchical society.[37] The need would now have to be met through the fostering of every person's journey, informed by the conditions for such journeying uncovered by the social and psychological sciences. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is identified by Mary Clark[38] and by Zenon Szablowinski[39] (2020) as a welcome anomaly to secular public policy.

But this is not just a question of an institutional or ecclesial dimension: this approach can be delineated, finally, as highlighting a specifically religious need. This is because the recognition of the other, and the attitude of forgiveness that can "restart" the solidarity, points to a predicament: each person, needing recognition, cannot by virtue of that all-consuming need, give it. Yet recognition does occur, as evidenced in persons' growth in integrity of will and in overcoming self-deception. That gives us good grounds for a reasonable trust in a power transcendent of all finite powers, all powers blocked by the impasse referred to above. Religion, appropriately symbolised in its person-directed and aspirational aspect, would seem central to a more consequential secular culture. The symbol of sacral hierarchy needs to be replaced by embodied symbols of participative journeying. And this would seem to fit in with the transformation, in the life of Jesus and the subsequent narratives of his life, of the messiah-symbol, the Christ.

The Self-understanding of the Christian Faith

Finally, is it possible that the religious traditions could be authentically reframed in a secular context? In principle, it seems so, *pace* Leatt. We have described above the secular frame of a world of symbols by which we live our lives, a world of interiority, a community of meaning entailing transcendence. An integral element here is an implicit affirmation of a non-finite power presupposed to the drama of personal growth and community.

37 See Claire Morin, *Être à sa Place – Habiter sa Vie, Habiter son Corps* (Paris: Observatoire, 2022).
38 Mary Clark, *In Search of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 2022).
39 Zenon Szablowinski, "Religion (Un)wanted in a Secular Age." *Heythrop Journal* LXI (2020): 595–606.

But how, if at all, would this fit with the dogmatic formulations of the faith?

In answering this, the role of philosophical theology is crucial. We have introduced the idea that human self-transcendence is an overlooked but central dimension of a culture understood as secular. It enables citizens' recognition of and consent to a pluralism in the culture. In its absence, furthermore, we could have no idea of what it is for God, in the traditional way of formulating the faith, to take up and perfect human form. For example, under the influence of Wittgenstein's scepticism about our ability to unpack such transcendence, Rowan Williams wants to put strict limits on any project that gives an interpretation of the Christian faith in the terms of a philosophical psychology. For Williams, "we do not have available the criteria that would help us settle what is and is not a plausible or persuasive narrative account of the basic claim" of God taking human form.[40]

On our account, however, it makes no sense to follow Wittgenstein here, who sees no possibility of a philosophical psychology in general; for him, there is nothing to be identified, in any action or behaviour, as "willing." "What is left over," he asks in his *Philosophical Investigations*,[41] para. 621, "if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" The trying, the willing, he points out, is nothing else but the action itself (para. 615). This view is, however, firmly refuted by the narratives in the global traditions of literature where the central character's "willing" is convincingly problematised by, for example, uncovering elements of self-delusion. This could equally be the case in the gospel narratives. So, the normativity of the human person, the human form, as seen by religious faith is

40 Rowan Williams, "Imagining Christ in Literature." In Francesca Arana Murphy and Troy A. Stefano (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 488–489, quoted in Khegan Delport, "The fall and rise of King Oedipus: On sacrificial logic and 'Proto-Christology'." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (2021). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2021.v7n1.a2 Online ISSN 2226-2385.

41 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

not something that must necessarily be introduced from outside the human psychological drama.

Delport notes[42] that for Williams, whereas Christ's human nature may well be unpacked in terms of "a recognizable human psyche" (quoting Williams), this cannot be the case with his divine nature. Something therefore has to be said about this traditional dogmatic formulation of the Christian faith. The key point is to note how this formulation, so taken for granted, reflects a very different cultural frame of reference to the one we have been evoking above.

It is useful to distinguish here, as Lonergan does, three different realms or frameworks of meaning.[43] First, we can pick out the common-sense frame of thinking of the biblical story telling, and contrast it with the theoretical frame of thinking that was introduced so memorably in the classical Greek philosophical period. Even as the evangelical narratives were being composed in their language of story and metaphor, a more theoretical interest was at hand, concerned to formulate the nature or essence of Jesus as the Christ. The influence of the Greek philosophers is palpable. Theory looks for internal coherence, as Socrates does, challenging the common-sense answers of his interlocuters. But of any "common sense" cultural framework, a similar point may be made. The traditional wisdom traditions of Kenya have been canvassed by Odera Oruka. To the question, "Why is there death?" the wise answer is given, "To make room for the young." This, however, is susceptible of the critical question, "What about sparsely populated areas such as deserts?"[44] With theory there is a new realm of conversation. Mass and temperature are not objects in the world of common sense. Mass is not how heavy it is and temperature is not the same as how hot or cold it feels (metal feels colder than wood).

So, one asks, which is the real table, the hard surface I touch, or the atoms and molecules described in physical

42 Delport, "The fall and rise of King Oedipus," 19.
43 *Method in Theology*, 85–100.
44 Gail Presbey, "African Sage Philosophy and Socrates: Midwifery and Method." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (2002): 177–192.

theory? One lives in two worlds, the one I must deal with for my biological survival (the table's hard surface), and the one I grasp through understanding the terms and relations of physics and which I can verify. In this way, my mind becomes the site of a differentiated, rather than compact, consciousness. The third realm of meaning, interiority, centres on my relation to my own cognitional operations, so that I do not mistake the theory by itself as giving knowledge of the thing. Through theory, I make sense of the data, as patristics make sense of Jesus. But I must also be reasonable in judging the possible completeness or otherwise of the theory. Does it cover all the evidence? In the final analysis, there is a demand on myself to be responsible in applying my powers of knowing, in appropriating my subjectivity. Within the frame of interiority – which takes many cultural changes to come to consciousness – theory is relativised. A man or woman, for example, is now seen not simply as an instance of "rational animal" (the theory), but rather has to become someone, the burden of existentialist philosophy.

The achievements envisaged in any normative appropriation of human willing – the new frame of thinking – amount to growth in the quality of one's actual self-transcendence. This is the quality of life that can be seen, analogically, as sharing in God's non-finite transcendence. It is a quality that is described in the biblical texts in terms of the "wisdom" and "word" of God. The "Logos" idea, employed in particular in John's gospel narrative, can be seen as holding that such self-transcendence is sourced in God's self-communication; the idea of "Spirit" as a co-eternal reality can be seen as affirming that such self-communication is in fact effective in the recipient.

We can, in contrast, take one example of how the theoretical frame of thinking has determined the form in which the Christian faith has come down to us. Christ must be divine, argues Irenaeus, because otherwise it would not be the actual presence and power of God we are taking about in the case of Jesus; and he must be human, to sum up our human flesh and blood life.[45] These descriptions are in terms of "nature," human and divine. Roger

45 Cf. Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (New York: Orbis, 1999), chapter 9.

Haight argues, discussing the Nicaean formulations, that this way of putting it is not central to the faith. "The language of a hypostasized Logos constituted the milieu of the discussion. But that very framework has become part of the problem; it has lost its plausibility and power in a postmodern intellectual culture."[46] For Haight, the meaning of Nicaea is, simply, "that no less than God was and is present and at work in Jesus."[47] Unpacked in this way, he argues, we have a language of faith that is not a mythological way of speaking, but nor is the Logos hypostasized.

Conclusion

The debate on religion in a secular culture is about our understanding of autonomy. Does autonomy exclude anything "higher?" Or is autonomy, on the contrary, very much what a religion in a secular culture is all about? Is religion at the heart of the growth of freedom in human history? This is what we have been suggesting. The suggestion is supported by the Axial Age theory, the push to transform the religions towards a focus on humanity and its fulfilment. In understanding what that fulfilment could mean, we have the witness of the grand tradition of storytelling, which, if we follow Christopher Booker,[48] contrasts the "below the line" challenge of personal growth with the ostensive plot ("above the line").[49] This challenge, and the internal world of the characters, is a matter of the symbols one lives by, the ideas and values charged with significance that give meaning and motivate action. We create the world we live in, by symbolising it and then living through these symbols, whether the cross or the swastika. The discovery of the absolute transcendence of the creator goes along with the discovery of the human psyche. Faith will henceforth always include this journeying dimension towards responsibility for our world. Voegelin, doyen of the Axial Age researchers, in his wide-ranging *The New Science of Politics*

46 Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God*, 281.
47 *Jesus, Symbol of God*, 284.
48 Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots. Why We Tell Stories* (London: Continuum, 2004).
49 Patrick Giddy, "Jack and the Beanstalk: The human plot in narrative traditions and contemporary global culture." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 39 (2020): 361–370.

puts it this way: "Not only does one discover one's own psyche as instrument of the transcendent, but at the same time divinity in its radical supra-human transcendence."[50]

When we unpack how Jesus' listeners understood what he was doing and saying, it is our psychic life that seems to be addressed. The parables are instructive. Each one gives us a trajectory that brings us to a deeper understanding of ourselves. The long global tradition of storytelling does something similar. In each case the hero has to learn something of themselves, and the listener participates in this learning. "The rich fool," "the seed growing secretly," "the mustard seed," all seem to reflect a "below the line" meaning of the narrative, addressed to anyone taking up their task to make something of their lives, but in a way that contradicts the "normal" way of society, the "worldly'' way (the plot "above the line"). "The workers in the field" and "the prodigal son" make similar points. In these narratives, the good of social order (equal pay for equal work; just desserts) is superseded by the value of self-gift. Beyond the dignity due to the father, lies the self-gift that overcomes sin, going beyond the trajectory of the dutiful. In the Good Samaritan, the "obvious" hierarchy of good persons is put to one side in favour of the challenge to make oneself a neighbour, to anyone. That is the self-learning that has to take place, in the older, dutiful sibling in the case of the prodigal son, or in the Jewish listeners to the narrative of the incident on the road to Jericho. Jesus' own life is the central parable, overturning the received idea of the messiah, now rooting human hopes in a journey that draws on resources beyond the calculation of benefits, of "getting and spending," and beyond death as a block to flourishing.

All this fits very well with the approach of Haight's *Jesus, Symbol of God*: "Jesus is the historical mediation of God for the Christian imagination," he writes. "This is why the ideal presentation of Jesus as the medium of God will assume a

50 Eric Voegelin, *Die Neue Wissenschaft der Politik,* trans. I. Gattenhof (Munchen: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2004).

narrative form."[51] In the narrative, the listener undergoes a shift of their hierarchy of values.[52]

What is presented here is not a matter of giving a watered-down or relativist interpretation of the Christian faith. The affirmation of human transcendence as the exact "place" of God's action in the world – negating the negation that death seems to be – has in principle no further possible development. If this affirmation is identified with the person of Jesus, then that solidarity with Jesus is unsurpassable. At the same time, this leads to a depopulating of the "other" world above, a diminishment of its effective energy or reality in people's lives. In cultures influenced by this religion it is going to provoke a secularisation process (as Gauchet and others have argued). That solidarity with Jesus is an open centrifugal, rather than a closed centripetal, attitude. Along with this affirmation is an affirmation of all religious expressions as participating in something positive and to be respected, as manifesting that very human transcendence in a plurality of ways outside of the Christian churches as well as within them. It is an interpretation that can speak to a secular culture and contribute towards modifying the standard public policy of secularism or *laïcité*.

51 *Jesus, Symbol of God*, 112.

52 In his discussion of Haight, ("Symbolism in Weakness: Jesus Christ for the Postmodern Age." *Heythrop Journal* LVIII (2017): 64–77), Jean-Pierre Fortin misrepresents the idea of reality as accessed through symbols as tied into an epistemological scepticism, a factor constraining any possible revelation. "All theology can do," he writes in a tone critical of this frame of thinking, "is to mediate the transcendent symbolically, via the use of some empirical reality having the capacity to convey, alongside its own being, the presence of the transcendent." (p. 70). On the contrary, it is only through our entering into the world of symbolic meaning with its unlimited horizon that we are able to receive revelation.