

LEARNING TO LIVE
WITHOUT GOD

JOHN GUNSON

To Shirley

My wife, and my best friend,
Who is the best lay theologian I know,
And who lives out to the full the Jesus Way.

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PREFACE

"OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD"

This book is the end product of a life-long search for the answer to the questions :
How can we help to make a better world ? How ought we to live ? And how can we find the motivation to do the truth when we find it ? And what do we mean by the word God ?

In recent years this search has focussed on a secular rather than a religious question :
How can we overcome or be set free from the legacy of our biological evolutionary heritage, from self-concern to concern for others, indeed for all other living things ?
What can free us from our competitive, aggressive, exploitative, tit for tat mentality which has now brought us to the brink of disaster, for cooperation and mutual concern and responsibility.

The answer for me is to be found in what I call ethical ecology, and in the life and teaching of an ancient sage, Jesus of Nazareth, who confronts us with the simple yet profound challenge :
"Overcome evil with good."

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A PARABLE

This story is told in three of the four Gospels in the New Testament. It is safe to assume that this is an authentic account from Jesus' life and teaching.

A rich young man who is a leader in the Jewish community comes to Jesus with a serious enquiry : "What must I **DO** to receive eternal life ?"

Jesus answers : "You know the commandments. Keep them."

"I've obeyed all of them since I was young" , he replies.

"Well", says Jesus, "there is only one thing standing in your way. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor. Then come and follow me."

The first thing to notice about this conversation is that for Jesus (and the enquirer) "eternal life" or "salvation" is an ethical, not a religious issue. Not "what must I believe", but "what must I **DO** ?"

This is also obvious from Jesus' reply. He doesn't call for a belief statement or a religious response, but an ethical one. Keep the commandments, he says, and he enumerates some; namely, don't commit murder or adultery or steal or make false accusations or cheat, and the positive ones, respect your parents, **and love your neighbour as yourself**. The way to eternal life (i.e. living a good or God-directed life) is to live ethically, for the sake and for the good of others.

But a challenge still remained. How could he really love his neighbours when he had great wealth and many of them remained poor. So Jesus encourages him to take the costly decision which would set him free from the dehumanising situation and system that separated him from others, and which contributed to the diminution of their lives, and the enmity and violence which are implicit in, and flow from inequality.

Jesus says: Get rid of that which separates you from others. Instead, come and live out your life in healing and serving the destitute, the deprived and the broken hearted.

But this challenge proves too great, too radical.

So he goes away sorrowful, because what he possessed mattered more to him than the quality of life he sought (experiencing "God's" life in him, i.e.love, joy, peace).

Mark 10:17, Matthew 19:16-30, Luke 18:18-30.

LEARNING TO LIVE WITHOUT GOD

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone writing a book with the title “Learning to live without God” might reasonably expect to be labelled, without further examination, as an atheist. I want, therefore, at the outset to reject such a classification, and at the same time clarify what this book is about.

To begin with, the title is not without some ambiguity, if you think hard about it. On the other hand, its principal intention is to imply quite clearly that many in the post-modern world are not much interested in the “God” idea, that traditional concepts of God are deficient (and in a sense dangerous) in important ways, and that recent attempts by theologians to inject contemporary meanings into the word leave us unenlightened in the world of philosophical speculation, failing to take seriously our secular scientific approach to life. So, I will argue in this book that the God concept is inevitable and appropriate in the religious age in which humankind has lived until quite recently. But in the present secular, scientific age, at least for advanced Western societies, neither religion nor the God concept is any longer appropriate or relevant.

Why do I want to reject the atheist tag ? The first reason is because it is inaccurate and misleading. My position might more accurately be called anti-theist rather than atheist. Theism is just one understanding of the God concept. If I am an atheist, what understanding of God am I rejecting ? My objection indeed is not so much to the concept of God, as to its vacuous popular connotations, and by extension therefore to the use of the word “God” itself, as meaning everything and anything to anybody and everybody. If we are going to discuss God or believe in God we need to say quite clearly what we mean by that word. I deal further with this in the chapters that follow.

My second objection to the atheist tag is just as important. I recall back in the 1960’s reading Bishop John Robinson’s explosive book “Honest to God”, and subsequently the rash of critical reviews that it received. My reaction at the time and since to many of those reviews was that they dismissed Robinson’s thesis on the grounds that it failed to meet the test of Christian orthodoxy. It was as if they were saying; “There is only one understanding of God, the historic orthodox Christian one. You are questioning it and proposing another definition. Therefore you are wrong, indeed heretical.” Some of them argued further that the view of God Robinson was challenging or rejecting (i.e. of a God “up there” or “out there”) was not the view of orthodox Christianity. None of them, however, bothered to deal with Robinson’s arguments. They were carefully ignored or perhaps deliberately avoided.

Another interesting example of this tendency among academic critics is the similar response to the work of the “Death of God” theologians. For example, Charles Bent, S.J.*, in his book “The Death of God Movement”, (a study of Gabriel Vahanian, William Hamilton, Paul Van Buren, and Thomas J.J. Altizer), provides an excellent description and analysis of the work of these theologians. This constitutes about 90% of his book. In the remaining 10% , rather than dealing with the substance of their arguments, he simply dismisses them as failing the test of Christian orthodoxy.

I hope that if there are those who wish to criticize what I have written, they will do me and my readers the courtesy of dealing with the substance of my arguments. It is easy and totally unproductive , indeed cowardly, to hang labels on people rather than accepting the discipline of dealing in detail with what they have to say; to attack conclusions rather than the facts and

arguments that lead to those conclusions. It helps no one to hang labels such as atheist, unbeliever, secular humanist, liberal, unorthodox, heretical, or whatever, on people. Whenever used, these terms usually remain undefined; but even if defined, they are no substitute for reasoned argument and debate.

The standpoint from which I approach this study is that of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which I have spent my entire lifetime. It may, of course, have application to other religious traditions and their understanding of God; but that will be for others to say.

My book is another attempt to answer the question posed by Deitrich Bonhoeffer : How can the Christian, who is himself a secular man, understand his faith in a secular way ? However, it seeks to go beyond what a number of others have written recently by arguing that to attempt this with logical consistency one finally must leave behind both religion and God. Otherwise one is playing with words, and attempting some kind of oxymoron, in which one persists in maintaining that the words and concepts of “secular” and “religion” can meaningfully co-exist. They are however mutually exclusive terms by definition. But in particular, it is time to stop playing games with the word God.

The traditional, widely held, fallback position of theologians has always been that in the final analysis God is unknowable in Himself, and hence undefinable. We can only know him through his actions or activity in the world and in our lives. Such a position can be shown to be inconsistent with much else that theologians assert, and certainly with their practice as Christians in such activities as worship, and in their use of language to talk about God.

Many theologians assert that traditional or orthodox Christianity has never had the view that the word God refers to some objective reality “up there” or “out there”. It is simply metaphorical language to talk about the “transcendent” or “holy” or “sacred” dimension of life. They will not acknowledge however that those metaphorical words or concepts simply have no referents for the great majority of those today whose world is fundamentally secular and scientifically understood.

On the other hand, the title is not meant to imply that the word “God” has no sensible meaning for our lives. However, I hope to show that most attempts to redefine it of which I am aware are unlikely to prove meaningful to more than a few academically minded people, and that the traditional and popular associations of the word are so entrenched in the human psyche, that it will be better to discard the word, however painful that may be, and find a new way, or new ways, of expressing what the word stands for at its best. To persist with a word that has become so debased and so irrelevant in our contemporary world, is to hasten the demise of religion itself along with the institutions that are its traditional custodians, and to risk the loss of those ethical values which have been an essential part of most religions. Indeed, the present incapacity or unwillingness of religious groups to confront the problems associated with the God concept represents a serious barrier to any effort to save and prosper the fundamental values that religion at its best has enshrined throughout history.

As I have suggested, it is fashionable in some quarters to dismiss as “liberalism” or “secular humanism” arguments or theses that wish to question theological orthodoxy. Again, I hope to show that these are quite inappropriate for what I want to say. If one has to hang a label on my thesis, though labelling is unnecessary and an excuse for failing to deal with the arguments, I would want to describe it as a position of “ethical ecology”.

The book also addresses a number of common charges that are regularly laid by theologians against all such attempts as this to question the validity of traditional views of God. Those

charges invariably include statements such as that life without God will necessarily be without purpose or meaning; that without belief in God there is nothing to hope for, or live for, or die for; that atheism or liberalism has no resources to battle the forces of evil and selfishness.

A further challenge which the book attempts to face in some detail, is to describe Christian faith, and the life and worship and mission of the church, in terms of a redefinition of God. Such a redefinition will be expressed not in metaphorical language, but in the everyday "value" words of our language. It asserts and hopefully demonstrates that the "death of God" does not mean the death of the church and the Christian life, but rather its rebirth. That re-birth can only come with the death of so much presently in Christian church and theology which asks us both to suspend our intelligence and knowledge, and to engage in a form of psychological immaturity and dependence.

In response to the current crisis in religion and the in-credibility of traditional dogmas and theological concepts and language there appear to be two main approaches:

The commonest one is the attempt to translate or redefine old concepts and images and language into contemporary terms and concepts, while retaining the God concept itself, and either the word God, or some substitute, such as 'Ground of Being', 'Being itself', 'Persuasive Love', 'the Life Force', 'the sacred', 'the transcendent', etc. There is a strong rationale for this approach. The principal desire is to retain its links with the best of the past, and to point to the importance of recognizing and enshrining the transcendent dimension of life, and the need to retain a sense of awe and wonder in life, and to have an adequate basis for the moral life. (Examples of this approach are Paul Tillich, Paul Van Buren, John Robinson, the Process theologians, John Shelby Spong and others.)

The second way is to take courage and recognize that the old interpretations and associations of the God concept are not only too debased, but too deep-rooted in the human, especially the popular psyche, to permit a successful redefinition. Indeed, it is to recognize that the concept itself carries within it the fatal flaw of externalizing what needs to be internalised, of projecting on to some discreet externality the values and relationships that are properly to be located within ourselves and the cosmos at large. But beyond that, the God concept will always remain open to fundamentalist abuse, and not only be a danger to society and the unity of humankind, but will as a consequence, stand in the way of enlightened progress towards a commitment to an ethical ecological understanding of life. Among those who have embraced this second alternative are some of the "death of God" theologians, and others such as Don Cupitt, Robert Funk, Lloyd Geering and Richard Holloway.

The God concept is integral of course to religion, to religious world views and the cultic practices and belief systems that attach to them. If the God concept no longer makes sense in a scientific secular world, then the religions that embrace it are equally suspect, at least in their traditional forms and formulations.

It is time now to identify religion with a 'primitive' stage of human development, to discard it as inadequate and inappropriate in a liberal educated society, and to offer men and women the challenge of human maturity and responsibility in a recognition of our interdependence with all of life, accepting responsibility for all of life.

This is what I call ethical ecology. Ethical ecology relates us successfully to a modern scientific understanding of our world and our place in it. Those who favour the concept of "transcendence" will note that ethical ecology successfully retains the dimension of

transcendence in life. Transcendence means an awareness and acknowledgment of the “beyondness” in life, of that which is greater than us, of that which gives us life and maintains us in life, and calls us to responsibility for life. I prefer not to use the word "transcendence" because it is seldom defined by those who use it, and is nonetheless generally used to refer to a "sacred" or "holy" dimension of life (again undefined), or a dimension beyond the physical. Later on I will be explaining that there is no evidence for such a belief or assertion.

The “beyondness” of an ethical ecological view of life, is our total dependence upon and interdependence with the whole biosphere, and beyond to the vast mystery of the cosmos itself, without singling out some separate life force or love force within it. If an awareness of our own smallness, rather than the arrogant assertion of our “crown of creation” status, is essential to our future, yet also at the same time a recognition of the wonder and mystery and the richness of life’s potentials and possibilities, then ethical ecology is the way forward. Its ethical principles are humility and responsibility, co-operation and self-giving, so that we may all receive.

To be truly contemporary it can even embrace the New Age banner “Magic Happens”, so long as we understand that that doesn’t mean supernaturally-sourced happenings, but rather, that life can be characterized by joy and surprise and wonder, if we learn to live in humility and harmony with this wonderful world and this incredible cosmos.

Finally, a personal statement may prove helpful to the reader. What is the context out of which I come to write this book? An ordained minister of the former Congregational Churches in Australia (prior to its incorporation into the Uniting Church in Australia), I served three pastorates in Australia and the U.S.A., and also served in a specialist ministry in the field of Christian Education. While in the U.S.A, I undertook post-graduate study in both Theology and Christian Education. Throughout my ministry I had extensive involvement in the life of the denomination including theological education, social justice, Christian education, and in the ecumenical movement. I then took a brief “secular sabbatical” of a year or so, to undertake secular employment, with the aim of looking at church and faith from the perspective of the ordinary man or woman both inside and outside the church, from a standpoint where I was not “captive” to professional responsibility as a Christian minister. This sabbatical developed into a period of some thirteen years in secular employment before retirement, rather than a return to Christian ministry as I had intended.

Many men and women enter the Christian ministry after first working for a period in secular employment. That is not a bad thing. However, it is a very different and I believe, a more valuable experience to view, and participate in, the world of secular employment after both theological training and years of professional leadership in the church.

It became clear to me that life in the church as a “professional” minister, with heavy responsibility for the faith of others, has a powerful inhibiting effect on the freedom with which one can examine and express one’s deepest intimations and questionings of the faith. There is just too much at stake personally and professionally, and for the people in one’s care. It is probably only in freedom from these constraints (except for a few brilliant and courageous prophets of recent and current times) that one can best be fearlessly honest in facing the questionings that come to so many of us, but remain either unexamined or unexpressed.

There are some exceptions to this rule, and in this book I want to pay tribute to them. The first is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who unlike most of the leading contemporary church leaders in Germany during the Nazi regime stood out against Nazism and paid the price with his life.

Bonhoeffer recognized the secular nature of the world, and called for a “religionless Christianity” to make sense to “men come of age”. Tragically, his imprisonment and martyrdom prevented him from expanding on his emerging convictions. As a consequence, the church and its theologians have been able, while heaping praise on him as a Christian martyr, to ignore the basic thrust of his thinking with the excuse that we cannot really be sure what his meaning was. This is of course convenient if his ideas threaten us. Eberhard Bethge, his close friend and interpreter, leaves us in no doubt as to the clear direction of Bonhoeffer’s thinking.

But, apart from Bonhoeffer, I want to focus attention on three contemporary brave and pioneering bishops of the church who have had the courage to challenge Christian orthodoxy. They did not suffer martyrdom, but rather the hostility, fear, and one might say, the ostracism of their churches' hierarchies. While these men have strong academic claims to attention, the church should have listened to them because they were not detached from “real life” in an academic setting, but pastoral leaders on the front line of the church’s day to day problems and challenges in the world. Each of them is passionate about and deeply committed to the church and Christian faith. All have been recognized by their peers as trusted and capable leaders by their elevation to the position of bishop. And yet, once having challenged orthodoxy for the sake of the church’s future, indeed survival, their churches and their academic peers have turned on them by damning them with faint praise and turning away from them in fear. Bishops John Robinson, John Shelby Spong, and Richard Holloway have each pointed the churches towards their salvation. Thousands have read their books with gratitude and relief; but in the official courts of the church, its academic enclaves, and the secure ghettos of its ministry, it appears few are listening, and none speaking out in support. Less well known, but equally important, are leaders like Don Cupitt in England, and Lloyd Geering in New Zealand. Richard Holloway's recent book, "Looking in the Distance", for instance, unlike this book, is a gently argued and almost lyrical account of a highly intelligent and sensitive man leaving behind a theology that is no longer credible, for a secular faith without God or religion.

I want to draw attention also to a unique and quite remarkable scholarly project that is still in progress. This is the Jesus Seminar, a collaboration of some two hundred leading Biblical scholars engaged in research into the historical Jesus, whose published findings give us a radically new understanding of what Jesus said and what he did. This work has profound implications for making a clear distinction between what could be called the Jesus Way over against the later development and elaboration of this into what became orthodox Christianity. Whatever the relevance of orthodox Christianity for the past, the findings of the Jesus Seminar represent a vitally important clue for the direction of Christian faith in the secular, non-religious age in which we now live.

So, in this book I outline something of the contribution of these pioneers. I honour them for their courage and insights, even though I wish to take the debate somewhat further than they have gone.

So, today, you will find me a confessing lay Christian in membership of the Uniting Church in Australia. My commitment and loyalty to Jesus Christ and his church is not in question. My Christian life is not worse than when I was an ordained minister, but probably better, certainly more mature. While I see “ethical ecology” as the new basis for living for 21st Century men and women, that new ethic needs to be informed and illumined and empowered by the radical ethic

of one, Jesus of Nazareth, whose life and teaching calls us to go beyond “tit for tat” to a radical identification with the marginalized and dispossessed and unimportant in sacrificial service and self-giving, and to the task of overcoming evil with good. My passion for the Christian Church to be what it could be and should be, instead of a slowly dying institution with a life and language largely irrelevant to modern and post-modern men and women, remains undiminished.

I hope, among the readers of this book, there will be many, both inside and outside the church, who will find help in what is written, and who will then have the courage to try to re-shape the institution, or more likely recreate it in a new universal form, so that it can continue to live, and to call us to, and nurture us in living, the truly ethical life. So I am especially writing for those referred to by Michael Novak in his book “Belief and Unbelief”: “Many a believer feels out of step with others in his generation. He neither believes with the believers, nor disbelieves with the atheists.” (p.19).

The book is deliberately divided into two parts . For most lay people without formal theological training it should be sufficient to read Part 1. In Part 2 (The Appendices) I have included more detailed summaries and comments for those who might want them.

I have found that authors frequently use, without explanation or definition, what might be called academic terms, on the assumption that readers will be familiar with them. This is often not the case. Therefore in order to assist readers in understanding this book, I have included at the rear of the book a list of key words and my understanding of what they mean or how I use and define them. Readers may find it helpful to acquaint themselves with this list before reading the book, and to refer to it as necessary as they encounter these words throughout the book.

•I use Bent’s useful outline of these theologians in Appendix 3.

CHAPTER 1

A CRISIS FOR RELIGION

Richard Dawkins, the pre-eminent communicator of science to both scientists and non-scientists, has just written a widely acclaimed book called "The God Delusion". As a scientist and a rational person he is deeply troubled by what he sees to be the irrationality of religion and the harm that religion causes to individuals and society, and he gives some chilling examples of that; examples of "how religion fuels war, foments bigotry and abuses children".

"While Europe is becoming increasingly secularized, the rise of religious fundamentalism, whether in the Middle East or Middle America, is dramatically and dangerously dividing opinion around the world. In America and elsewhere a vigorous dispute between 'intelligent design' and Darwinism is seriously undermining and restricting the teaching of science. In many countries religious dogma from medieval times still serves to abuse basic human rights such as those of women and gay people. And all from a belief in a God whose existence lacks evidence of any kind." (From the dust jacket of "The God Delusion".)

Dawkins' book serves to highlight the fact that religion is not merely something that many ignore or dismiss in a rational secular age, but something that many now see as a danger to an enlightened society, indeed something that should be attacked and exposed and rooted out of our modern world, as something based on superstition that needs to be left behind.

While Dawkins' attack is on supernaturalism and supernatural ideas of God, he responds to the common claim made for all ideas of God, that the existence of God is conceivable, and though it cannot be proved neither can it be disproved. He makes the pertinent comment that like the case of the fairies at the bottom of the garden "nobody thinks that the hypothesis of their existence is on an even footing with the hypothesis of their non-existence."

Dawkins doesn't deal with other non-supernaturalist ideas of God, such as cosmic mind or intelligence or the pantheist concept of God as the life force (God is in everything and everything is in God). But I suspect that he would agree with me that these concepts have little claim on the word 'God', and that if they are not supernatural but natural, then their reality or existence should be scientifically testable.

So, religion is not only being seen increasingly in a negative light, but in secular Western societies such as Europe and Australia, as far as the Christian religion is concerned, people have voted with their feet, and the churches are clearly dying institutions. In Scandinavian countries regular church attendance stands at less than 5%, with Russia at 2%. In Australia, it has fallen from around 40% in 1960 to less than 7% today, and most of this number are in the elderly age bracket. What seems incredible is that the churches show no signs of alarm, and no inclination to confront what might be the causes of, and the possible solutions to, this crisis.

Before we go any further I need to say precisely what I mean when I use the word "religion", because it means many things to many people.

For the sake of the discussion that follows I use the word religion to mean a belief system and its associated rituals and practices that recognizes “a controlling superhuman power entitled to obedience reverence and worship.” (Macquarie Dictionary). That suggests a supreme being, but we could broaden that to a plural reference, i.e. either God or the gods.

The Macquarie Dictionary also gives a much broader definition, namely “the quest for the values of the ideal life.” In the Appendices I refer to the seminal work of Don Cupitt. Because he chooses to use this much broader definition, while he argues persuasively for the need to ‘take leave of the God concept’, he nonetheless wishes to retain religion, but in a new form. Technically this can be justified, but in practice it only serves to confuse the issue, because this is not the meaning of religion in common use, nor did religion have its origins in this supposed quest.

Religion is, and always has been, about our relationship to God (or to the unseen powers, however understood), and it is primarily expressed and recognized in its institutional communal and cultic forms and expressions, and by the special class of professionals who guard it and interpret it to the faithful and the world at large.

The so-called “values of the ideal life” have been generally understood by the various religions, not so much in terms of “how we should live” in this world, i.e. in terms of ethical values, but rather of how we should live in order to please, or to access the benefits controlled by, the “god” who is defined by, or who has revealed himself to, our particular religion.

The language of all formalized religions, from their very beginnings, has necessarily been the language of metaphor, symbol or myth. All religions acknowledge that we cannot directly know God (we can experience his love, wrath, power, guidance, etc.), but not him or her directly. Therefore our language uses metaphors which convey our image of God (e.g. King, Lord, Father, Saviour), but which are not meant as a literal description of ‘him’, but rather what we believe he does, namely his activity or power.

It is only in recent centuries that fundamentalist expressions of religion have talked as if they know what God is like, and as if they have a direct line to him.

To make the point from another perspective, if we want to make a judgment about the gods of other religions as to their acceptability, it will be on the basis of how they measure up to our standards of goodness, truth and love. Indeed, this is the way that rational people assent to the religion of their choice. That is, we measure all religions and gods by our secular ethical standards, not by some external religious authority (such as a holy book). Only primitive peoples and religious fundamentalists are able to worship a god who contradicts their highest and best human values (e.g. a cruel god), either out of fear, or belief in a sacred revelation (generally enshrined in a sacred book). Many secular rational people continue to believe in ‘god’, by which they mean the highest and best they know, i.e. ‘god’ as symbol or metaphor for something like ‘goodness, truth and love’, or ‘the ground of our being’.

While Christianity and its predecessor the Jewish faith did not recognize themselves as one religion among others, but as the true faith, there is no doubt that in today’s world each is seen as one religion among many. Christianity is in serious, perhaps terminal decline in advanced secular societies. Matching this decline is a surge of interest in “spirituality” and psychic phenomena. While this concern for spirituality receives a good deal of public attention, it is nonetheless a relatively minor movement. Moreover, while it is commonly interpreted as a sign of a hunger for religion or spiritual values in a secular age, I suggest it is really a hunger for self-realization and inner peace.

Anyway, to talk about religion and especially Christian faith, as if it is basically about “spiritual” matters (see the next chapter) is to distort the truth. Harvey Cox reminds us that “... we have distorted the Biblical picture of God’s world by an over-spiritualization of the meaning of the Christian life. This is the most sinister distortion of the Bible abroad today.”

The Biblical testimony is to a God whose primary interest is in this world of his creation , and the relationships and behaviour of his creatures in this life. Cox goes on to say that “Archbishop Temple once said that God is probably not interested in religion at all” , and that Karl Barth warned “that religion is often the last battleground in which man fights against God ...”.

(God’s Revolution and Man’s Responsibility. pp.28-31.)

Religion still flourishes in those societies where education, democratic processes, and an adequate standard of living do not exist for the majority. A brutish and often short lifespan encourages belief and hope in powers outside ourselves, and often a life beyond this one, reinforced by a lack of scientifically based knowledge about this world. Superstition and magic flourish, and religion provides a framework and vehicle for this superstition.

However, Don Cupitt quotes Acquaviva as saying : “From the religious point of view, humanity has entered a long night that will become darker and darker with the passing of the generations, It is a night in which there seems to be no place for a conception of God, or for a sense of the sacred, and ancient ways of giving significance to our own existence, of confronting life and death, are becoming increasingly untenable.” He refers to “the weighty statistical evidence of long-term religious decline. Recent work has shown the process going on in Asian religions as well as in the West ...” . (Cupitt in “Only Human”, quoting S.S.Acquaviva from “The Decline of the Sacred in Industrial Society.” Blackwell. 1979. pp.201& ff.)

Fundamentalist religion of course continues to flourish in our so-called secular Western societies. This is a manifestation of the opposite of a secular, liberal society, and is in fact a reaction against liberal and secular thought. It is the response of insecure and frightened people who need security and external authority to cope with life. It is terrified by a world where we, rather than God, must accept responsibility for, and control of, both our own lives and the world. Karen Armstrong characterizes it as obscurantist, anti-intellectual, authoritarian, literal and intolerant.

Scientifically advanced societies are characterized as secular and materialistic, contrasted with what was commonly their previous status as “religious” societies. Religious people today, whether in secular or religious societies, look back on this earlier religious age as an ideal to cling to, and if possible to return to; as a time when God and spiritual values were honoured, and life was more spiritual. This view is, of course, a false reading of history. Pre-secular societies and modern day predominantly religious societies are, for the most part, just as materialistic as today’s secular societies, i.e. fundamentally focussed on meeting our basic needs for food and shelter, for acceptance or status in the community, for health or healing, and for security for the future. The difference now is that in advanced secular societies we also focus on getting and spending more than we need.

All societies of every age have been fundamentally concerned about material existence. Pre-modern societies did this within an accepted religious framework, but the study of history suggests that neither their religious practices nor their behaviour were any more ethical or "spiritual" than modern secular societies. Many religions, at their best, called for ethical behaviour, but there is no evidence that this characterised the behaviour of the majority of the society, any more than it does in a modern secular society.

Even where a particular religion did teach a moral code or requirement, it was rather “religious” rituals, practices and beliefs that dominated the lives of both the religious leadership and the devotees. For example, Hebrew religion’s Holiness Code, not only directed ritual requirements, but also ethical behaviour. It placed restraints on usury and debt, and required some provision for the poor. Like most other societies, however, in practice throughout Hebrew history, major inequalities existed in the society, and exploitation of the poor by the rich and powerful, including the religious leaders, occurred. It was precisely this that Jesus attacked.

Organised religion at its best has helped profoundly to influence individuals and society to confront injustice and bring about social change. It has been able to do this when it has listened to the voices of its prophets rather than its priests; in the case of the Christian faith, when it has fearlessly followed the man of Nazareth, who stood in that Hebrew prophetic tradition. But, throughout much of the history of religion, it has played servant to the power structures of society, confining itself to a concern with the individual’s "soul" and its eternal destiny. Rather than being the counter- cultural conscience of society, it has often resisted change for the better, both in society and in itself.

Such change has come through insightful and compassionate individuals, who recognised at the heart of their religion or their humanity, not ritual or dogma, but a radical moral demand. Right throughout history some men and women, with or without religion, saw that what they craved for themselves – justice and mercy – were the birthright of all, that life without justice and mercy was intolerable, and that justice without mercy was as intolerable as mercy without justice. (I owe this phrase to John Dominic Crossan.)

All religions have raised up “prophetic” voices demanding that religion be fundamentally ethical in its central concerns or it is idolatrous, indeed a burden, rather than a way of liberation. Such prophetic voices have likewise always been opposed by the dominant clergy / priestly classes of every religion, perhaps for two major reasons:

- i) Clergy have a professional and personal interest/stake in their religion, as guardians of the ritual and dogma, and as intermediaries between God and the devotees.
- ii) A radical ethical stance invariably brings one into conflict with the rich and powerful and the governing classes.

Religion relies for its success or at least its acceptance, on the support of those two dominant social groups, the rich and the governing classes (they usually overlap). Clergy therefore persuade themselves that ritual, dogma (belief systems) and the institution are the primary business of religion, and that the institution must survive at all costs, if religion itself is to survive and do its work for God in society. They reason that if we are religious, morality (usually confined to the area of personal morality) will follow and take care of itself. Our devotion and obedience is to God (signified by our participation in religious practices, and not even the high and mighty would oppose that), as prior to our responsibility to one another. Thus, where our responsibility to one another is taught as secondary or derivative (i.e. it is God’s will), if it is taught at all, it is easy for devotees to focus on the primary loyalty (belief in and worship of God) and feel justified, while expressing the secondary demand in negative morality (i.e. not doing any evil), rather than living the radical ethical life, which takes responsibility for the world seriously, and inevitably brings one into confrontation with power and self-interest and evil.

In my introduction I referred to the three brave bishops whose prophetic voices have been raised and largely ignored over recent decades.

Bishop John Robinson in his book “Honest to God” (1963) asked whether our image of God needed to go. He challenged the popular “theistic” understanding of God as a divine personal Being “up there” or “out there”, Creator, Sustainer, Judge and Redeemer, who intervenes in our world and our lives to achieve his purposes. This concept , he said, no longer makes sense in a secular, scientific age. He introduced many to the thinking of theologians like Bultmann, Bonhoeffer and Tillich. He wanted to reinterpret God in terms of ultimate Love.

Bishop John Shelby Spong has brought to thousands of readers the best of modern Biblical scholarship in a readily understandable form, so that for the first time people can make sense of an ancient book about which their ministers and priests have failed to enlighten and educate them. Further, he has passionately fought his own church over the issues of women, gays and racism. He too finally came to challenge the outdated and discredited theism to which the churches continue to cling.

Bishop Richard Holloway likewise challenged his church over these issues, but his unique contribution has been to show that ethics is a human enterprise, and ought not to be tied up with traditional expressions of religion.

All three, while wanting to re-define God, would nonetheless want to see religion at its best continue, but the various forms of organized religion are so wedded to a theistic God-concept and the primacy of cultic practices that these leaders despair of the chances of reform. In the appendices I treat something of the contribution of these men in more detail.

So, does it matter if religion is decaying and dying in the West, or anywhere else? Bishop Robinson says that Christian faith will come to be abandoned because it is moulded by a cast of thought that belongs to a past age, which Bultmann describes as mythological, Tillich as supranaturalist, and Bonhoeffer as religious. (Honest to God. p.123.) Bishop Spong says “To step beyond religion is to grow into human maturity.” (The Sins of Scripture. p.290.) Perhaps the most telling remark of another bishop, indeed Robinson’s own senior bishop, most clearly highlights the dilemma of Christian religion. He remarks with naive candor : “ ... when I address audiences in factories, technical colleges or universities ... the language I use often fails to register. ... but because of my traditional upbringing I am unable to express the truth in an idiom meaningful to them.” (The Honest to God Debate. Ed. David Edwards. p.33.)

We can acknowledge that in the past it has been religion that has primarily nurtured many of the individuals who have become the agents of compassion and of social change throughout history. Religions at their best have envisioned their “God” as worth our devotion to the extent that this God is understood as moral in his dealings with his creatures and his creation. By no means all, however, have seen that this requires the same moral passion in us, or grasped the full implications of this moral demand.

The question, then, is whether we can be grabbed or grasped by the implicit moral demands of life apart from religion? Indeed, given the failure of religions historically to give primary emphasis to living the ethical life over religious beliefs and practices, a second urgent question needs to be addressed. That is, would a secular basis for morality be more likely to be successful than a religious basis in achieving acceptance for morality in a fundamentally secular society? To put it another way, in a religious or God-focused society, the best way to get

morality taken seriously is to give it a God-required or religious-required authority; i.e. to show that it is the primary expression of one's religion. In a secular society, one would surmise, therefore, that the best way to get morality taken seriously as fundamental to human living and existence, is to show that it is the primary expression of our humanity, and fundamental to our survival as a species and as a cosmos. It is not difficult to show that a secular ethic derives naturally from a scientifically based understanding of our world and the universe, and I will spell out such a proposal in a later chapter.

If we are not yet sufficiently persuaded that we need to move beyond religion to a universal and secular ethic then the spectre of contemporary religious fundamentalism across most major religions ought to give us grounds for deep anxiety if not fear.

Fundamentalist Judaism is a powerful force in making the establishment of peace in the Middle East an intractable problem, and in stressing the separateness of the Jewish people rather than their essential oneness with humanity. Fundamentalist Islam is the motivator and cover for extremism, terrorism, mindless prejudice, and hatred and destruction of others. Fundamentalist Christianity is a profound danger to the democratic state and to the societies in which it exists, with its present campaigns to manipulate politics for its own narrow purposes. Its punitive image of God, which derives from a primitive and early stage of Judaism long ago rejected by the best of modern Judaism as well as Christianity, is the very antithesis of the Christian faith they claim. Their fearful clinging to God's coat-tails, their judgmental narrow personal morality, their comfortable and comforting assumption that affluence and prosperity are signs of God's blessing, and their primitive belief that poverty and illness are signs of faithlessness and God's judgment, make a mockery of the Lord they profess to serve. Their bad theology leads to an abdication of responsibility for a just and ethical society and world and for good government, because God is in charge of everything working out his plan, and we must not interfere in the working out of his will (except perhaps to oppose government taxes on us and any interference in our profoundly materialistic lives).

All this is done in the name of God, just as for orthodox Christianity justice, peace and compassion is also. Let us then see religion for what it is, an external and unchallengeable authority for either good or evil. We need now to dispense with an authority source that can be so manipulated for evil. If we do that we can instead do good for its own sake, and we can recognize evil for what it is, and by removing its pseudo sacred clothes denounce it for the evil that it is.

It is particularly sad that where "orthodox" or "liberal" Christianity continues in the West it seems blind to the fact that aggressive conservative and fundamentalist versions of the faith are slowly yet surely becoming the dominant influence in most branches of the Christian church. This process is inevitable because liberal minded Christians are finding it increasingly difficult to stay within the churches in the face of their refusal to take the secular world seriously and its implications for religion of every kind. Not merely fundamentalism, but supernaturalism, even within orthodox Christian theology, is increasingly embarrassing and an intellectual offence to such liberal minded Christians. Nonsensical prayers for God's intervention in our lives make many of us cringe. So the churches (and their large property base) will inevitably fall into the hands of the highly motivated fundamentalists.

Roman Catholicism is an excellent example. The previous Pope has effectively reversed most of the gains of the Second Vatican Council, and entrenched conservatism by the elevation of

conservative clergy to bishop and cardinal status while moderates and liberals are being forced out of the church.

Recent events in the world Anglican communion highlight the same trend. The growing majority of conservative bishops now come (as you would expect) from third world countries where secular Western culture has yet to permeate those societies. It is this conservatism and Biblicism that is now dominating world Anglican decision-making, such that issues of women clergy and gay clergy are on the verge of tearing world Anglicanism apart.

In Australian Anglicanism the conservative Sydney diocese is now ordaining more and more clergy such that its numbers will soon be able to dominate the assemblies, courts and decision-making bodies of that church in Australia.

The Uniting Church in Australia is widely recognized as the most liberal and socially active denomination in the country. It speaks up politically on issues of justice and peace, and runs the largest welfare programs outside of government. Consequently it would be seen by many outside the church as contemporary and relevant, as about life and not just religion. But over the last few years it has been tearing itself asunder over the issue of sexuality, and homosexuality in the ordained ministry in particular. This internal conflict has its roots in two major groupings in the church, a "liberal" majority and a significant but smaller group of conservatives (who range from evangelicals to fundamentalists). This conservative group has in common that the Bible is God's word to us, and they find in their literal interpretation of it grounds for seeing homosexuality as condemned by God. The "liberals" can not only live with the fundamentalists, but have been standing on their heads to find compromises with them to retain unity within the church. The conservatives, however, cannot live in tension with what they are sure is error, and so they threatened the possibility of leaving the church.

Unfortunately the church's leadership is more concerned about maintaining unity between unreconcilable positions than about speaking an unequivocal contemporary and relevant message to a secular world. It cannot grasp that by associating with fundamentalists with an obscurantist belief about sexual preferences and belief in a magic book from heaven, that the secular world will write off this otherwise more progressive church as irrelevant, if not a joke.

As a former Congregationalist, whose church has practised equality of men and women in all aspects of the church's life, including ordaining women, for over a century, I am also sad that just as women are at last beginning to gain some limited access to ordained ministry in some churches, it is time for us to move on from religion itself. In my view women in ministry have brought a breath of fresh air to the life of those churches that have ordained them. Women on the whole are more sensitive pastors, more insightful and scholarly preachers and theologians, and more creative liturgists and worship leaders. It would not be surprising should they want to hang on to their new-found opportunities for leadership in the church. However, I would see them as offering and providing those same qualities in the new "ethical society" (see a later chapter) which will desperately need their pastoral and community-building skills and sensitivities, their academic gifts and ethical passions, as well as their liturgical gifts, if we are to celebrate life and love, our place in the natural world, compassion and justice, freedom and hope.

In Australia, which has a much more secular history and tradition than most other Western countries, the Christian church is almost totally identified with "religion" in the minds of the community at large. And the sphere of religion is seen as the "spiritual" life. So religion's role in society is widely seen as that of "chaplain" to the community for births, deaths and marriages, (though secular celebrants are widely used for even those functions), - to help us at our entry and

exit points to and from this world and into the next; and also to counsel and comfort us in the crisis moments of our private and community lives. There is nothing wrong with that, unless of course that is all, and that is where the community expects us to stay.

Almost the only time the churches get reported in the press is when a conservative Anglican or Roman Catholic bishop or archbishop makes some mindless pronouncement about homosexuality or there is a debate in the church about women priests. When the churches do speak out about social justice and other ethical issues politicians increasingly tell them to "shut up" and keep out of politics, and to stick to their core business of people's spiritual lives (undefined). So the church's once powerful influence in social and political life is already a thing of the past, and right wing politicians court the votes of conservative Christians who can be relied on to support their conservative views, along with some pressure for interference in our personal liberties.

We live today in a secular, scientific world. Many thoughtful religious people acknowledge that, but they wish it wasn't so, and they long for the 'old days'. Christians unfortunately have mistaken the religious clothing (including the God idea) in which their faith is expressed for the faith itself.

At the heart of Christianity is Jesus of Nazareth. In later chapters we will examine what modern scholarship tells us about him. But within a decade of Jesus' death his followers were already re-clothing his life and teaching in the categories of their Jewish faith. (Most of these attempts to explain him he would have rejected). Within another decade another group re-clothed them again in the categories of the non-Jewish world (especially in Greek and Roman, i.e. 'pagan' concepts). That was because they wanted to tell the non-Jewish world about him and his significance for all people. Within five centuries this story was re-clothed again in the terms of the then dominant philosophical ideas of the time - Greek philosophy. Unfortunately, at this time, the Roman state took over control of the Christian Church, and fixed this new clothing in creeds that were made mandatory for the next 1500 years. The Protestant Reformation then somewhat modified these by returning to an emphasis on what the Bible taught. But these 5th century creeds have continued to this day to be accepted as orthodoxy.

So today when Christian faith needs to re-clothe itself once again in language and concepts relevant to our age - the secular scientific age - the earlier clothing and language has such a stranglehold upon us that we feel there can only be one way to express our faith. Thus we reject the prophetic voices that would give us new life and new relevance, and we weep because the secular world is not listening to us anymore. So, we blame what we call this "God-less age"; we hate the idea of a secular world; but we have not understood our own faithlessness and lack of courage. Whatever we mean by "God" can no longer speak to this new world, unless we express that concept, the heart of our faith, in a profoundly secular way.

The age of religion has gone - forever. It will not return. We can gather in our ancient ghettos and criticize the world, or we can express again the heart of our faith in the language of our day. As Richard Holloway says : "For many people today religion is no longer a way of life that is possible for them". (Looking in the Distance. p.x.)

To summarize then. We live now in a secular age; but not secular because people have rejected religion. On the contrary, in the West the great majority have rejected religion because we now live in a secular age. In other words, a secular world is a world in which our explanations and understandings now come from our growing scientific knowledge of our world,

not from some belief system filling the gaps in our knowledge. To quote Bishop Robinson on Bonhoeffer's concepts of "man come of age" and "religionless Christianity": "... man in the modern world becomes more self-reliant, and responsible; he looks to his own resources and not to God's; his ways of thinking are pragmatic and functional and exclude the dimensions of the religious and metaphysical. If Christianity is to speak in that world it must demythologise itself and strip itself of metaphysics too." ("Exploration into God". pp.74-75).

In a pre-scientific era the God hypothesis was the fall-back position for all those things for which we had no answers. As well, in a pre-scientific/technological era life was much more tenuous, brutish and short, and suffering almost universal. Further, sin, seen as a breach of God's law, brought guilt that needed expiation or forgiveness. With the advent of science and technology we progressively find temporal objectively-testable answers to most of our unknowns and speculations. With technological advances life becomes longer, more comfortable, more predictable, more bearable, even enjoyable. With the emphasis on material things and the fading of the need for God, sin and guilt and forgiveness are no longer issues for secular man. So the functions the God concept once performed for people are no longer necessary. For the great majority religion can be discarded as unnecessary, irrelevant and out of date.

A hunger for so-called "spirituality" nonetheless remains, but, this is really a hunger for the values and relationships that individualism, consumerism, materialism and competitiveness destroy. It is not secularism that is without human values. It can have them if we choose. It is materialism that exchanges the priority of persons and relationships and the eco-systems that support us and give us life, for the values of things and their possession, and ambition, success and self-centredness in all its forms. It has always been thus.

Religion did not make or guarantee a moral society in the so-called "religious" age. It must, by definition, have even less influence in a secular age. A secular ethic is obviously more relevant to a secular age, but it will not produce a moral society either. It will function rather just as good religion has in the past, i.e. to inspire and inform a "remnant" or "core" or "leaven" in society that witnesses and works to keep calling society to be true to its best insights and its ultimate best interests.

I'm afraid that nothing may save society before it is too late to retrace our steps. My more optimistic theory, however, is called the "cliff-edge" theory. That declares that humankind will only do the right and the good when we stand on the edge of the cliff with disaster imminent, and our own personal safety or welfare at risk. For example, we all know about climate change today, but we will do little or nothing about it until our crops are burnt and destroyed by drought year after year, and our water supplies dry up, and our coastal areas are submerged at enormous economic cost. Our evolutionary heritage means that we will respond best or perhaps only to nothing less than the threat of our very extinction. And that indeed may be too late. This theory is otherwise known as "enlightened self-interest", when circumstances may finally recall for us in our panic the ethical voices that we have had the advantage of hearing and ignoring, if indeed we have been lucky enough to have had an ethical community at work, vigilant, active and faithful in our society.

In his recent book, "The Sins of Scripture", Bishop Spong confronts head on the unpalatable truth that religions can be the agency of terrible evil, as well as good. He remarks that "... religion is not primarily a search for truth; it is overwhelmingly a search for security." (p. 220) Bonhoeffer spoke of his natural sympathy with the non-religious and insisted that 'to be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way ... but to be a man. It is not some

religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.” (Letters and Papers from Prison. pp. 222-3. Macmillan. 1962). As mentioned earlier, Harvey Cox reminds us that Archbishop Temple once said that God is probably not interested in religion at all, and Karl Barth warned that religion is often the last battleground on which man fights against God. (God’s Revolution and Man’s Responsibility. Harvey Cox).

Throughout this book I will be making a case that for Western post-modern societies religion has passed its use-by date.

CHAPTER 2

SPIRITUALITY AND THE WORLD OF THE SPIRIT

We live today in a secular, scientific age in which knowledge is based on empirical research and testing. All sorts of people have beliefs, and are influenced/directed by their perceptions and feelings, but it is not possible to provide objective, scientific proof of these beliefs as part of our knowledge base of the real world.

The objective realities of the material world are known either by scientific method, or by projecting further knowledge based on and consistent with the facts (laws of nature) that have already been proven. To the extent that physical, chemical, biological realities are not yet fully known, we know that what remains unknown will largely be consistent with, not in contradiction of, what is already known.

Physical reality consists in matter and energy, two aspects of a single reality. In the past, our lack of understanding of our world led us to believe that there had to be another dimension of reality beyond the physical, - entirely separate, though often interpenetrating our physical existence – the world of spirit, where dwelt the gods.(1) Today, we have reached a point in human development where we can explain most, if not all, of the mysteries that led our forebears to posit another parallel world. Those explanations come from our scientific knowledge of the universe, and our equally greater knowledge of ourselves, that extraordinary animal in which has evolved a sophisticated mechanism which can process physical stimuli, store and recall those stimuli, and reflect on and manipulate that information, and communicate it between members of the species. The human animal not only stores, processes and uses knowledge/information about the world, but experiences feelings and values in respect to that knowledge.

People, reacting not so much against this post modern emphasis on material reality, but against materialism itself, seek another dimension that addresses our need for affection, acceptance, security, peace, comfort, love, well-being. For many such seekers, this realm of experience or reality is subsumed under the head of the “spiritual” or “spirituality”.

These words are latched upon because, though the concept of a spiritual realm comes out of the past with all sorts of connotations, it at least suggests a non-material dimension of reality. But because of its roots in the past it also seems to point to a reality outside of, or beyond the physical universe, or to a parallel world within our universe, and within such a world to a God, or a life force, or a spirit world, or a source of psychic energy, to which, or with which our “spirit” can respond or relate or communicate. This parallel or different world is where the “real me” belongs. So, for many, it becomes the “real world”. The material world, as a consequence, is thus seen as merely transitory, of lesser value, to be borne, but also to be escaped, both now and ultimately, to the world of spirit.

Because this need for what we might call the positive “relational” and emotional elements of life is so great, so fundamental to our health and well being, and the experience and perceived blessings of the so-called spiritual quest so “comforting”, “renewing” and “life-giving”, people do a most un-modern and unexamined thing. They conclude that their “inner” experience is of

a reality of an equivalence to their scientifically based knowledge of the physical world, that it has a reality “out there” beyond their own inner experience.(2)

There is simply no evidence for this leap of faith, only that people experience it as true for themselves, and so objectify that experience into a realm of external spiritual reality. To deny that these experiences have an objective reality outside or apart from ourselves is not therefore to deny their reality or their importance. But, we do not need another realm of reality or existence to give them credence or value.

It is important to acknowledge that so-called “spiritual” experiences at their highest and best, (and to the extent that they don’t conflict with our knowledge of the real world) are not only real and important, but that they are essential to a full and meaningful life. Indeed, we need to recognize that human values and feelings (which are in fact what so-called spiritual realities are) constitute one dimension of our deep human needs and our responses as material beings to one another, and to our physical/material environment. In other words, these needs, responses, experiences are psychological, aesthetic, emotional, ethical, relational, and even physical (i.e. often accessed via massage, meditation, relaxation of the body, tarot cards, incense, ritual, worship, sensory stimuli of one kind or another). And they are experienced by a totally physical reality, a human animal, and accessed by physical senses and a physical nervous system, and processed by a fabulous physical computer, the human brain.

But what about our soul, our real self? This surely is what experiences and communicates with the spiritual realities of life. Part of the great onrush of scientific endeavour today is research into the human animal itself, and especially the human brain. This research is telling us that our sense of self, of being “us” over against others, is a growing awareness in our central processor (the brain) of our differentiation from the rest of reality. But, there is nothing to support the primitive explanation that the “I” of our existence has any reality or existence or permanence apart from the brain (and of course, the body) which responds to the stimuli and processes them. Contemporary research into brain functioning is heavily based on cases of people who have had some brain damage, either through illness or accident. Research can consequently link specific locations in the brain to the loss of specific behaviours or functions. We know that our brain is not only the locus of our thoughts and our reasoning, but also our emotions and our values as well, including our religious sentiments, and indeed our faith.

We know, of course, from our experience of those who suffer from such degenerative brain diseases as Alzheimers, that gentle generous people we have known can become aggressive and unkind, treating those they have loved with suspicion and lack of trust and love, often not even being able to recognize them. If the “person” or “soul” or “self” is not co-terminus with the physical brain and its functioning within the body, then damage to the brain ought not lead to a radically changed personality or person. With serious brain damage the person we have known can disappear, and another personality take their place. The evidence is increasingly supportive of the view that the “I” of our existence is a function of our central processor, and that with the damage or death of that organ, we become “someone else”, and in the end cease to exist.

We no longer have to posit a “soul” or “spirit” within us to explain who we are, and to which to give higher value than to the therefore lesser value mortal shell, that contains the supposedly “real me”. Nor do we need to posit the consequential or parallel duality of the external world into material and spiritual. (3) There is only one world and one reality for which there is any hard evidence at all, the physical/material universe in all its complexity and grandeur, including us. All the other experiences and values we hunger for, and which give us life are fundamental,

but, they are material experiences by material beings – and they are as wonderful as a sunset, or a river, or a tree, or a beautiful animal, or a man or woman, or the sacrificial love or courage that makes life worth living.

We need now to extrapolate from this discussion to the concept of God, and in particular, to the mind of God. We will be dealing with this in greater detail later, but it is important to make the logical connection in the context of this current discussion. Contemporary theologians (and many of their predecessors) will tell us that to think of God in physical terms (as some kind of Super Being), or as some kind of objective reality (perhaps a Super Spiritual Being) is mistaken, even though in their writing and their practice of Christian life (especially worship and prayer), they use words which suggest that God is in fact, some kind of objective reality. If there is nowhere else to hide, philosophical theologians tell us that the idea or concept of God or ultimate reality can be derived or deduced from rational thought alone, and that therefore God must exist. But they cannot tell us that God is any more than an idea. We must then fall back on “revelation”, i.e. God revealing himself to us through the events of history, and our having faith that this interpretation of history is the best or most credible one.

Scientists, like Paul Davies, impressed by the extraordinary logic and complexity of the laws of mathematics and physics, believe that this could indeed be powerful evidence for a Cosmic Mind (or Super Cosmic Intelligence) at work, in and through creation. It isn't clear to me whether this means that the physical created order has a mind/intelligence, or whether there is some sort of objective reality, not part of creation, but at work within creation, which is Ultimate Mind/Intelligence.

Davies also asserts that many physicists can conceive of mind apart from matter. Suffice to say, at this point, that the only mind we know is a function of a physical brain in a physical being, which experiences reality through its sensory receptors. It would seem then, that to talk about a spiritual mind, indeed a cosmic mind, or the mind of God, is to conceive of something which makes no sense in terms of our understanding of how minds work. The whole concept indeed involves a serious internal contradiction. A cosmic mind would need a cosmic brain related to receptors and nerve cells, and having some kind of central processor to process information. To talk about mind apart from body leaves us in the realm of fantasy, not reality.

One further observation needs to be made at this point, to be elaborated further in later chapters. The extensive literature by religious scientists and scientific theologians arguing for the existence or reality of God from a basis of science, or what could be called natural theology, is fraught with a major defect. What they derive or deduce from the study of science is the incredible wonder of the universe, and from that the assumption of Mind or Intelligence, directing or persuading or calling forth, or interpenetrating the physical universe. But there is no necessary connection between the wonders of nature and a Cosmic Mind. Further, the concept of God as “intelligence” or “mind” doesn't make God in a profoundly religious sense, and more particularly in a moral sense. The wonders that science reveals not only do not make a moral universe, but, if not examined selectively to prove a point, they make precisely the opposite. The God that science reveals is breathtaking indeed, but never worthy of our worship and devotion. Indeed, at the heart of this vast and unique mystery of cosmic creation and evolution, is indifference and cruelty, not the “agape” (4) for which man has always yearned, nor the justice and righteousness without which life is also barren and cruel.

Process philosophy/theology, for example, wants to find “God” in the processes of the cosmos, but I have yet to see a convincing case that the “life-force” of process thought, interpenetrating

all creation, can in any justifiable sense be extrapolated to become the “Love-force”, or indeed, the source of justice and righteousness. I deal in more detail with process thought in the appendices.

- (1) Note Nietzsche’s view that religion, or at least the idea of the supernatural, of the separation of body and soul, originates in our dreams. (R. Holloway , Doubts and Loves. p.20).
- (2) Marcus Borg, while one of today’s leading Biblical scholars, bases his belief in God finally on the fact that throughout history there have been those who claim to have had direct, compelling, inner experiences of God. Because his own such experience means so much to him, he is unwilling to consider alternative explanations for these rather rare occurrences and their interpretations by those who experience them.
- (3) James W. Kalat, (Biological Psychology. pp,11-14) in his discussion of the mind-brain relationship, suggests that the dualist view (that mind and brain are different entities that exist independently of one another) “fits with our common sense notion of what the mind is and does.” But, he says, “the brain and the rest of the body consist of matter and energy. According to one of the most central tenets of physics, any change in the movement of matter and energy reflects the influences of other matter and energy. If mind is not a type of matter and energy, how could it possibly alter the electrical and chemical activities of the pineal gland or any other part of the brain ?” In fact, “nearly all philosophers and neuroscientists reject it.” (the dualist position).

“ ...I recommend your being very cautious about using the term *mind*, if you use it at all. If your use of the term implies that you think of the mind as a thing, separate from brain activity, you should be prepared to explain how a non-physical thing, having no matter or energy of its own, can affect the matter and energy of the brain.”
A helpful question that bears on this problem is “Does losing part of the brain mean losing part of the mind ? ... the answer is yes.” “And does stimulation of part of the brain elicit behaviours and experiences ?” (by chemical and electrical means). And again the answer is yes. Electrical stimulation of the brain “can elicit not only sensations and movements but also emotional changes.”

- (4) "agape" (ag- a - pe) is one of the Greek words for "love". A fairly colourless word in Greek, it lacked the emotional, sexual and possessive elements of the other Greek words for love, like eros, philia, etc. So it was deliberately chosen by the New Testament writers to express God's love for us and our love towards our fellows. This is because in its root form it refers to the will rather than the emotions, and because it referred to helping the object of one's love rather than the desire to possess or enjoy that object of love. It is therefore love by action or deeds. So it comes to mean unsolicited, unmerited, unconditional, indiscriminating actions of good-will towards others; acting for the other's good. Deep down it is unconditional love that we all need and crave.

CHAPTER 3

GOD AS CREATOR OF THE NATURAL ORDER AND THE MORAL ORDER

One of the arguments commonly advanced for the existence of God is the so-called argument from design, or related concepts such as the incredible complexity, order and wonder of creation. And at the apex of this created order is the human species, the peak of creation, which is seen as so special that it must needs have a divine destiny.

We are told too that natural theology is supported by revelation, that is that God has revealed himself through historic events as well as nature. The Hebrew people not only felt that God was working in and through their history but that he had specially chosen them as his agents to reveal his purpose for all mankind. For some of them the Christ event (God's coming among them in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to fulfil his saving purpose) was the supreme and culminating act of revelation.

These arguments are of course interpretations of both nature and history. Both nature and history are open to other interpretations, including those based on our contemporary knowledge. Through this we see the events of history as explicable in terms of a mix of human motivations, circumstances, and environmental influences; and nature as explicable in terms of our knowledge of the physical sciences.

However, most theologians and many others recognize that the achilles heel of these arguments for the existence of a creator/redeemer God, who is righteous and loving, is the existence and extent of suffering and evil in the world. This problem is usually recognized by most commentators as having very great weight indeed. None the less it is usually speedily disposed of by theologians with the assertion that the human enterprise has no value and lacks moral seriousness without our possession of free will. *Ipsa facto*, suffering is inevitable. Too bad! End of problem.

Let us examine then, in turn, "the wonders of creation" argument, the idea of revelation, the problem of suffering, and the claim that the human animal is the crown of creation, made in the image of the Maker.

1) The Concept of Creation

The natural order, the immense cosmic universe, is surely incredible, amazing, awe-inspiring. Much of it is experienced as visually beautiful. From a mathematical and scientific perspective it is both elegant and beyond imagination, at the same time fundamentally simple and awesomely complex. Many scientists themselves have been and are among its "worshippers", especially physicists, who marvel at the mathematical beauty and precision of it all. Some of them, in the search for both its secrets and its origins, conclude that it implies and suggests a super intelligence behind it all. Others, of course, come to no such conclusion.

Some admit that for the universe to exist, a first cause is neither logically nor scientifically necessary (for example, Paul Davies). But some are yet inclined to favour the hypothesis of a Cosmic Intelligence, rather than that of a fortuitous or chance event.

One could examine in detail the arguments of scientists, such as Paul Davies, but it is initially sufficient to say that their conclusion, like that of anyone else, is finally a matter of personal choice and preference, not a matter of conclusive evidence or proof. It is here that scientists take a leap of faith, rather than test an hypothesis.

Take the argument about mathematical elegance and the laws of physics. Paul Davies asserts that the laws of nature are not simply scientific descriptions of how things are, but ultimate laws about, and built into, the nature of the universe. (However, his latest book "The Goldilocks Enigma" casts doubt on this thesis). Once again this is mere assertion. Let us assume that what the scientists tell us is true about how the world came into being, and how life developed out of basic elements and chemical reactions. It is also true that what developed could do so only in accordance with the essential properties of these things, and their ways of interaction with other elements in the given conditions. If these basic elements had had different properties, or different conditions, they would necessarily have developed differently, and we would have had different laws of nature from those we know, but equally elegant and equally effective.

Whatever the initial properties and conditions happen to be determines what follows, and what follows will be consistent with and dependent upon what we begin with. This is surely neither remarkable nor elegant; it is simply how it is. Science is a description of how things are. If the initial elements of the physical universe had been different, and had different properties, and encountered different conditions, then we would either have had no universe as we know it, or we would have had one just as elegant in its "laws", but entirely different in its features or end products.

Steven Weinberg (Nobel Prize winner in physics) is tremendously impressed by the facts of creation. He says: "How surprising it is....." (Melbourne Age 25/3/95 quoting the Scientific American special, Life in the Universe Oct. 1994 ed).

Of course, it is surprising to us, as Weinberg says, that the initial conditions allowed for life to develop as we know it. And indeed, if one particular constant requires "accuracy to 120 decimal places", do not both these assertions and facts point, not as claimed to the existence of God, but simply to the fact that the chances of our universe coming into being and evolving as we know it were very slim indeed, and hence a product of mere chance. We would expect, on the other hand, that had the enterprise been planned and carried out by a Divine Mind or Cosmic Intelligence, it would surely have been engineered in a way less chancy, less complex, and less dependent on accuracy to 120 decimal places.

2) The concept of revelation.

Just as there is a non-supernatural explanation of creation, so there is a perfectly natural explanation for the events that are interpreted as the Words and Deeds of a God who uses history to reveal himself.

For a start, the concept of God having a "chosen people", which for Jews and Christians is inextricably linked with the concept of revelation, is in itself an unacceptable idea. The old rhyme "How odd of God to choose the Jews" says it all. With the advantage of history, we can say that God bungled it badly. If the Hebrew or Christian revelations are supposed to be correct, what an odd plan for God to choose a people who, on their own admission (see the Biblical record), consistently failed to hear and understand what they had been specially selected and trained to do and be – God's chosen instrument for the sake of all mankind. Indeed, the Hebrew people again and again felt that their failure was so bad that God had repeatedly to punish them through their conquest by other nations and finally to intervene personally in the

person of his Son, so the theology of Christians says. Now, on any logic, it isn't fair to blame the Jews. It was God's plan, wasn't it? And I can't believe he made such a mess of it just so that he could do an impressive rescue act 2000 years later. There is no sense or logic or morality in such a plan. Any God worth the name would reveal himself widely and equally to all humankind. Anything less is unfair, undemocratic, and highly risky and inefficient, apart from the inevitable consequence of the "favoured" people unfortunately coming to see themselves as "special" to God in a totally unintended sense.

The preceding comments are not intended in any sense to be condemnatory of the Hebrew people. They have bequeathed to the world a profoundly moral view of the universe, among much else for which we are in their debt. Had God chosen the Greeks, or the Egyptians, or anyone else, the chances are that the outcome would have been the same, or worse. I defy any group of people who believe God has told them that they have been specially chosen by him, for whatever noble purpose, not to jump to the conclusion that they are rather special, and have the whole thing go to the heads of at least the majority of them. What nation, literally, is going to conclude that they have been chosen because they are weak and inadequate (so that God's power and glory can be demonstrated through them, as some of their prophets taught)? And who, anyway, would want to, or could cope with the awesome burden of being responsible for the faith, salvation and knowledge of God, of all mankind?

We need to see that sooner or later some group of people was going to conclude from life's experiences, that their God was the dominant God among the pantheon of the various cultures. So the Hebrews' God, seen as the source of life and morality (i.e. those things that worked for life or against it), was thought by them to be alone the real and true God, and the rest were just idols or myths, and not real at all. The emergence of the Muslim faith (though based greatly on Hebrew religion) is also an example of this. And if such peoples were already interpreting the events of their personal and tribal lives in terms of the power and purposes of their God, the vicissitudes of their national history would too be laid at his feet.

The experience of humankind is that when we do wrong, commit evil, fail to love, act unjustly, put self first at the expense of others, life goes badly wrong for others at least, and more often than not for us as well. If we already believe in a supernatural power, we will naturally see and interpret these natural consequences as the action of that power in our lives and our history. And if we happen to live on the crossroads of the major regional powers of our day, as did the Hebrews, we are going to be overrun, conquered, taken into captivity, and so on, and interpret these events as punishment for our moral and religious failures.

Because a religiously inclined people very naturally interpret life in terms of their particular cosmology and theology, it doesn't mean that such an interpretation corresponds with reality. The history of the people of Israel can be explained in precisely the same way and by the same criteria as that of any other ancient people.

The Hebrew prophets came to understand that we live in a moral universe, at least in the sense that behaviour has consequences. That they did so on a national level, rather than a merely tribal or personal level, was a remarkable achievement. Any insightful person knows this to be true from their own observation and experience of life. It is not surprising that the Hebrews related such a life and death insight to the Power that they believed governed their lives.

We know today that morality is universal in its application. That is how life is, and how it works. And it is so because, given the nature of the human animal and the condition of his/her

life, it couldn't be any other way. Different cultures may arbitrarily define moral codes for themselves, but behind those is the universal expectation that we all want good done to us and not evil. Today, in a non-religious world, one doesn't need to posit a divine being to explain the obvious source of moral insights.

Revelation is nothing more than the perspective of a people with a particular cosmology and theology, which expresses itself in a mythology in tune with the way they perceive life to work (because they are acute observers of the moral as well as the natural order.) Revelation is the process of interpreting and explaining life's events from a particular religious point of view. That is perfectly legitimate, but life's events can quite adequately be explained in terms of themselves.

3) The problem of evil and suffering

In my introduction to this chapter, I referred to the fact that theologians can quite easily dispose of the problem of suffering on the logical grounds that free will is necessary to the human enterprise, and that suffering is one of the inevitable outcomes of free will.

While this easily and convincingly explains some, though not all, aspects of suffering, it does nothing for those who suffer. It fails to take seriously the immensity of the problem of suffering in the universe. If it is logically necessary for the universe to be characterized not by some suffering or limited suffering, but aeons of suffering for most animals and most humans, with only a tiny minority at any point in history enjoying anything that could be called "quality of life", then we live in an insane universe if we ascribe this situation to God, or some cosmic mind or intelligence.

Because the limited human mind cannot conceive of any other way of being truly human than being subject to the possibility and indeed the inevitability of suffering, it ought to lead us to the conclusion that such a scheme, whatever its logical or moral merits, is not worthy of, or consistent with, the character of a loving God.

Like the so-called "laws of nature", the fact of indiscriminate and near-universal suffering is exactly what one would expect in a universe, which, rather than being the result of a Divine plan, has struggled, for aeons of evolutionary time, through a process of chance selection and survival of the fittest. And after such millennia of struggle we live in a world where the prizes still go to the strong, and life for many is exploitation by others, and includes a disproportionate element of suffering, and behaviour and experience that seldom rise above the animal level.

If the only way God can give us freedom and moral choice is to condemn the cosmos to thousands of years of mindless suffering, at least for sentient beings, undeserved for many, if not most, then we must surely reject him, or the view that there is an intelligent loving reality behind it all.

I can accept that suffering is an inevitable component of a chance process of incredibly slow development over millennia, but not that some cosmic intelligence could consciously and deliberately initiate a plan which by definition had to turn out as in fact it has.

Uta Ranke-Heinemann, in discussing the problem of evil, quotes the ancient Christian apologist Lactantius, who in 317 became Constantine's tutor for Prince Crispus. Lactantius thought it appropriate to cite an argument by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (d. 271-270 BC.): "Either God wants to get rid of evil, but he can't; or God can, but he doesn't want to; or God neither wants to nor can, or he both wants to or can. If God wants to, but can't, then he's not all powerful. If he can but doesn't want to, he's not all loving. If he neither can nor wants to, he's

neither all powerful nor all-loving. If he wants to and can, then why doesn't he remove the evils." She comments : "On the question of the origin of evil, the theologians have always opted for the second possibility, that God can get rid of evil, but for whatever reason he doesn't want to. The theologians prefer to deduct points from God's compassion rather than from his omnipotence. A powerful God finds more supporters than a compassionate God. This is because people model their image of God on their own image. And potency and power mean a great deal to them - sometimes they mean everything - while compassion means less, sometimes nothing at all. But we should rethink all this. God can't banish evil unless he drowns the human race. And so all he can do is mourn." (p.61.)

4) In the image of God

Will the evidence, do the hard facts, support the high view of humanity implicit in the Judeo-Christian view of the world? Will it support any view that sees the human species as the crown of creation, as a moral being, as the highest in value of all forms of life? Does the evidence demand or imply a status for the human species as the lords of creation, and a destiny beyond this life not to be shared by any other creature?

What is the evidence? It is certainly true that the human animal is capable of moral behaviour, of acting so that the good of all is taken into account. It is true that we can enjoy more sophisticated pleasures and satisfactions, such as creativity, including the creative arts, than can other animals. We even use the word noble to differentiate ourselves from the other animals.

But how many humans are noble? How many humans live worthwhile lives, or enjoy sophisticated pleasures or creative accomplishments? How many are fundamentally altruistic, or prepared to put the common good above self-interest? How many do you actually like, could you live comfortably with at close quarters?

The majority of the human race, in fact, live lives of relative drudgery and meaninglessness, even in the advanced societies of the West, or perhaps especially in the advanced societies of the West. What does it profit them that they have a capability for something better, if for most they will never have the chance to realise it ? For the great majority of humans throughout history, life has been primarily the struggle for physical existence and survival – the getting of food and sex, the begetting of offspring, and the fight for power over others, or to be free from the power of others. Where, in developed Western societies (or the rich enclaves of underdeveloped societies) people are free from the drudgeries and suffering of normal existence, their major preoccupations become ambition, and the drive for power and status and wealth and the pay-off – the wherewithal to pursue material pleasure and acquire material possessions. Love exists for some, but it is nearly always conditional – within the constraints of the clan, provided one keeps the rules, obeys the taboos, provides the expected services, or conforms to the other's expectations.

Is human life really a noble enterprise, or simply a much more sophisticated animal existence, where self-consciousness makes suffering more intense, and sophistication of intelligence maximises cruelty and immorality ? Humans are among the very few animal species that kill their own kind. Humans are the only animals that kill for power or possessions, or hate, or in anger – for reasons other than food. Humans are the only species that kill themselves (commit suicide) because their self-consciousness and intelligence tell them that life isn't worth the suffering, whether it be the mismatch between expectations and reality, or experiences which

lead one to a sense of worthlessness or unlovedness or unfulfilledness. Only humans know that for many of them, for much of the time, life isn't worth living, and they only go on in the hope that it could get better, or because to die or take one's life is an even more daunting prospect.

What about humans as moral beings? And even if we are, does human morality require for its justification, or point to, some ultimate religious source? Living in communities quickly thrusts us into the need to develop codes and sanctions that govern relationships, or life becomes intolerable. Asking oneself "How do I want to be treated?" helps thoughtful people to understand that if I want that for myself, I must make sure that it is so for others.

In fact, the average human being lives according to a very low moral standard. Self-interest is the primary measure, and where this is exceeded, it rarely goes beyond family or tribe. Standards like a fair go, and tolerance of others, quickly find their limits where personal interest or tribal solidarity is at stake. Sure, we are capable of great courage and heroism and disregard for personal safety for the sake of another. But this comes to the surface mostly only in life and death emergencies, and is not all that common.

Where highly moral behaviour or the radically ethical life is found, its source can be a religion where someone has penetrated beyond the religious trappings to the moral core, or it can be a function of intelligence, enlightened self-interest, or a sense of fellow feeling with one's own kind, of our common humanity. In any or all of those cases, it does not always extend beyond our own species to other sentient beings or the rest of nature.

The study of psychology tells us that concern for others is something taught or learned in our early childhood experiences, or it is not learned at all, (unless we become incorporated into a loving community or relationship that exists for the sake of others). Even a religious commitment to the obedience of a higher authority (God) will not teach us selfless or other-directed living, unless it at the same time incorporates us into a loving community that finds expression in more than weekly worship and a Bible study or "fellowship" group.

Morality requires of us the acknowledgement not of a higher authority (as the source of values, etc), but of a higher good than our own. The source of a high morality is a recognition of, and commitment to, "the good of all", and awareness that my good is intimately bound up with the good of all creation. It is the conviction that, for all of us, our every action either diminishes or enhances life for others, and thus for ourselves.

The human species is a fairly ugly animal in our "unsaved" state (more about the meaning and source of "salvation" later) whose existence on this planet is of relatively recent origin. In the time we have been here, the planet has been characterised by more suffering and cruelty than was ever known before our advent, and we have now put our own life-support systems seriously at risk, with much of this planet damaged, perhaps beyond repair. Our potential for intelligence can save us, but not the story that some external creator loves us and wants us to live thus towards our fellows.

Religion has been with us for some thousands of years. For the greater part of that time all were devotees, but, even in the most ethical of faiths, there is little evidence of widespread conversion to a radically ethical life. In this secular world, commitment to religious faith is for a diminishing minority. Perhaps it is time for us to look elsewhere for the source of the ethical life, if we and this planet are to survive.

CHAPTER 4

THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

Modern Biblical and theological scholarship and the theological and doctrinal bases of most mainstream churches no longer accept the Biblical / Middle Ages view of cosmology (a three-storied universe). Nor do they accept as literally true the creation stories of Genesis as an explanation of how our world and its inhabitants were brought into being, but understand them as mythological / symbolic affirmations about the meaning or deep issues of life.

If the Bible is and always was, a “religious” book, (about ultimate questions) rather than about primitive science or cosmology, there is no doubt that primitive cosmology forms the categories in which its religious truths are expressed. There is also no doubt that generations of Christians have mistakenly taken these concepts to be literally true, that is, as pointing to objective realities, rather than to meaning, or truth, as understood by people of that time.

The existence of heaven and hell as real places, peopled by angelic or demonic beings, is no longer believable, if it ever was, nor is creation out of nothing in six days, to modern people, who accept the evidence for a modern scientific world view.

The best contemporary Biblical scholarship asserts of course that when these ideas are being used in the Bible, they are not being used as scientific (cosmological) statements, but theological statements. In other words, the cosmological language of the Bible is being used “mythologically” to state theological insights and beliefs, e.g. that God is creator of all things; that his power extends before, through, and beyond creation; that he is above and behind the realms and limits of our knowledge.

The fact remains, however, whatever the explanation of the use of such language in the Bible, that since we no longer accept Biblical cosmology, for most of us its symbolic or mythological use fails to speak to us today, either theologically or any other way. So, we ought either to discard it, or reinterpret it in some way.

Christian theologians, however, prefer to keep it, and hope that the church teaches its adherents what it means. That of course is a forlorn hope which mountains of evidence will support. What theologians fear, I suspect, is that if we discard such language we will lose touch with our roots. What they fail to see is that we can safeguard our roots by retaining our sources (e.g. the Bible) as just that, rather than as the inspired word of God, and without using the ancient language of those sources in our theology. And respect, rather than reverence, for these sources can be a constant check against the contemporary interpretation of any age. If it was appropriate for the Hebrews to express their insights about ultimate truth and reality in terms of their categories of meaning, their contemporary thought forms, it is surely appropriate for every other culture and generation to re-express the same truths (or perhaps some newer ones) in terms of the world of meaning familiar to them.

To discard this language then, is in no way to discard the essence of our Christian faith, but simply the outdated clothing in which it has been dressed. It should be clear, therefore, that our faith is independent of any particular world view or language or culture.

It is important to remind ourselves that primitive human communities, along with their primitive cosmologies (necessary to explain life without benefit of modern scientific knowledge), also developed religious or mystical explanations of life, which we would describe as supernatural (i.e. beyond this physical world, or not explicable in terms of natural laws or phenomena), and

they peopled these supernatural realms with supernatural beings (beings incidentally which they could only conceive of and describe in human terms).

For many peoples it seemed obvious enough that there must be a multiplicity of super beings or gods, each responsible for, or influencing some particular aspect of life, e.g. harvest, or war, or fertility.

Over a long history the Hebrew people came to believe, out of their experiences, that their tribal god was in fact the supreme or most powerful god; and in time they came to see him as the sole God of all men and the universe. Even if other nations continued to believe in their gods, the Hebrews knew that they were mistaken.

What then is meant by the word “God” in the Bible, i.e. in the Judeo-Christian tradition? The concept of a god or gods has been an almost universal one since primitive times. Indeed, the existence of some sort of supreme being is widely taken for granted among perhaps the majority of people today.

Karl Barth’s definition is a useful one. He contrasts the general view of God with the Christian view: “When man speaks of God, of the divine nature, of the divine essence, or of God simply, then he means the object of the universally present and active longing, the object of man’s homesickness and man’s hope for a unity, a basis, a meaning to his existence, and the meaning of the world; he means thereby, the existence and the nature of a Being who.....is to be regarded as the Supreme Being that determines and dominates all that exists”. (Dogmatics in Outline, p.35)

He goes on to say that when Christians speak of God, however, we mean not a Being as described above, who is simply the construct of our seeking and longing; not a Reality we ourselves have discovered, not one who can be known by our seeking, but one who is “the fundamentally other”. “God is He who, according to holy Scripture, exists, lives and acts, and makes Himself known” through His deeds (work of love) in and for us in history; and especially in the history of the people of Israel as recorded in the Bible; and finally and supremely in and through the man Jesus.

So Barth and Christian theology today thus intend radically to differentiate the Christian God, known only through his self-revelation, from all other ideas of God, presumably born of speculation.

Surely this is to misrepresent history. Many, if not most, non-Christian concepts of God (or gods) arose not from the reasonings or speculations of philosophers, but from the attempts of ordinary men and women to explain and interpret the events of their lives and their history. The speculation of philosophers followed later. This process is exactly what we mean by revelation as seen from the human side; people being open to meaning in the events of their daily lives. This is exactly what the people of Israel did; though we would say that their interpretations of meaning in events were simply more insightful than others, particularly as they came to focus on the moral dimensions of existence.

The difference between the Israelite and other concepts of God is not the difference between gods conceived through revelation rather than speculation. It is rather that the Hebrews conceived of their God as relating himself to them and involving himself in their history, rather than as some capricious deity (or deities) who could not be relied upon, and whose primary activity and concern was not the well-being of those people over whom he exercised his power.

The Hebrew God entered into a covenant with his people. He would be their God and they would be his people. He would love and protect them, and they would do his (moral) will.

What Barth is in fact doing is making a judgement that the Hebrews' insights about God are in fact superior to those of others, that they match the realities of our human experience more profoundly, and are therefore a truer revelation of what life is all about. In other words, in pre-scientific times, when the reality and existence of supernatural beings was taken for granted, the Hebrews developed a much more sophisticated, personal and moral idea of deity than any others. For this to occur historically does not depend upon God "revealing" it (upon revelation) any more than scientific discoveries depend upon God revealing them. We should note in passing that Hebrew history, like the history of any other people, can be satisfactorily explained in ordinary secular terms.

This unique understanding of the deity however, (one might say the pinnacle of all God concepts), is not in itself a convincing argument for its correspondence with reality, or for our believing in God today. What we have here is a primitive and pre-scientific explanation of life (the God concept), which has neither validity nor appropriateness in a post-modern world, understood scientifically and especially in ecological terms. Neither is it to denigrate the concept as, for its time and in its context, the most appropriate medium for expressing humanity's highest thoughts about the deepest experiences and meaning of life.

It will, no doubt, be argued by some that faith or belief in a God concept is not dependent upon a particular world view or an understanding of science; that religion deals with another realm of experience and another category of thought, i.e. the spiritual realm. I hope that I have already shown that such a category of existence or thought has its origins in our pre-scientific history and culture and a millennia of past usage. Even if one wanted to talk about such a category of thought today, one would need to use today's scientific, especially cosmological concepts in order to express it, and not the outdated concepts of another age. I think it can be validly argued that if children being born into today's world could be totally educated without any knowledge of, or reference to, pre-scientific concepts, then the idea or concept of spirit or a spiritual realm would simply not occur to them.

Before we leave the consideration of the concept of a personal and moral God, originating in the history of a particular people, the Hebrews, we should note an aspect of this development that is not adequately accounted for by Christian Biblical scholars and theologians. It is the fact that, while the Hebrews are credited with being the first to come to a monotheistic view of God (i.e. that there is only one God, rather than a pantheon of gods), this view can only be seriously maintained by fudging the evidence. The Hebrew experience of supernatural power or deity was always expressed in terms of a dualism, and this is maintained right throughout the New Testament by the Christian re-interpreters of the Jewish experience of God.

The duality of the experience of good and evil in our lives forced the Hebrews to personify evil in the same way as they personified good. "Good" was personified in the supernatural Being/Spirit, Jahweh/Jehovah. But, the Bible abounds also with references to Satan, and to evil spirits which influence or possess people. It is true that Satan and these spirits were seen as clearly subordinate to the good God, Jahweh, thereby expressing the faith and hope of men and women that good is the ultimate reality, and that evil must in the end yield to the good. Nonetheless, these two great spiritual or moral realities co-exist in the Hebrews' understanding and experience of the supernatural realm.

It is interesting to note that contemporary Biblical and theological scholars find the concept of Satan, the Evil spirit, as not credible in an enlightened scientific age. So they are happy to demythologise this vivid personification of evil, as a primitive attempt to express the reality and extent of evil in the universe by a people whose world view included a supernatural sphere peopled by spirits. But it seems that the same scholars cannot bring themselves to apply the same logic to the Hebrews' personification of "good". Why not demythologise the concept of God as well?

Most Christian theologians, and many Christians today, (except for those of a fundamentalist persuasion) accept the mythological and symbolic nature of the Biblical language, yet they nonetheless still embrace, with a life commitment, the Judeo-Christian faith, way of life, religion, that developed among these people. What is interesting, however, if not strange, is that while discarding, or where necessary re-interpreting, this primitive symbolic language, Christians today, by and large, accept as basic to their faith the central concept of this mythology and cosmology, namely, the idea and indeed the reality (existence) of a supreme being, the one that Barth calls "the wholly other One...who exists, lives and acts." We have already noted that many theologians no longer talk or think of God in personal terms, but in fact re-interpret this symbol as well. They would say that we use the word "God" as itself symbolic of something beyond our power to describe; that the Bible itself never expresses a particular view of cosmology (e.g. a three-storied universe) but simply uses cosmological language as the most helpful analogy for life's spiritual dimensions. E.g. God is in Heaven, meaning he is "above" and "beyond" us in power and glory, etc. (So Bornkham & Dodd).

Let us take a fairly typical example of modern Christian scholars and leaders, Bishop Leslie Newbigin, as he deals with this issue in his book, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*. He is keen to take account of contemporary culture and scholarship. He is thus happy to "spiritualize" and "secularise" the Christian Gospel, to "translate" and "demythologise" much that otherwise would appear out of step with modern knowledge, to see as symbolic much that has been taken literally in the Biblical story, to ask "what did the writers mean?" rather than "what did they say?", to espouse modern Biblical scholarship which sees the Bible not as revelation in propositional form dictated by God, but as progressive revelation or our progressive understanding of God's revelation.

Speaking of the **gods** of primitive belief, Newbigin says that while "for most of the Biblical writers the existence of these **beings** was a matter of course ... modern secularised man is unable to believe in the existence of these beings." "From the point of view of the Bible (the) God of theism may be as much a human construct as the idols of the nations. ... it is becoming impossible, or at least abnormal, for (modern secularised man) to share the view which until recently was normal in Western society that there exists some sort of **supreme being** controlling the affairs of the world about whom one can make objective statements The fading away of this belief is no more disastrous from the point of view of Biblical faith than is the fading of the belief in the '**gods**'."

He goes on to say (as if it were saying something significant) that belief in God is "not a matter of statements about the existence of an object beyond the reach of science. (It is) a matter of confessing that one has been known, loved, called, redeemed by Another whom one only knows because he has so acted For the purpose of speaking about God, the appropriate language is that of personal relationships." (pp.58-59). Surely Newbigin is therefore talking about a human construct of the kind he has just dismissed in respect to "the idols of the nations". It is a

construct arising out of his experiences, which seem to match the experiences of others, and of those recorded over centuries by the people of the Bible.

No one disputes the reality and importance of these feelings and experiences as experiences of “ultimate” importance to the experiencers. But surely the fact that the experiences are fundamentally “personal” in character is more likely due to the fact that they are the deepest experiences of persons, rather than these persons experiencing another Person.

He goes on to say “The man of faith knows that he does not know, but knows that he is known.” (p.99). Surely this is a nonsense statement. If he knows that he does not know, then he cannot know that he is known. He can only guess or postulate or confess or believe as much.

He goes on to reject Bishop Robinson’s position that what we mean by God is that “Reality at its very deepest level is personal”, that “Personality is of ultimate significance in the constitution of the universe”, that “Belief in God is the trust ... that Love is the ground of our being to which ultimately we come home.” But in doing so he affirms that he is instead “dealing with the living God, who is, if you like, the eternal Thou, but who is emphatically not a category, but a **living personal being.**” (p.92).

If Newbigin begins with the acknowledgment that we can no longer believe in the existence of “a supreme being” (the God of theism, - who must surely be a personal being), I find it very confusing semantics that he should end with a view of God as a “living personal being”. Is he saying that it is all right to believe in a supreme being who is personal, but not one who isn’t? Simply to change the human construct from an impersonal to a personal one doesn’t address the issue of his reality. Has his argument in fact been not about the reality of God, but rather the nature and activity of such a reality? Whether personal or not, he leaves us surely with belief in a category of being or existence that he began by acknowledging is foreign to modern men and women.

This brief encounter with Newbigin, I believe, illustrates the enormous difficulty faced by theologians who honestly want to respond to the challenges of modern secular thought and the best scholarship, but who in the end cannot leave behind the concept of a living, willing, loving personal supreme being.

Paul Tillich is one who does confront this dilemma honestly, and thus rejects the concept of a personal God as being internally contradictory in every sense. He saw God rather as the “Ground of being”.

The question needs to be asked: Why reject an obviously unscientific view of the universe, or treat it as symbolic language, and yet retain a literal belief in its central symbol? I believe there have been at least two compelling reasons:

- 1) The moral content, life values and salvation efficacy that came to be associated with the Hebrew/Christian understanding of this supernatural supreme being (especially found in the Old Testament prophets and Jesus of Nazareth) are central to Christian faith and to human desires and needs. Is it necessary, however, for these “values” to be ascribed to, or authored by, a supreme being or personal God? In other words, are these “dependent” values, or are they implicit in the human enterprise and for the survival of the cosmos?

2) Our deepest human yearnings and longings (note Barth's definition of God earlier) respond wholeheartedly (with full emotion), to the concept of a personal Father God, and especially so as understood in Christian theology and experience.

This Christian God concept, whether real or imagined, meets all the wish-fulfilment or basic emotional needs of human beings:

- a wise and trustworthy power in charge of, and responsible for, a universe beyond our control and understanding,
- an ultimate judge to right the wrongs of this world and to redress our sufferings,
- an absolute love to forgive and accept us though we are unacceptable, and when no-one else loves us,
- a healer to bring us life and health when human means fail us,
- a power to save us who know we are unable to save ourselves.

The personification of such deep and understandable human feelings and needs, and their enshrinement in the Biblical story (the source book), the teachings and beliefs of Jesus, and the worship, especially the hymns and prayers of the church, causes the Father/God idea to be projected with enormous emotional power.

But despite the deep emotional need that we have for the father / God idea, many thoughtful people today find the concept hard to reconcile with their scientific understanding of our cosmos. So increasingly they drop out of organized Christianity in the face of an unsustainable belief system that they find embarrassing and irrelevant.

Karen Armstrong refers to those who prefer to trust in this ineffable God, "and affirm a meaning even in the midst of meaninglessness". She cites the Catholic theologian Hans Kung who notes that "human beings cannot have faith in a weak God but in the living God who made people strong enough to pray in Auschwitz." (A History of God." p.382). I find that indeed an obscene thought. If the best God can do is plan a world in which Auschwitz is possible, indeed an actuality, or in which we justify belief in God as a source of strength and hope in the face of absolute evil, then save us from religion and from such a God. What can it mean to say that God can make people strong enough to pray in Auschwitz, but he can't make people strong enough to prevent Auschwitz ?

If "God" however is symbolic language for the ground of our being, that quality of love that is fundamental to life and its relationships, then to live creatively and redemptively in the power of love would both drive us to prevent Auschwitz and if necessary to find strength to endure it.

At the same time, some Christian scholars, wrestling with the same dilemma, have for the past couple of centuries sought to develop new ways of interpreting and understanding ancient Biblical concepts and their developments in the early centuries of the Christian era. These basic dogmas are expressed especially in the great credal statements of Nicea (325 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE) and their later refinements, for example in the Protestant Reformation, such as the Westminster Confession and others. Without exception these scholars have caused deep anxiety and defensiveness in the churches and provoked strong negative reactions.

This scholarly process has included attacks from a philosophical perspective, by such as Nietzsche, Schliermacher, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and in the current period by such as the school of Process philosophers and theologians, like Whitehead, Hartshorne, Cobb and Birch. Paul Van Buren and Don Cupitt are perhaps the latest and most significant today. (See the Appendices for a discussion of Process thought, and also Van Buren's and Don Cupitt's writings.)

As well, Biblical scholarship took a new course with new textual discoveries, and the development of new tools for understanding the texts, e.g. form criticism, literary criticism, etc. Large numbers of scholars have contributed to these studies. Among recent and contemporary ones and their interpreters are people such as Bultmann, Raymond Brown, Michael Goulder, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and John Shelby Spong, and the scholars of the Jesus Seminar. (Again, see the Appendices.)

Historical, archeological and anthropological studies likewise have contributed to our new understanding and interpretation of Scripture. See especially such Jewish studies as those of Geza Vermes (“Jesus and the World of Judaism”, and “Jesus the Jew”), and the work of Crossan.

All of these studies have helped to elucidate the true meaning of Scripture, and to debunk the literalist interpretations of more recent times. They have helped us to see that ancient Biblical people expressed their deepest insights about God and life through poetry (imagery), myth (using stories or images, especially supernatural ones, to convey truth), and metaphor, and sought meaning and understanding of contemporary events (e.g. Jesus of Nazareth) in terms of the great past events of their history. It was in their history as a people, in the context of oppression and dispossession by the great powers around them, that they believed their God addressed and disciplined them.

The best modern scholarship has been forced to see Jesus in a new light as a consequence of these studies and the incredibility of the theistic view of God. The ideas of Virgin Birth, Incarnate Son of God and second Person of the Holy Trinity are no longer credible. Instead we are seeing Jesus afresh in the significance of his full humanity; and seeing his “divinity” as the expression and revelation in his human life of what we mean by the word “God”.

For the last century or two now of both philosophical and textual criticism, with its attendant re-working of Christian theology, the God concept itself has long remained virtually untouched. However, in the last half century a few have had the courage to attempt a re-interpretation of that ancient myth or metaphor itself. These have included key figures like Paul Tillich (who redefines God as the Ground of our Being), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (‘God is the “beyond” in the midst of our life’), Bishop John Robinson (who redefines God as Ultimate Reality, which is Love and which is also Personal). Then come the Process philosopher/theologians who assert that God is in everything and everything is in God (not pantheism but panentheism), that God is the Life-force or the Love-force or Persuasive Love at work in all of life. More recently John Shelby Spong has come to see, along with those illustrious predecessors, the impossibility in our contemporary world of a supernaturalist, theistic view of God. He adopts all of the above, describing God as the source of both life and love and the ground of being.

A very few others have concluded that the word God itself, however re-interpreted, can no longer be a useful symbol for these concepts, because it is too closely tied in popular imagination and orthodox theology to the idea of the supernatural, and indeed of a supernatural personal Being. These pioneers include the so-called “Death of God” theologians, Van Buren, Hamilton, and Altizer, and others like Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering, and Robert Funk (founder of the Jesus Seminar). And it is with this last group that I find myself standing unequivocally.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONCEPT OF GOD

Porteous (p.40) quotes Ogden as follows: “the reality of God has now become the central theological problem”.

The concept of God is clearly a very primitive concept that derives from primitive people's limited and often mistaken understanding of their world. They sought to explain not only the strange powers and forces of nature that so affected their lives, but also birth and death, dreams and visions, and their awareness of conscience and the moral order. Each of the powers which are believed to control these “mysteries” is personified as an unseen power present as a spirit in the world, or dwelling in the “heavens” in the pantheon of the gods. Gods naturally come to be envisaged anthropomorphically, extensions/analogies from our human experience, somehow personal beings, but much more powerful, and obviously invisible, dwelling in a spirit world.

As we saw earlier, as time went by, some peoples, such as the Hebrews, began to relate their growing awareness of moral forces at work in their personal, tribal, and national lives, to that supernatural source to which they ascribed the natural, elemental physical forces at work in the world. They came to believe that their moral God, the God of justice and righteousness, was the dominant God in the pantheon, and therefore, the God also of creation. In time, they reasoned that their supreme God was not just more powerful than the gods of their neighbours, (early on they were usually successful in war), but that he was indeed the only God, the others being mere idols. So, slowly Hebrew faith developed, and from it, Christian faith (Jesus of Nazareth's insightful and prophetic interpretation of Judaism).

In the modern and especially post-modern world, our growing understanding of both the physical and moral realms of life means that we no longer require a supernatural explanation or source for these aspects of our world. One can still choose to believe in a supernatural power or supreme being today, as many do, but it is no longer an adequate or necessary explanation of those things that it originally sought to address.

A contemporary understanding of the origins and maintenance (creating and sustaining) of the universe that presently finds general consensus among scientists is the theory of the big bang. Yes, it is a theory, not a proof, but one which fits the known facts of the universe, rather than being a belief system to fill the gaps in our knowledge. In the same way, a contemporary understanding of the moral dimensions of our life, personal, corporate (bearing on the community, nation, or the world at large), and ecological (our relation to the physical universe), is also derived from our modern knowledge of ourselves, especially through the study of such disciplines as evolutionary biology, psychology, the growing research into the human brain, and ethics. Moral laws, like physical laws, are not “written into the universe” by some architect or creator. Rather, they are implicit in the universe because of the very nature of life, and are readily revealed or observed in the experience of all. They are not matters of belief, but are deduced from the consequences of behaviour. The authority of experience is enough to establish their importance, even if not a commitment to obey them.

If we remove too much vegetation from the earth, for instance, or pollute the air or water, we damage the planet and destroy our own life-support systems. That is not an externally imposed

moral law, it is simply a fact of life. If, by thoughtlessness or selfishness or greed, we place our good ahead of the good of all, our good is achieved at the expense of others' good, and we are involved in hurting others. At minimum, we are diminishing or contributing to the diminution of the lives of others, and experience tells us that we may also expect consequences, such as disunity, hatred, bitterness, revenge, tit-for-tat behaviour, and even worse.

If, on the other hand, to the extent that we seek in all situations the good of, or to enhance the life of, both the physical universe and its living creatures, both human and non-human, good for all will result.

It can be shown that there will be minor exceptions to these general truths, but it cannot be shown that these truths do not apply in most cases. We know today that behaviour has consequences, and that all behaviour is caused, and we can readily predict both the likely causes and consequences of most behaviour. We do not need to posit an external authority or power to explain morality in general, or a code such as the Ten Commandments in particular. These moral imperatives make their natural demands upon us. We ignore them at our peril, not because we need to please God, or to avoid his judgement or punishment.

However conceived, the God concept and the word God pointed in human development at least to the fact that the human species was not the centre of the universe, that there is a higher good which has a claim upon us, and to which we should aspire.

If the word God then is freed of its anthropomorphisms (a personal Being) and is seen rather as the enduring symbol of that which is higher than us, that to which we should aspire, that which unites, which makes life whole, which offers salvation, then, it is worth retaining. In other words, "God" means goodness, truth and love – those "goods" which, if practised, ensure the good of all.

If, on the other hand, the primitive concepts of a Divine Person or Personal Being are so entrenched in our use of the word God, such that God remains for most a reality external to life, arbitrarily (however worthily) imposing laws or demands upon us, or indulgently fathering us, or saving us from ourselves by a magical intervention into the universe 2000 years ago, activated by a magical belief formula today, then we are best to do without that much abused word.

Throughout history there have been many images and understandings of God or the gods, (see Karen Armstrong, "A History of God"), including whether they were spirits or had some bodily form. Equally there have been many views about their power or powers and about their location; in the sky or the sea, the trees and mountains, or elsewhere. Often it was believed they could change their appearance, appear and disappear, and move between their world and our world.

Up until a few centuries ago everyone believed in a reality or realities called God or the gods. There were no unbelievers, but many different understandings of what was the nature and character of these beings or powers. In the late 17th, early 18th centuries deism was the dominant Western understanding of the God concept. This took the view that God was largely absent and disengaged from this world. He was thought to be like a clockmaker, who built the world, started it off, and now leaves it to run by itself.

The orthodox Christian understanding of God is called theism. That is the view that God is an objective personal being, like us, who thinks, feels, wills and acts, both in creation and in redemption, i.e. who is concerned about us, and gets involved in this world from time to time.

(In a note at the end of this chapter I briefly define some of the major ways of thinking about God over the centuries.)

The word atheism has come to mean someone who doesn't believe in God. However, it strictly means someone who doesn't accept a theistic view of God, (but might still hold some other view of God). So, in a strict sense therefore I can be said to be an atheist, since I reject theism as an intelligible view of God. This is a widely held position among theologians and many Christians today, who see theism as no longer credible in terms of our contemporary understanding of life and our universe.

So, though my preference is to discard the word God, nonetheless I reject the term atheist in its broader meaning as applicable to me, because I believe the word God can and does refer to something real in our experience, to the "transcendent" dimension of life, to the life force that gives us life and maintains us in life, to the moral imperatives and values that make life work and worthwhile, to goodness, truth and especially love, to the ground of our being as some have put it. That is what the word God has always pointed to, but the legacy of a dualistic view of the world means that most cannot conceive of that reality without projecting supernaturalist and personal objective images or understandings upon it.

So I accept the reality of "God"; and in that sense I am not an atheist. But I advocate an end to the use of the word God, because it is too deeply associated with the images of a pre-scientific age, with God- spirits or with a theistic or deistic image or the many other images expressed in other forms of religion.

The Christian churches have now had the serious options before them, for nearly half a century in a profoundly secular world, of either translating or explaining the word God in terms of some relevant contemporary concept, or of discarding the word itself as irrevocably tied to an outmoded theistic image. They have faced this challenge at exactly the same time that they have been experiencing a serious and progressive decline in the West. But they have either failed or refused to see any connection between their persistent clinging to outmoded supernaturalist theology and their increasing irrelevance in a secular scientific world.

Bishop John Shelby Spong, one of my heroes, is an interesting example of one of the few who has rigorously and courageously confronted the church's dilemma and crisis. He has done so because he has been a working pastor as well as a life-long student and scholar. But, in my view, he, like the church at large, has been unable to go all the way in facing the full implications of his own profound insights and courageous leadership.

In his book "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism", which I first read some years ago, Spong tells how he continued to use the ancient language of the church, but taught his congregation and many others the contemporary meaning of that language and those concepts. I remember remarking at the time that someone as honest and insightful as Spong sooner or later would have to confront the God concept itself, and either translate it into meaningful 20th century terms or give up its use altogether. Finally, some years and several books later, in "Why Christianity Must Change or Die", Spong faced the inevitable and confronted the God question. His answer is a strange compromise between a sound secular insight (God as Life and Love) and what he must feel are appropriate contemporary symbols for God, namely Tillich's "Ground of Being" and Process thought's "panentheism".

Spong, faithful pastor and brilliant interpreter of Bible and faith, like the church he loves, simply cannot let the God word go, even though he seeks to invest it with contemporary meaning. Instead of God as Life and Love, he talks of God as “*the source*” of Life and Love, thus continuing to suggest a view of God as ‘out there’, as having some kind of objective reality. As for “Ground of being” and “panentheism”, these are philosophical concepts to which Van Buren rightly says we cannot ascribe *objective* reality, in the same way as we do to the other everyday realities of our world that can be investigated by science. These concepts therefore are still operating in the realm of the metaphysical or transcendent or supernatural, however “modern” they may sound. They are not the language or the currency or the concepts of our post-modern scientific secular society. These words / ideas have no referent in *objective* reality. We cannot say what they mean, except by referring to *values* like goodness, truth, love, etc. If we claim they refer to more than that we cannot say what that is. To say that God is the “source” of those values still leaves God or this source without any meaningful referent in our language. If we claim they refer precisely to those values, then we should use the value words, and cease using the God word as if it referred to some objective reality beyond the values themselves. Spong thus represents in a profound way the church’s great dilemma. He believes passionately in God, he loves God, but he does not say why convincingly, or really say what he means by these definitions, or what difference it would make if we discarded them.

Being and Becoming.

The Tillichian concept of "God" as metaphor for what he calls the "Ground of our being" (or in traditional philosophy "Being itself") has been widely adopted by many scholars from Robinson to Spong as the most helpful concept or metaphor to speak of God when we come to accept that a theistic image of God is no longer credible. However, none of those who adopt and use this term offer an intelligible explication of its meaning, but either merely assert it, or assume that its meaning is known, at least to philosophers.

The ground or depth or height of our being, of our humanity or person or self, is thus assumed or asserted to be our potentiality, and especially our potentiality for good, (and that it has some ultimate objective reality in and under and behind all of life). But there is in fact no basis for such an assertion. It is simply our natural tendency to objectify on to some supposed external reality our highest hopes and deepest longings.

What is really being said here is that as humans we can conceive of our highest and best, and therefore that which we can conceive and which we deeply need must be the ground or depth of our being, that which we need for wholeness and fulfilment, and that for which we are made or intended. The facts, however, affirm the opposite. Science in the form of evolutionary biology provides the evidence we must address. It tells us that the ground (or depth or basis) of our being is the life force, the urge to live (existence) or the drive for survival; that is the drive for our own "good", not the good of others.

Once life forms developed a brain, and that brain developed the capacity for self-consciousness and reflection in the human animal, *mere 'being' had at last the capacity for 'becoming'*. This capacity in the human animal finds its highest expression in the moral sense. As I will spell out later in this book the moral sense is a uniquely human capacity that derives simply and immediately in all humans as a consequence of observation and experience. We quickly come to know that others can harm and hurt me, and I them, and equally that we can help and do good to each other. We prefer to be treated well, but the "ground of our being" drives us not "to do

unto others as we would have them do to us", but rather to put self first (often at the expense of others).

This dilemma was early recognized by the ancient Israelites, and in time "the ground of our being" came to be called "original sin". With that came the recognition of our need to be 'saved' from "the ground of our being" to become the moral animal, so that we could live in harmony with our fellows and each achieve our highest good - via the good of all.

My chapter on Ethical Ecology attempts to show that the way of "salvation" is not and cannot be a miraculous divine intervention, but rather three things :

- i) experiencing the love of others, the living of others for our sakes, the life-enhancing gift of life and self-giving from others,
- ii) an awareness of, and conviction and commitment in us to, the good of all; transcending self (or the ground of our being), and each living for the other,
- iii) living in "the community of love" where we support one another in "becoming" what we can be, indeed in overcoming "the ground of our being".

So, love is not the ground of our being, however attractive that thought may be. It is rather *the potentiality or ground of our becoming*. The ground of our becoming is love. And love is not some pre-existent energy interpenetrating all of life (panentheism) or some ultimate reality "out there".

Strangely, love arises accidentally from "the ground of our being", i.e. from the primitive urge to genetic survival. Where evolutionary life-forms develop the capacity for consciousness (a primitive brain) maternal 'love' or protection develops as the essential activity to ensure the survival of our genes (in the next generation).

When that primitive brain becomes more advanced and hence contains the capacity for memory and reflection, morality and "becoming" are at last potentialities for our species. It is possible for us to deduce from, and be motivated by, the life-giving dimension of parental (especially maternal) love, that if we extend that behaviour to the world around us, survival and indeed the good of all (and consequently of ourselves) is the new possibility in the evolutionary saga. (See "The Moral Animal", Robert Wright).

Without the gift of love (the self-giving of another) we will remain trapped in the "ground of our being". Through the gift of love we and the world can be set free from the destructive competitive drive of our evolutionary "being", free from finitude and alienation for relationships and responsibility.

To return then to our theme. Why does the God concept have such a hold on the human species ? Why does the average person still have a lingering belief in some sort of divine being / creator ? Why do the Christian churches cling so desperately to a theistic concept of God ?

With the growth in scientific knowledge and of rational thought (the Enlightenment) life came to be understood from within itself rather than from without. The supernatural world slowly shrank and finally disappeared from most Western people's lives altogether, or at least as a matter of any significance or relevance. Curiously, vestiges of it remain in some people's fascination with magic and the psychic, New Age "religious" practices, and the persistence of religion for a small proportion of the population and especially in fundamentalist forms. And among the

religious, while the God concept remains, for many it changes radically from interventionist to immanentist.

I think there are three major reasons why many, including the churches, continue to cling to the God concept. The first is personal insecurity and fear. With the loss of a credible God concept humans confront the fearful thought that they are alone in the universe and therefore must accept the unacceptable of full responsibility for their own destiny and that of their world. Second is the feeling that we are being sold short if this life is all that there is. There needs to be something better to look forward to, and perhaps a balancing of the ledger as well. Third, especially for the churches, is the fear that without God we will experience the loss of what is called the "transcendent" or "sacred" or "holy" dimension of life, or of the values associated with, and felt to be derived from, religion and God.

However, it can be convincingly shown that the sacred, transcendent, value dimensions of life are more satisfactorily explained "scientifically", by our knowledge of ourselves and the physical world, in exactly the same way as science now gives us explanations of the physical world. There is no necessary dependence of these seemingly 'non-physical' aspects of life on a separate non-physical dimension of reality.

Sometimes used also in support of the case for the existence of God, whether as Personal Being or in some immanentist form, is the argument that while one cannot prove the existence of God, neither can one disprove God. That sounds like a proposition that only a religious person could make arising out of a religious view of the world. It is not an argument that makes sense to secular people. In a secular world we do not believe in things because they cannot be disproved. The existence of men on Mars or fairies at the bottom of the garden cannot be disproved, but secular people do not therefore believe in them. We cannot prove that our wife loves us. But we can prove the physical existence of our wife, and we can prove that she is the author of those actions towards us that are commonly accepted to be expressions of love. The parallel with the existence and actions of God does not exist.

Do I accept as "real" only that which can be verified by the scientific method? I would answer: How else could we verify anything? As with the comment above about my wife's love, for the emotions there will be verifiable evidence, for values and moral behaviour there will be verifiable evidence, so for goodness, truth and love, for personal experiences for example of beauty and ugliness, provided in each case we define our terms. But in the end, the presence or absence of these things will simply be in the eye of the beholder. They will not exist apart from the observer. Personal experiences of God are likewise. The experience is real, but the interpretation of it exists only in the mind of the experiencer. There are other explanations that come not from pre-secular cultural concepts but from "scientific" analysis and knowledge about ourselves and our world.

To the average "man or woman in the street" and perhaps many in the churches, the God idea has degenerated into a vague concept of a benevolent "heavenly" power, who is somehow in charge of life, a view that in fact approximates the popular idea of "Fate", who controls our destiny about which we can do nothing, and who finally receives us in a "heavenly" afterlife.

This view of God has little to do with the God of the Bible, and for the non-religious and many religious adherents as well has little or no bearing on how we live in this world. His real domain is beyond and above. He certainly seems to make no moral demands or claims upon us, has little or no relevance to our individual or social or political decisions, and is basically

forgiving, indeed indulgent. As for the churches, their leaders (and many of their adherents) are fearful, as we have suggested above, that should the God concept go or be interpreted in other than theistic terms, Christian faith and values will go with it. So sadly, instead of risking a brave step into future relevance, they are condemning themselves and their congregations to irrelevance and ultimate death.

There is wide theological consensus, when dealing with the 'God' question, in acknowledging the strength of those arguments that we have alluded to above that call this concept into question. John Spong and Marcus Borg are examples of many, who because of their scholarship confront this question head on, dismiss the appropriateness of the theistic view of God for our secular scientific age, but in the end cannot let go of God.

In his book, "The Heart of Christianity", Marcus Borg tries to resolve the problem of God by asserting that there have been two main ways of thinking about God in the history of Christianity, supernatural theism and panentheism. The first stresses the idea of God as a separate somewhat remote personal being who intervenes in life from time to time (including his special intervention in the man Jesus). The second thinks of God as an all-encompassing Spirit. It asserts that everything is *in* God and God is *in* everything. Panentheism speaks of divine intention and interaction, not intervention. Borg acknowledges that supernatural theism is no longer credible, but that a panen-theist understanding of God is. In the Appendix on Process Thought I analyse in more detail the immanentist or panentheist view of God, which I find as equally unsatisfactory as that of supernatural theism.

What Borg fails to acknowledge is that there is a third way of thinking about the meaning of the word "God" that is consistent with a secular understanding of the world in a way which neither supernatural theism nor panentheism are. It is the obvious assertion that the word God is and always has been a symbol for the highest and best that we know or can conceive, a symbol for goodness, truth and love.

Marcus Borg tells how his own theistic position came under doubt early in his life when he realised that it meant believing claims "that went beyond what we knew". (p. 21) This position he reaffirms right at the end of his book thus : "believing that something is true has nothing to do with whether or not it is true." And "We cannot solve not-knowing by believing". (pp. 172&175). Yet, in spite of these honest acknowledgments, at the heart of his thesis and his own faith, is the "conviction" or "belief" that personal experience of the sacred, and especially "ecstatic religious experience is the primary reason for taking seriously the reality of the sacred, of God." (p.45). Of course personal experience is a form of knowing. However its *interpretation* must be subject to the scrutiny of objective testing, as is true for all knowledge in our secular age.

As a consequence he is forced to qualify the relevance of the scientific world view, a position that seems to be in conflict with his basic view about religion in a scientific secular world. He says, "There is nothing about science as a way of knowing that leads intrinsically to a material understanding of reality." (p.30). Here we encounter the final refuge for otherwise honest thinkers. Borg, along with many others, desperate to hang on to God in some form or other, falls back on a dualistic view of the world and our knowledge of it. Science is the way of knowing the material world, while faith or belief or personal "religious experience", whatever that is, is our way of encountering the "sacred", whatever that is; of knowing God.

This fails to acknowledge that the scientific approach to knowledge or understanding life is not primarily about whether reality is "material", but whether our conclusions about it can be

objectively tested and verified. Unfortunately, personal experience cannot be. It suffers from a number of serious problems.

First, it cannot be objectively tested. Second, whatever it is, its description by the experiencer can only ever be a subjective interpretation. Third, such experiences are not very common, however numerically numerous according to Borg. Fourth, the degree to which such experiences tend to be described in similar terms is readily explicable. The experience appears to those who have it to be somehow paranormal, and tends therefore to be described in terms of the cultural legacies that remain strong in our culture today, of a belief in spirits and a spiritual or non-material realm, and of the “soul”, and the concept of God itself. These cultural legacies predispose us to such an interpretation of what are mental and psychological states, or unusual dynamics in the brain under surgery or stress or intensive meditation, or “near death” experiences. Fifth, an experience of a blinding light, and / or a sense of being enveloped in absolute love, or feeling such towards others, in no rational sense can be equated with an experience of God, unless one means by God, light and love. And even if one means by God, light and love, one cannot jump to the conclusion that such light and love is everywhere, embracing everything, and that it is an overarching reality we can call “God” in any normal sense. And finally, what about the rest of us, who have spent a lifetime practising the presence of God, and yet have been denied this ecstatic moment ?

It goes without saying that such personal “religious” or mental or psychological experiences are real and indeed “true”, but their meaning or interpretation can only ever be a matter of belief. Indeed they can quite reasonably be explained in medical and psychological terms. And Borg has already affirmed that one cannot with integrity make claims that go beyond what we know, and that “we cannot solve not-knowing by believing”.

A NOTE ON SOME UNDERSTANDINGS OF GOD

The God of the Bible (the God of the Hebrews): God understood as Spirit; seen at work in their national history, and in nature; and occasionally in special people, such as prophets or wise men. Normally God did not communicate with ordinary individuals. Where he did it was for the sake of the nation.

The God of Jesus: Jesus was a Hebrew, and accepted the above view of God. However, he took God's active presence and love for granted. His passionate concern was not that God should do something, but that men and women should do God's will by living the life of love for others.

The Christian God: Is based on the above views. However, Christianity saw God as active in our world and for our salvation supremely in the man Jesus; and through Jesus, present to us through the Holy Spirit, working his will in us.

The God of the Enlightenment (Deism) : The European Enlightenment was the age of reason and science. It rejected religious revelation, but saw that rationally one could argue for a creator from the fact of the created world. However, it believed that there was no evidence of God at work or involved in this world. If anything, God is like a watchmaker. He made the world but leaves it to run by itself.

The God of theism : This is the most common and enduring view of God. This is the "wholly other" God who is the Supreme Being, who is creator and redeemer, and who is personal (or a Person). He is separate from and above his creation. Nonetheless he is interested and involved in this world, both through our obedience and his occasional interventions.

The panentheistic view of God (Panentheism): God as Spirit, immanent or present and involved in all of life.

God is **in** everything and everything is **in** God. God is not a separate Being, but (an) all-encompassing Spirit - the Life force in nature, &

- the Love- force (persuasive love) in morality (human affairs).

The pantheistic view of God (Pantheism) :In contrast to all of the above, which are middle eastern and Western models (based on the model of the Chieftan, King, or Emperor), pantheism is typical of Asian religions. It is the doctrine that identifies the universe with God. Nature and humanity are but manifestations of the divine. All is God. Everything is God. God is the unity or oneness of all living reality.

CHAPTER 6

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Scientific knowledge has been challenging so-called religious truths from as far back as Copernicus and Galileo, but the overarching authority of the church was able to keep these troublesome heretics in line. However, with the publication of Charles Darwin's "The Origin of Species" the dam wall burst, and the tide of scientific knowledge that was pouring forth almost overwhelmed the church. So the church began to find ways of accommodating and even embracing this new knowledge. Evolutionary theory, they soon came to say, did not contradict the Biblical creation story, but rather spelt out the detail of how God went about it all. Later, the more liberal theologians were able to assert that the Biblical creation stories were never intended to be understood as scientific accounts, but were theological affirmations about God as creator told in the mythological or story form appropriate to religious truth.

It is even more true today that science is no longer seen by many Christians as the opponent of religion or at least of intelligent religion. It is, however, and ought to be, the opponent of fundamentalist faith in all its forms. Rather, science is now the happy hunting ground for those who would seek a contemporary and intelligent basis for their faith, and especially for an understanding of God. And physics seems to be the science par excellence in this endeavour. Recent books on science and religion have focussed principally on the physical sciences, and especially physics and cosmology as the keys to the way forward. To a much lesser extent biology and ecology have received some, but not much attention.

This concentration on the physical sciences as support for religion is, I believe, seriously flawed, indeed a sort of blind alley. The physical sciences, especially physics and cosmology, are certainly relevant in providing the knowledge base to free us from the myths and superstitions of the past based on incorrect understandings of the world and the cosmos. But they cannot take us forward to new insights about religion. This is a false trail. Just as the Bible is not about science, so scientific knowledge cannot be made to produce theological insights. The way forward is rather to be found in the much neglected disciplines in the field of contemporary knowledge, namely psychology (the study of human behaviour, of the creature that is asking the questions), ecology (our place in, and relationship with the cosmos), and ethics (the only relevant branch of philosophy, because it asks not 'what is the meaning of life?', but 'how should we live?').

The physical sciences.

'Physics is the science dealing with natural laws and processes, and the states and properties of natural energy.'

'Cosmology is the branch of philosophy that concerns itself with the origins and general structure of the universe; especially with such characteristics as space, time and causality.'

(Both definitions from Macquarie Dictionary.) Physicists have borrowed the word "cosmology" and would redefine it by replacing the word "philosophy" with the word "science" in the above definition.

Most of the current key thinkers and writers in the field of the relationship between science and religion are either themselves physicists or people who believe that because physics deals with the origins of the universe it looks to be a fertile ground for answers to ultimate questions about life. People like Paul Davies, Polkinghorne, Peacocke, Barbour and others have written extensively in this field. Their general conclusions, however, seem to me to be simply modern versions of the old “watchmaker” hypothesis for God, i.e. when we see something technologically complex and quite remarkable, say like a watch, we are led to conclude that there must be a watchmaker.

(Contemporary ‘religious’ scientists, unlike their predecessors the deists, see this ‘watchmaker’ as continuously involved in the ‘watch’, providing the ongoing creative energy that drives the watch, and the new developments that continue to arise from it.)

So, because physics reveals to us the complexity and wonder of the universe, some scientists are constrained to the view that there must be a creative intelligence behind and in it all. For them, science doesn’t banish or rule out God but rather simply reveals his creative power more wonderfully than we could have guessed.

Some writers, particularly those who belong to the school of process philosophers and theologians, focus on the biological sciences, and the contemporary study of ecology. These include among others, Whitehead, Hartshorne, Cobb, and Charles Birch. They also get clues from physics, especially quantum mechanics, which has a somewhat parallel story to tell. Physics deals with the origins of the universe, of matter and energy, while biology deals with the origins of life, living matter. The latter of course has its origins in the former. Both accept the modern view that life’s basic components are not static entities called atoms and protons, but are living active energies or forces or processes, ‘atoms’ in movement or process.

False Trails.

Now, why are physics and cosmology and this stream of biology false trails or blind alleys in the search for contemporary religious understanding, or a post-modern understanding or definition of God?

1) All of the authors who explore these fields do so out of great skill and knowledge in elucidating the wonders of science. However, with the exception perhaps of Paul Davies, their conclusions represent leaps of faith or statements of belief. They leap from the scientific data to religious or philosophical assertions, rather than deductions from the evidence. E.g. physics explores and seeks to explain the wonders of our universe and its laws, but it does not follow from the evidence that therefore there must be a creator or cosmic mind or intelligence. That is simply a statement of belief. The science itself isn’t evidence for the belief. If one is going to use science as support or evidence for religion, then one ought not to depart from scientific method at the point of drawing conclusions.

Physics tells us that life is matter, and matter is energy, not static solid entities. But it does not follow that because protons, molecules and atoms are pure energy they are therefore not physical entities. Nor therefore does it follow that we can jump from the concept of energy to the concept of spirit, as if they were the same thing, simply because both are invisible to us.

Further, even when we have shown scientifically that water can become steam, or matter become energy, we have no evidence whatever to conclude that energy in any form, or matter in process, has the capacity for self-consciousness or intelligence, except in one particular configuration or form. This can occur only when energy bundles itself over millennia into living cells that develop the structure and capacity for genetic programming, and finally a physical central processor we call a brain.

It is a contradiction of our scientific knowledge and method to attribute mind, thought, will, intention, purpose, creativity, intelligence to either pure energy or some imagined parallel we choose to call spirit. Nothing in science supports that conclusion. Science tells us, on the contrary, that to think and will there needs to be a physical mechanism called a brain.

Now, it is perfectly permissible for science to be among the factors leading some people to faith, or enlarging and confirming their pre-existing belief systems. But it is not permissible to give the impression that science by itself or ipso facto necessarily leads to faith. Even more importantly, it is not legitimate to suggest or give the impression that such conclusions are supported by science, or deduced from the evidence of science. And, for most, we need honestly to recognize their conclusions are based on a very selective use of the available scientific evidence.

In nearly every case our “science and religion” writers are religious people seeking confirmation of already held beliefs. This confirmation comes not from a scientific process of observation, experiment and testing, but by an unsubstantiated leap of faith. For them, religion and God are almost by definition associated in their minds with mystery and wonder, and so-called ultimate questions. Such a faith step appears reasonable because science seems to suggest parallels, or inspire wonder, or defy final explanation. On the other hand, Richard Dawkins, eminent evolutionary biologist, has written whole books to persuade us that by explaining things science does not take away the awe and wonder, but on the contrary makes it so much more so. But he is at the same time scientifically correct in asserting that awe and wonder do not necessarily lead to a concept of God.

2) There is a second major reason why physics/cosmology is a blind alley. Certainly its study may confront us with a response of awe and wonder, and lead some of us to the conclusion that there is a Cosmic Intelligence at work in the cosmos. However, if we are to be truly scientific about this conclusion, we need to look dispassionately at the scientific evidence of the ‘fruit’ of this Cosmic Mind.

It is one thing to be over-awed by the “beauty” of the so-called laws of mathematics and physics, or by the immensity of space, or by the millions of stars and even universes. Equally, from a biological perspective, one can also be overawed by the diversity and beauty and complexity of nature, including the mystery and wonder of the emergence of living matter on one tiny planet in the great cosmic expanse. But that is not a scientific response.

What is the significance or purpose of this cosmic experiment ? What is the point of trillions of bits of fiery mass and energy accelerating at ever-faster rates into infinite space? More relevantly, what are the facts about the emergence of life on planet earth ? Let us look at some of them:

a) The whole process of the emergence of life has been immensely wasteful. Life has struggled in and out of the marine soup, taking millennia to get beyond single cells, and more millennia, until a fraction of cosmic time ago, to reach self-consciousness, and that for one or at most very few species. For almost the whole history of our planet life has been both meaningless and expendable for all its inhabitants.

b) The whole process has been an endless struggle for survival. And the survivors have been the accidental recipients of advantages that arise from chance occurrences in the genetic process, nothing more. Evolution proceeds alone through sexual re-combination and genetic mutation. As well, chance catastrophic physical events in the universe can destroy and have destroyed millennia of chance development. Equally, disadvantageous mistakes in the genetic process lead to individuals or species whose survival prospects are greatly reduced or altogether lost. (Think, for example, of the extraordinary deformities of human birth that occur, but are not revealed to the public, except perhaps for joined twins.) It is on this point that most

commentators betray their lack of understanding of what evolutionary biology is all about. It can be so easily romanticized and described as a purposive process towards ever fuller development and completion as part of some great plan conceived in a Cosmic Mind. On the contrary, the evolution of life is characterized by a singular drive, not so much for life, but merely genetic survival. This genetic survival struggle is only successful throughout evolutionary history when a particular gene happens to best match its environment. This superior matching generally occurs by a chance mutation, i.e. by a mistake in genetic reproduction, and /or the combination of genes by sexual reproduction. Something quite *unprogrammed* occurs in the sexual reproduction of a gene or genetic characteristic.

Let us say that for aeons a particular gene has produced teeth. The "accidental" production of these teeth has thereby given an advantage to their owners in an environment where food is scarce and hard to ingest. Over time one of this species develops teeth that have doubled in size and have sharp edges. (This happens generally by a slow process of minor variation or modification - incremental change through natural errors in genetic copying.) This "accidental" strain of living creature soon monopolizes its food environment, including many other living creatures, and the possessors of less adaptive genes are disadvantaged, and may indeed die without offspring.

Evolution of living things, i.e. genetic evolution, is characterized by the urge to survive; the survivors are the results not of development or planning, but mere chance, i.e. accident. There is no evidence that in this aspect of life Cosmic Intelligence, purpose, or planning is at work. The contrary is indeed the case.

c) This whole process is characterized by indiscriminate predation, indeed cannibalism, and ultimately indifference, and finally suffering, on a vast scale. The biological cosmos is nothing more than a vast food chain. All living things indiscriminately prey on and consume other living things. The process is an immense competitive struggle for resources and survival.

d) The human animal itself therefore is certainly an accident of evolutionary history. It is nonetheless a living creature of remarkable potential and great complexity. It is also very primitive in many of its mechanisms and attributes. Further its much vaunted self-consciousness has a down side, bringing with it fear, anxiety and insecurity, in addition to the competitiveness for resources, the preying on other living things, and the drive for genetic survival that characterizes all living things.

e) Any scientific study of the human species would confirm that for all of its existence homo sapiens has been engaged in struggle, suffering, fratricide, competition for territory and resources, and the inescapable focus on genetic survival, inevitably at the expense of others. Throughout human history it has been only a small elite that could be said to have any quality of life, life worth living beyond mere survival, and that generally at the expense of others.

f) Finally, after some millions of years of struggle against other predators, the forces of nature, and enslavement or destruction by one's neighbours, our species has finally developed technologies that make life potentially longer and easier, with time for a variety of diversions to fill in the idle hours when not making or getting a living. But even this leisured lifestyle is achieved at the cost of exploitative market systems, impersonal and life-diminishing work demands and practices, and the same old drive to succeed at the expense of others. And these human animals live in tribes who continue to settle tribal conflict through armed aggression, killing, death and destruction.

To assert that there is some plan in this that involves 'free will' is to make mockery of the facts, whatever its accidental potential for something good or noble. And if there were a plan, it would have to be said that it is deeply flawed. A plan that operates over millennia on the blind,

competitive, exploitative drive for survival, builds into all living things a fundamental self-first mechanism which almost renders impossible any grander enterprise based on concepts like cooperation, sharing, altruism, the good of all, reconciliation, forgiveness and so on. It is not difficult to see why religions develop theologies of sin and suffering, and the need for a theology of redemption. But if “God” is the author of evolution, then it would appear that he has created the problem that he then needs to solve. In this religious scenario, it is not Adam who chose sin (disobedience) and evil, but God Himself who caused our pain, and needs save us from the outcome of his own plan.

But strangest of all, the advent of the human species seems to herald the end of evolution. With human sensitivities, we no longer let nature take its course, but insist on the survival of any and almost all, rather than nature’s survival of the fittest (except of course when we continue to solve our problems by murder or war).

So physics tells us of immense complexity and vastness and elegant mathematical laws. Biology tells us the incredible story of the emergence of life and its multiplicity of forms, and its mindless, purposeless struggle for survival and existence. If we see it as clever, as the product of Mind, then it is more logical, indeed scientific, to conclude that that Mind is heartless, indeed diabolical, rather than benevolent. A Mind that plays immense cosmic games, with living things as experimental pawns, is hardly the object of worship, veneration, praise and obedience.

So, if we warm to a theory of a Cosmic Mind, we need to face the whole of the scientific evidence in all its brutality and impersonality, and not romanticize merely a part of it. And we need further to acknowledge that there is no basis in science for imputing a moral dimension to that Cosmic Mind. For me, the evidence points clearly to the conclusion that such a Mind, were it to be shown to exist, is either immoral or amoral. To face the scientific evidence for Cosmic Mind is not to warm to it at all. Morality, if it is to appear at all in this great cosmic happening, is only possible for us, and it is clear that we must make it for ourselves, or we are destined to be naught but a tragic cosmic accident.

Turning for a moment to the philosophical system we call process thought, its disciples, like those of physics, leap from science to philosophy or religion, equally without evidence or scientific support. Once again, seeming parallels suggest religious conclusions; but none in fact exists. That, once again, is not a scientifically legitimate process. Its exponents leap from the reality of a life force in nature to a Source of that life force; to God as process rather than object (or subject); to God as Life-force active in and through all creation. They leap again from life-force to Love-force; from life-force to purposiveness, when the notion of purposiveness has no legitimacy or support in evolutionary biology. To rehearse that account once again: Evolutionary theory says that the evolution of life forms proceeds on the basis of chance and natural selection. The only force or drive operating in evolution is “survival”, and what survives is that which best fits its environment; and generally what best fits its environment, so as to outlive other competing genes, is due to an accidental “mistake” or failure by a gene.

If we granted that purpose is operating at all in evolution, that purpose is axiomatically connected to competition for life resources for survival, and nothing else. It has nothing to do with love or goodness or disinterested cooperation. There is just no evidence in nature of a larger purpose at work, such as a slow evolution towards fulfilment or higher forms of life. More complex, especially self-conscious, forms of life, are as we have said, accidental not purposive. The evolutionary accident of a brain and the capacity for self-consciousness and thought cannot be argued as God working out his wonderful plan, except by those who do not properly understand the mechanisms of evolutionary biology, or by those who make a leap of faith and forget that they are no longer doing science. (In the Appendices I treat process thought in greater detail, and provide some further description of evolutionary biology.)

Cosmology, in so far as it is a philosophy rather than a science, has outlived its usefulness, in a world where science can tell us what cosmology once surmised or argued. Cosmology, like all philosophical disciplines (except ethics), is a pastime for academics, but is no longer a useful discipline in our modern world. We can no longer with any relevance argue purely from rational thought the meaning of life, nor how we should live. If we do, it will not convince anyone other than academics, certainly not the average citizen. His or her philosophy is based on what is and what works, and that is about science not philosophy. Don Cupitt has made this point as an academic in both philosophy and religion. (See the Sea of Faith and other writings).

The human sciences.

What knowledge do we need then to understand the meaning of life, our place in the cosmos or at least this biosphere, and how we should live? The relevant scientific disciplines are not physics or chemistry or cosmology, but rather psychology, and medicine (in so far as it helps us in the field of brain research), biology in its fields of evolutionary theory and especially ecology, and finally ethics. By ethics, however, we mean not primarily the traditional academic discipline based purely on philosophical reasoning concerned about what is the good or duty, but as a practical discipline that asks the very secular question “How should we live?” and which seeks the answers in our knowledge and experience of life and the pragmatic consequences of our behaviour.

What help is psychology? Psychology is the study of human behaviour, and in more recent times it has given major attention to the study of the brain which is the special organ that enables our self-consciousness and directs our behaviour. It seems to me vitally important that the human animal which asks the questions that lead to religion, that reacts to its circumstances such that it posits a God or supreme being as the initiating or controlling force in our lives, that thinks and feels, that shows awe, and anxiety and hopefulness, it seems self-evident that we should begin our search by seeking to understand ourselves.

Psychology is the discipline that can tell us what causes behaviour, including religious behaviour. Psychology can tell us why we seek security, authority, certainty. It can help explain what leads us to do good or evil, the origin and capacity for giving and receiving love, the consequences of the deprivation of love, our need for relationships and community, our capacity for trust, our dependencies or independence, our “conscience”, our prejudices, our neuroses and psychoses, our “out of body” experiences, our near death experiences, our “spiritual” experiences, what and how we learn, and much more. It is the field of study that can give us important insights into our thought processes, our motivations, our needs, our self-consciousness, our “instincts”, our emotions, our “personality”, our “temperament”. It can now accurately demonstrate which parts of the brain are involved in or responsible for the various aspects of our functioning, and how, with damage to some parts of the brain, we cannot function “normally” at all.

All of this has direct relevance for our understanding of what we choose to call “self” or “soul”. So, before we seek understanding of the meaning and purpose of our lives, and whether there is some overarching or interpenetrating Reality or Being that originates and determines our existence, we should first check what can be known about ourselves as a species of animal, in case our speculations or convictions about meaning and God are contingent on a lack of understanding about what makes us tick.

Psychology itself must of course be understood in the context of evolutionary biology, and what it tells us about how we have come to be who we are. Together, these two disciplines give us a scientific knowledge base against which to test our theories and belief systems concerning a

benevolent creator. To so believe, without first asking whether such is compatible with this knowledge of our origins and our behaviours, is surely to engage in speculation and interpretation rather than reaching conclusions based on the available evidence.

To make the point somewhat stronger, let us briefly look at some of the historical outcomes of human behaviour that can be made sense of through an understanding based on evolutionary biology and psychology. Any honest observer of 21st century humanity would have to be close to despair about the evidence of this supposedly divine enterprise. Without for a minute seeking to deny the human species' capacity for good, what characterizes our history and our world today? "Fratricide", perhaps above all; our constant resort to territorial aggression and force, to wars and killing (50 million of us killed in just one war early last century); competition for resources and territory; slavery of one another, and continuing inhumane working conditions; a flawed imperfect human machine, and bizarre genetic mistakes in childbirth; relationship breakdown, mental illness, stress; depression, the growing "illness" of our worship of economics and competition; unhappiness as the direct corollary of having "more"; living and relating replaced by consumerism ("born to shop"); meaninglessness, and meaningless valueless lifestyles; degrading our life support systems in the form of environmental destruction now close to irreversible; immoral society, 'me first' at your expense.

The other area of knowledge that I referred to as relevant to an understanding of our contemporary situation is the study of ethics. I will deal with this in a later chapter, not however confined to the traditional philosophical discipline, but ethics viewed from the perspective of science, what I call ecological ethics, or perhaps more accurately ethical ecology.

If God is supposed to be not only Creator but Loving Father, while such a thought is a wonderful dream that cries out from our barren lives, it is not a credible concept in the world revealed to us by science. Sure, we need whatever the God idea stands for, but we must make it for ourselves, and urgently at that !

Science does not and cannot lead us to the concept of God. At best, for some, it can suggest the concept of a cosmic mind or intelligence. But if we stick to the evidence of science, that mind can only be defined as a technical whiz bang, not a moral power; assuming of course that it is possible to justify intelligence or mind without a brain. And such a God cannot by any evidence drawn from science be the same God as the God of the Bible, and especially of Jesus. To be so, the act of creation and the process of continuing creation, has itself to be a moral act. It cannot be shown to be so. Rather, science reveals the very opposite, a process in which respect for life itself is absent.

If it is argued, as it commonly is, that life had to be thus for free will and moral choice to be possible, that must be seen for the nonsense it is. In a moral civil society we don't allow complete freedom of moral or any other choice. We, as a society, and as good parents, take intervening action to prevent or help diminish the worst aspects and outcomes of unbridled free will. Just so, a loving God would intervene to stack the cards in the direction of good and the limiting of evil and suffering, rather than leaving our fate to evolutionary accident or the slow immensely wasteful and destructive aeons of time till some rudiments of moral development began to blossom, only to be overwhelmed by the very legacy of that evolutionary process. It is not good ethics to suggest that the end justifies the means.

So science is a fundamental tool in helping us to understand ourselves, the cosmos, our place in it, and how we should live. But science reveals much more than the awe inspiring wonders of the universe. And when we look at all the evidence it does not lead us to a cosmic Mind, and even if mind can one day be shown to exist without a brain (and there seems no evidence at all for that), that Mind cannot be shown to be either moral or loving.

CHAPTER 7

ARE WE LOST WITHOUT GOD ?

It is often pleaded by religious leaders and adherents that without belief in a personal God, without this external authority to govern our lives, there would be nothing to call us to the highest and best, nothing to save us. The answer to that claim is twofold:

- 1) If we can only be or do good because some external authority, or cosmic love requires or demands, or expects, or calls forth such goodness in us, then we are neither mature nor moral creatures. To be moral is to do good for its own sake, to do what is right because it is right, and because we implicitly recognise that the good of each is ensured only in the good of all.
- 2) Religion, in so far as it leads to goodness (and personal salvation), happens for some only – indeed, only ever a minority. We are by nature (evolution) self-centred or selfish, (including religious adherents), or are constrained by, or captive to, human conventions, be they law, tradition, culture, propaganda, or community pressure. Equally, some live lives of goodness, even sacrifice, quite apart from any religious belief or code, and often in denial of any religion or belief in any supernatural reality. Indeed, with or without religion, we can and do recognize, out of our own experience, and by reflection upon the lessons of history, that my individual good is ultimately dependent upon the good of all; and we find the strength to live and do that good .

In other words, morality confronts us with an “intrinsic” authority, as Richard Holloway would say, (Doubts and Loves p.217), rather than the external authority of our religious systems. Indeed, this is precisely the distinction that the New Testament makes between the intrinsic authority of the teaching of Jesus, and the external authority of the religion of the Hebrews. “He spoke with authority”. It was, in fact, his intrinsic authority that led later to the claim for him of external authority, i.e. divinity or Son of God status.

In sum, if we cannot love humanity and the cosmos for its own sake, but only for some other reason (e.g. for the love of God, or the fear of God), then our love is derivative or second best. My solidarity with not only the human race, but the whole of creation (i.e. the awareness of the need for mutual care and responsibility), is in itself all the motivation I should need. If we cannot do it for its own sake, we will be sure to keep clear of organised religion which might demand it of us.

We need honestly to recognise that there are , and always have been, only the minority who accept responsibility for the common good, and who thus help to keep life healthy for us all. Some of this core group are religious and some are not. Indeed, much religion, especially of the fundamentalist type, attracts its adherents by appealing to their own self-interest (their eternal destiny and their need for salvation), rather than to the claims of a larger vision. All religions, in fact, fail to inspire more than a minority, including a minority of their own adherents, to be “men for others”.

The passing of religion in favour of a universal cosmic ethic would remove the offence of the sectarianism and superstition that keeps many people of goodwill from joining a faith community. Instead, they throw in their lot with special interest groups that work for social or political or justice or conservation ends, but lack the support and guidance of a community that lives by a universal ethic, and accepts responsibility for the whole of life.

If people are anxious about their eternal destiny, and at the same time believe that such destiny hangs on commitment to a specific brand of religion, or particular religious formula or belief system, prior to, or apart from, living an ethical life, then they had best join that religion. Hopefully, having settled the matter of their destiny, they will then be free and motivated to focus their lives outward on responsibility for the world.

Claims are made by religious people that were it not for our religious faith we would have no direction or purpose in life, and no basis for morality. But it is ludicrous to believe that if Christians, or Buddhists, or Muslims, or Jews found they could no longer accept the belief system of their faith, that they would therefore cease to live the life of goodness and loving care for others that had become their way of life (assuming that is the way their faith had been expressed in their lives). Indeed, except where cultural pressures or fear, or both, dictate a person's incorporation into a religion, a great many caring, responsible humans who join religious movements, and accept religious belief systems do so, not out of a desire for some form of personal salvation, but because the life of love and goodness already attracts them, calls to them, demands their commitment, and they recognise in a particular religion an appropriate vehicle for its expression and support.

I can testify, in my own case, that my impulse and commitment to good, arose out of the caring, unselfish environment of a loving home, in which I was also taught to care for others. My parents were members of the Christian church, and my childhood and youth were nurtured in the life of that church. Its dominant teachings were about a good man who spent his life, and finally gave his life, for the sake of others. The experience of my family life was matched by the lifestyle and teachings of the church. In spite of the normal struggles of youth, I wanted to be part of, indeed an agent for, the work of goodness and love in the world. Formal membership of the Christian church of which I was already a part, required a decision to commit my life to, and to become a follower of, Jesus of Nazareth, to live a life like his in the service of others. I did not join the church to be saved, or to be made good, but to join the community whose mission was to love the world. And since I have come no longer to take literally much of its belief system and its God concept, my commitment to the life of love has, if anything, grown stronger, rather than the reverse.

All of which brings us to Christianity. Do we need it anymore? Is it a religion, or is it rather an elucidation of how to live, an ethical system or way of life wedded to a community committed to the living of that way? Is it in fact the distillation of the wisdom of the ages, the derivatives of humanity's experience, which calls us to live for the highest good of all, because in that alone lies our own good?

This is where the work of the Jesus Seminar and in particular that of scholars such as John Dominic Crossan come to our aid. Contemporary New Testament and historical Jesus study reveal quite clearly that the "Way" that Jesus himself taught and lived, and how he was understood and understood himself, is quite different from the later interpretations of him that we have in the New Testament records. These records, while preserving the core of his teaching and his program, seek to interpret his significance in terms of Jewish Messiahship and

contemporary Greek and pagan concepts , and on the basis of these to found a new religion called Christianity. The more original material embedded in the Gospels, and in more recent textual finds such as the Gospel of Thomas, presents Jesus, not as the founder of a new religion, but as an itinerant prophet, wisdom teacher and healer, and a faithful Jew, calling men to the core values of his own historic faith. In the next chapter and an Appendix, I spell out this research in greater detail.

What is new in Christianity, or rather in Jesus' teaching and way of life? The answer is, very little. Jesus, like the prophets of Israel before him, sought to recall his own nation (which was co-terminus with the Hebrew faith) to what he saw to be the essentials of their faith. In that process, he made sharp distinction between the religious practices of that faith and its ethical requirements. He did nevertheless seek to universalise his Jewish faith, and to radicalise its ethic. Indeed, "love your enemies" and "give up your life for others" represent a call to a totally new way of solving our human dilemma.

Jesus is reported as having very little to say about the importance of practising religion, except often to draw attention to how such practices so easily become the focus of a person's life, and a substitute for its ethical demands. There is nothing new here either. Earlier Hebrew prophets had God saying: "I hate your feasts and solemn assemblies, ...let justice roll down and mercy." Rather, he went about, and called others to go about doing good. That is, he called people to the ethical life; caring for the poor and downtrodden, acting to enhance and enrich life, calling men and women to repentance and love (to turn away from self-concern, and self-interest, to pursue the good of others).

Sure, he talked about God as the source and authority for this way of life, but in that he was a child of his age. We have already observed that everything that Jesus taught is written large in our own experience, if only we can see it. I am certain that anyone can come to the same insights that Jesus taught, if helped by others to reflect upon life, and what makes it work, and what makes it worthwhile, and what works against life. Not everyone, however, can bring himself or herself to live by those teachings or insights, regardless of whether they are backed by religious authority or secular authority, or belief in a personal God.

The Jesus story tells of one who so brilliantly taught and lived this radical ethic more totally and effectively than perhaps it had ever been done, that a new community of those who dedicated themselves to this way, grew out of his life and ministry and death (that is what his resurrection means); and he became both a beacon of hope for the world, and a fitting symbol of the calling to live creatively in the world for the good of all.

So, because we are people of a new scientifically understood world, we can, like Jesus, discard many of the religious practices and beliefs that no longer speak to our human situation, and reinterpret those minima such as the concept of God itself, that he took for granted. And we can do it without any fear that we will lose the essentials of that faith, and indeed the challenge and the desire and the need to live the "Jesus way" in the fellowship of his people.

If, for some of us, the only way, or the preferred way, to live out the Jesus way (Matth.5-7) is by holding to certain religious myths, stories and symbols, and engaging in meaningful religious practices, then, by all means let us hold on to them. But let us make sure the world knows that the myths and rituals that express our faith are just that, pointing to the truths about how we are to live, rather than to some supernatural realm that has no meaning or relevance to this age. If however, we practise religion and accept its belief systems, but do not live out the Jesus way,

then we have nothing of importance to say to our needy age, and we are helping to obscure and hide the truth that Jesus taught behind a discredited and irrelevant religion.

Let us ask a purely theoretical question. What if we gave up using the “God” concept? What if it could be shown that there was no God? What difference, if any, would it make to those who now live in response to their belief in the reality of a loving God?

The answer oft repeated by theologians and other Christian apologists is that life would have no meaning, purpose, goal. “If God doesn’t exist, if Jesus didn’t die for me, then there is no point in striving for a better world; there is nothing to hope for, or live for, or die for”. Or, to quote Bishop Leslie Newbigin: “A view of the world from which....(the reality of God and its implications for the value of man)...has been eliminated can have no final safeguard for the human person. In a technologically advanced society what is to prevent the planners from treating human beings as significant only from the point of view of the plan?” (Honest Religion for Secular Man p62). One can only reply that in our technological society there is no evidence that either the planners or the politicians are influenced by Christians or Christian faith, or by an awareness or acknowledgement of the existence of the Christian God and the radical ethical implications for human/political life, whether such a God exists or not. The church’s voice may once have carried significant influence in Western nations, but today is largely seen as irrelevant, unless the polls tell us that it is strongly mirrored in the population at large on any given issue.

It is just plainly not the case that our modern world without God (or belief in God) is necessarily and on that account, prey to sub-human motivations and actions, and even if it were, a continued belief in God by the present minority who take their religion seriously, is not enough to save us from the planners. The modern state, capitalist or communist or something else, is in most cases a secular state. The most humane secular states may well be so because of a legacy of Christian influence/values, and of the European Enlightenment (and not necessarily the concept of God as such). One would expect that, roughly up to the beginning of the 20th century, one looked for the “truth about life” from religion, where one assumed that the highest human values were enshrined.

But even for that prior period, known as Christendom, in which church and state were largely co-terminus, it would be naive in the extreme to suggest that political life or the authority of the state espoused a radical Christian ethic, or that they acted on the assumption that belief in God guaranteed meaning and purpose for life and the safeguarding of the highest human values.

If societies with a Christian tradition enshrine values that flow from, or appear to reflect Christian ethics (e.g. justice, compassion, personal freedoms) in their way of life, this is because they have become widespread community values, not because of a belief in God. Later chapters will attempt to demonstrate that there is no logical necessity in the claim that there can be no safeguards for humanity without God, and no ethics without religion. We can readily acknowledge the contribution of religion and belief in God to humanizing and raising the ethical standards of society, not only through its emphasis upon a moral God, but through ascribing the authority for morality to an unchallengeable external source. That has been a natural and perhaps inevitable fact of history. But, we should not fall into the trap of therefore assuming that because religion and God- belief was a natural vehicle for the early development and expression of moral ideas, that therefore, without religion such ideas are without validity or possibility. I hope to show that quite apart from any religious history/tradition, we may well have come to a knowledge and acceptance of fundamental ethical values in this scientific age, through our new understanding of ourselves and our world, what Charles Birch calls “the post-

modern ecological world view". (On Purpose p73). Indeed, there is strong ground for hope that a secular scientific (ecological) basis for the ethical life can and will gain a more universal acceptance than was ever achieved by the Christian ethic (regardless of the universality of Christian religion). It is this conviction that sustains my hope, at a time when Christian religion is in rapid decline, or becoming more fundamentalist and therefore irrelevant, irrational, and dangerous; and it is this conviction which is the major thesis of this book.

Is it true that life without God would be without meaning and purpose and striving?

Those who claim so must provide the evidence for such an assertion, rather than simply making the assertion as a matter of belief. I fail to see such evidence or any logical or historical necessity in such a view. Certainly, it can be readily acknowledged that it is hard, if not impossible, to believe in or love the rest of the human race, or many individual members of it, (whether we have the benefit of belief in God and the Christian faith or not). Certainly, a belief in God is not a necessary pre-condition to recognizing the extent and unacceptability of so much evil and suffering in the world, and in ourselves. But it is not hard to believe in "humankind" and the human endeavour, and to stand in awe of the cosmos. Pessimism about the human species is fairly easily overcome if one is fortunate enough to experience the delights and challenges of being human – enjoying the beauties and wonders of nature, loving and being loved, all sorts of creative activities, the incredible capabilities of the human mind, and unselfishness and altruism wherever found.

Religion too, for many, provides the answer to an unjust world. We project onto God our need for the "righteous" to be rewarded and the evil and unjust to be punished. So even if we cannot get justice in this world, God will balance the ledger in the next.

Another aspect of religion that might be lost for many, perhaps most, religious people, if God and religion were to go, is the source of comfort and hope that belief in God provides. Bishop Spong writes eloquently of the anxiety and insecurity that afflict us all as self-conscious individuals. Our awareness of self and of our vulnerability and our mortality so easily fill us with fear and doubt, and we look for a source of comfort and security in our lives. That vulnerability is reinforced for many people, perhaps most, by personal tragedy or sorrow or illness or separation or alienation or cruelty, or lack of love and acceptance, or failure or depression or despair.

The projection of a loving God who cares about us, who at times for some seems to intervene to save or heal us or our loved ones, and who finally will receive us into his care and into freedom from pain and suffering in an afterlife, is a life-raft for many who otherwise might not find the courage and hope to go on.

For some, of course, the lack of justice and comfort and hope in this life, and the image of a loving God, spurs them on to help bring these to reality in the world. But for a larger number it unfortunately leads to a quiescence and inactivity in the confidence that God alone can and will put things right in the end.

Without God we would have to do it for ourselves and one another. More of us, perhaps all of us, would have to face and accept the responsibility of being "God" to others, i.e. offering the compassion and acceptance and justice and support that would enrich the lives of all with both comfort and hope.

Life at its best, for myself, my family and friends, and for all humankind, is eminently worth living for, hoping for, even dying for. And it is so simply because I am here, I exist. The alternative surely, is not an option, i.e. to give life up because it isn't perfect, or because without God it lacks ultimate meaning. (Note that I am careful to say "ultimate" meaning. Later on, I will have more to say about whether people today are asking questions about "the meaning of life", or whether they are concerned rather to find meaning in their lives, and how that might be done).

Post-modern ecological men and women can come to know, not only our place in the universe, and that we desire the highest existence for ourselves, but that our individual good (or evil) is inextricably bound up with the good of all, and of the whole cosmos. We also know that we do not need a God-belief or God-experience to lead us to this truth.

Let us note that such assertions as we have just made are only beginning to become possible for us as modern knowledge and technology increasingly free us from the brutalities and uncertainties of the human struggle. In more brutal periods of history, and in less developed, more brutalized societies today, the concepts of God and religion are a natural enough response to the human condition, just as communism is a political manifesto and system for deprived societies. Neither make the same sense in a free, democratic, enlightened society, when the spectres of hunger, poverty, slavery and disease are largely eliminated. (I'm not sure I can say the same for superstition, which still seems to flourish in advanced societies, including much of the religion that continues to exist.)

CHAPTER 8

WHO IS JESUS OF NAZARETH?

What can we believe about Jesus of Nazareth today ? Is he the divine Son Of God ? Was he born of a virgin mother ? Was his death on a Roman cross for our redemption from sin ? Did he rise from the dead ?

Christians living in today's secular and scientific world find these traditional concepts increasingly incredible. Taken literally they suggest supernaturalist and magical phenomena that fly in the face of how we understand our world today. Many Christians have given up on church and faith because the churches still insist on these ancient mythological formulas, and indeed imply that they refer to objective realities that are the work of a theistically understood God.

Further, was Jesus the founder of Christianity, and did he establish a new church and religion ? Or did Jesus rather initiate a radical social justice movement (couched nonetheless in his religious terminology of the "Kingdom of God") ?

Does the New Testament give us an account of the authentic words and deeds of Jesus ? Or is it a theological construct, developed years after the events, that sets out to explain the Jesus phenomenon in terms of the Jewish religious concepts and traditions of his Jewish followers (what we know as the four Gospels), and the even more dominant philosophical and pagan religious ideas of the Greco-Roman world in which they lived (what we know as Paul's letters) ?

Today we are in a position to give some quite clear answers to those questions that make sense to modern or post-modern minds, but at the same time allow us to retain our loyalty and commitment to Christian faith and the radical teaching of Jesus. Not only the best contemporary scholarship, but a significant consensus among scholars, has given us a new perspective on these matters.

Let me set out the findings of this scholarship.

Through the discovery in recent decades of texts earlier than the New Testament, and rigorous and literary analysis, along with cross-cultural , historical and archaeological studies, we can today distinguish various layers or ages of early tradition in the New Testament and other earlier and later texts. This fresh analysis of the early Christian texts and traditions reveals a number of important facts.

The earliest traditions are records of Jesus' sayings and teaching. What is more they show little or no interest in his life, and make no reference to his birth (quite inexplicable if it was a miraculous one). Only one of these early texts gives any account of his death (again inexplicable if that death was understood as God's saving act for humankind). And that same account alone refers only to his being raised from the dead in terms of then current Jewish expectations of a general resurrection of all the righteous, not his unique resurrection as attested in the later records. His death is clearly seen as a political act of collaboration between the religious leaders of the Jewish state and the Roman conquerors who saw him not only as a threat

to religious orthodoxy but a troublemaker threatening the Roman peace. His being raised with all the righteous of Jewish history is central to Jewish theology that God will vindicate his servants who have suffered unjustly. There is no interpretation of his life as Son of God or Saviour, and redemption from sin is nowhere a central theme.

In these earliest records of his teaching it is clear that Jesus makes none of the claims for himself that appear in the later New Testament records, especially those in John's Gospel, written some 70 years after Jesus' death.

Further, Jesus' teaching makes no reference to founding a church or religion, or starting a movement of which he was the head. Indeed the opposite is the case. Jesus, as a loyal Jew, set out to reform his own Jewish faith, to free it from its religious and ritual preoccupations, and its entanglement with political power and priestly domination. He sought to restore it to its great historic insights in which its prophets saw Israel's (the Jewish state's) mission as servant to the poor, the dispossessed and the needy, and as servant to the world. This was to be a community without priests as mediators between God and his people (Crossan calls it a "brokerless kingdom"), in which everyone was to become priest to his or her neighbour (i.e a giver of "healing" and "hospitality").

Jesus specifically rejects the idea of loyalty to and reliance on him. He instructed his followers not to bring people to him, but that they should do as he did. Those who were helped and healed were commissioned to become healers and helpers of others. He called this the "Kingdom of God", i.e. letting the love of God rule in our lives, and being its agent in the world. In practice it meant challenging and overthrowing (in the circumstances of his day, by example) the structures of domination, dispossession and inequality in which religion and state collaborated and which they imposed upon society.

What then is the bulk of the New Testament about ?

First it represents the attempts of the earliest Christian community, i.e. the Jerusalem "church", to explain to itself and others, who their martyred leader was, in terms of their religious history. Jews always sought to explain the major contemporary events of their lives in terms of the great themes of their past history. So they searched their Scriptures (Old Testament) for clues that led them to interpret him as Messiah, as Son of God (key Jewish kings, as well as pagan rulers, commonly used this designation of themselves), and to claim for him a special birth and a sacrificial death (the lamb of God paying the price for the nation's and the world's sin), and a unique resurrection.

Second, the New Testament presents the other major branch of the early "church", namely Paul and his converts throughout the Mediterranean region. Paul, an intellectual Jew, steeped not only in his Jewish traditions, but a graduate in Greek thought (the dominant intellectual world views of his day), broke with the Jerusalem group in his determination to universalize the Jesus movement beyond its Jewish roots and adherents. Paul's gospel further reinforces the view of Jesus as divine, as God incarnate in a human life.

Paul's writings, which are much earlier than the four Gospels, interestingly show no knowledge of the bodily resurrection appearances of Jesus, or Jesus' virgin birth; and his concept of resurrection, like the early tradition referred to above, is of a man vindicated and raised by God into God's life and presence, not resurrected back into human life.

Paul's biggest disservice to Jesus and Jewish faith (and hence to Christianity) was to impose Greek dualism upon Christianity. He makes a strong distinction between flesh and spirit, body and soul, ideas foreign to Jewish thought, and of course to our secular scientific understanding today.

The group of scholars responsible for the most recent research is called "The Jesus Seminar". Its membership has ranged between 80 and 200 professional New Testament scholars. Its best-known exponents are scholars like Robert Funk, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, and one of its best interpreters is John Shelby Spong. In three of the Appendices I expand on this scholarship under the heads of "Contemporary Jesus Study", "John Dominic Crossan", and "A New Christianity - John Shelby Spong". But I will further outline the key findings of "The Jesus Seminar" in the remainder of this chapter.

Of course, if God is a metaphor for goodness, truth and love, and in fact it is and always was, then Jesus can be said to be divine, to be God Incarnate, i.e. goodness, truth and love expressed (enfleshed) in a human life. And as a consequence it is also true that he can be our Saviour, that he "saves us from our sins", i.e. to follow or seek to emulate his life-style is to set us free from self-centredness and evil. As to him being the Second Person of the Trinitarian God-head, that is more difficult to translate. Nonetheless it is easy to assert that he was and is the first, second and third persons of the holy trinity of goodness, truth and love.

So, current Biblical scholarship has enabled us to see the clear difference between what we can confidently know about the historical Jesus – who he was, and what he taught, and did, - and the variety of interpretations which the different centres of the early church developed in order to explain him.

In fact, all of these interpretations can be readily explained by the particular historical situation, the religious traditions, and the cultural ethos in which each was set, as well, of course, as the passion of those early followers of Jesus to find ways to introduce him to the surrounding non-Jewish world.

Certainly, Jesus of Nazareth needed explaining, so impressive was he. The "way" to which he called his followers presented them with the opportunity to make a major breakthrough in the face of the tragedy and failure of both the Jewish and pagan religions of the day to speak to people's desperate needs in a desperate world under Roman occupation.

However, in the event, the interpretations which prevailed and, in time, became official doctrine, were derived not from the life and teachings of their hero, but from their own traditions, needs, and circumstances.

Christian faith as we know it today, expressed as a religion, with its central dogmas of virgin birth, sacrificial death, bodily resurrection, salvation from sin, sacramental meal, and the hope of a life beyond the grave (i.e. "eternal life" commonly misinterpreted to mean everlasting life or the immortality of the soul), has no valid basis in the life, teaching, and death of Jesus as we can now reliably reconstruct them.

It is these dogmas that not only no longer speak with any credibility to the world of the twenty-first century, but which for nearly two millennia have tended to divert attention away from what Jesus himself was about.

As we have seen, the best contemporary scholarship brings us a picture of Jesus, not merely from a scholarly examination of the original texts (including a number not included in the official canon of the Scriptures), but also from a detailed study of archaeology, cross-cultural and cross-temporal anthropology, and Hebrew, Hellenistic and Greco-Roman history. These studies enable what we know about Jesus to be examined against what we know about the social, cultural, political, economic and religious context of his day. Scholars have developed textual tools and methodologies which enable them to distinguish within the Biblical texts about Jesus three layers: the earliest being the authentic voice of Jesus, the next the anonymous voices of early Christian communities talking about Jesus, and the latest stratum the voices of the Gospel authors themselves. The Biblical text as we have it today, presents them all as if they were all the authentic voice of Jesus himself.

It can now be shown that after Jesus' death groups of his early followers soon began to ascribe differing interpretations as to the significance of his life and death. *It is clear that the earliest responses to him were to follow what he lived for, and to keep alive his teaching and his program.* What was that teaching and that program? And what was the context in which he developed it?

First, the context.

He, like all his contemporaries, believed in God or gods. But his God was the Jewish God. Under both the cruel and rapacious occupying Roman power, and the wealthy, politically dominant priestly class and merchant class of his own race and religion, he saw the majority of his people, and especially the large peasant classes, suffering severely. They suffered not only through military occupation, but socially and economically through urbanization, and exploitation by both the conquerors and their Jewish political and religious leadership. This economic suffering was compounded by burdensome religious requirements (including religious taxes).

Second, Jesus' teaching and program.

This could be summarized as the loving father and *the kingdom of love*, whose implications for the above context was a program of "*healing*" and "*hospitality*". (See Crossan).

Jesus' ministry was a direct response to the human (inhuman) conditions of his fellow men and women. It found its inspiration in the prophetic tradition of his own religion, which he and the prophets saw as the ethical, rather than the religious demands of their God. (See my earlier definition of religion in Chapter 2 where I refer primarily to the cultic practices of faith, over against the faith, or relationship with a god of which these are seen as the external expression.) Ethical behaviour can also be seen as the expression of faith, but unfortunately, this is seldom characterised as religion. Hence, my usage which refers to typical practice rather than academic definition.

While the Hebrew prophets were the inspiration of Jesus' ministry, its motivation was his own compassionate spirit outraged by the suffering of his fellows, not the desire to found the principles and practices of a new religion. Jesus was a faithful but rebellious Jew to the end of his life.

Jesus, of course, accepts the reality of a living God, as understood in the prophetic tradition of his own Jewish faith, and he no doubt was brought up in synagogue worship and teaching. But, there is absolutely no evidence in the New Testament records (that can be accepted as historically reliable recollections/records of Jesus' life and teaching, rather than later interpretations) that he placed any importance upon religious practices as such, nor upon dogma nor priesthood. There is indeed evidence to suggest that while he was grounded in and lived by

the insights of his historic faith, he had little time for its religious practices. (The synagogue was about teaching and prayers, rather than the cultic, priestly controlled, sacrificial practices of Temple worship.)

His central message of the “Kingdom of God” was that religion was not the way into that Kingdom. Rather, he declared that life in God’s “domain” (see Crossan) was open to any and all for the taking, and that the gifts of God to needy men were healing and hospitality (table fellowship and physical sustenance), and that those who were the special focus of God’s compassion were the poor, the deprived, the exploited, the dispossessed, and all who were marginalized by both the rich and powerful, and especially by their own religion, which rather than setting them free, judged them harshly and placed additional burdens upon them. Sin, for the high priestly controllers of Jewish faith was *religious* failure, that is failure to meet all the codified details of the Law, especially the cultic observances and religious taxes.

Andrew Dutney sums this up well in his book, “Food, Sex and Death”. With Jewish society struggling to survive under Roman rule, double taxation brought unbearable pressures. Tithes were required by Biblical law, to support the priests and other Temple staff, and theoretically the poor. Under Roman occupation Roman taxes had to be paid as well. As a consequence many subsistence peasant farmers had to sell their land to pay these taxes. This loss of land and livelihood meant that they could no longer pay their tithes, and thus observe God’s law. So poverty drove them outside the requirements of Jewish society and faith.

The Jewish nation had long interpreted its tragic history of occupation, exile and subjugation by foreign powers as God’s punishment on the nation, according to its prophets, for its failure in respect to justice and righteousness (neglecting the poor and marginalized). However the priestly leaders consistently interpreted it as a failure to meet the stringent requirements of the religious Law. So, as always before, under Roman subjugation, the religious leaders sought to correct the situation and renew Jewish society to win back God’s favour by the strictest possible adherence to the Law, what Dutney calls “the politics of holiness” (p.65), based on the “holiness code” (see Leviticus 19:2, and 17:1 – 26:46).

In this historical context, holiness came to mean separation; the clean from the unclean, the pure from the defiled, the sacred from the profane, the Jew from the Gentile, the righteous from the sinner. This found its extreme expression in such renewal movements as the Essenes, the Zealots, and the Pharisees. The Essenes lived in a closed holy community, hoping to win God’s favour by living lives of ritual perfection. The Pharisee’s method was to attempt to apply the standards of holiness required of Temple priests to the daily life of the people. Not only did detailed prohibitions apply, but the Pharisees refused to eat or associate with those who were regarded as unclean. As we saw, this group were largely the poor, the sick, and the oppressed, and any who collaborated with the Gentiles (especially the Romans), or those who ate with the unclean; in other words the underclass in Jewish society. It is to this group that the term “sinners” is specifically applied in the Gospels. (Note Mark 2:15-17, Luke 15:1-2, and such parables as the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Children).

Dutney quotes Borg as pointing out that Jesus, like the Pharisees and other renewal movements, saw the *imitation of God* as the key to Israel’s salvation (restoration of national sovereignty). But for Jesus, it was not God’s so-called holiness, but his love and compassion that we should be reflecting. (See Luke 6:36). So you can see that Jesus is seen to be a major threat to his own religion, indeed to the nation. He attacks the politics of holiness head on. That which is perceived to be the only method of the nation’s salvation is being openly flouted. This troublemaker is encouraging, indeed teaching disobedience. He is inviting national disaster, and must be stopped. This charge against Jesus and the penalty is reflected in Matthew 11:19, and Luke 7:34. See also Deuteronomy 21:18-21. So Jesus is seen as a traitor, and a blasphemous

one at that (denying the holiness of God). The trigger for the removal of this dangerous man was to be the Temple priests rather than the Pharisees, when Jesus symbolically attacks the Temple religion. (See Mark 11: 15-19). Again, quoting Perrin, (“Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus”), he says that it is Jesus’ eating with “sinners” that makes sense of the death on the cross, its inevitability, and Jesus’ foreseeing of such a fate.

Sin, for Jesus, was not our religious or personal shortcomings, but the failure of love for our fellows. Sin was exploitation and marginalization of fellow humans. Sin, indeed, was religion itself where it oppressed rather than liberated, and where it denied people direct access to a loving God. For Jesus, to be in the Kingdom or domain of God was to live counter-culturally, i.e. in profound negation of the accepted ways and values of the world (including his own nation). In God’s Kingdom, equality of all is the fundamental principle. As we have said, Crossan calls it a “brokerless Kingdom”, i.e. access was not dependent upon a mediating priesthood, or religion, or correct belief, or personal holiness, but was for those who hungered after right relationships.

Jesus’ disciples and contemporaries were clearly challenged by him to “follow” him; i.e. to do what he did. As he made disciples he didn’t charge them with going out and telling everyone to come and be saved or healed by him, their leader. Rather, he said to them: “Now, you go and do just as I have done”. In other words, you go and heal and tell people that the Kingdom of God is theirs if they want it; and then send them off to be healers of others and harbingers of the Kingdom. And to repeat; that meant to live in defiance of, and to change for as many as possible, the prevailing cultural and economic systems to which they were subjected.

After Jesus’ death his followers wrestled with the enormous problem of not only explaining who he was, but also his apparent failure. He is executed as a common criminal, and the promised kingdom (largely misunderstood as a future event) does not eventuate. So, by the time the Gospels are written, the interpretations placed upon Jesus are in fact the very reverse of his own life and teaching. They insist that this man, who turned attention away from himself to God and his Kingdom, is our Saviour, that all must come to him for salvation and to enter the Kingdom. How strange that the second Person of the Triune God (as Church dogma came to conceive of him) had no knowledge of his salvific role, makes no mention of it, and in fact, will have no truck with it.

One of the things we need to understand is that the early “church” formulated its faith largely out of its struggle to understand Jesus’ death. The background of being once again an occupied people, this time under the heel of Rome, and of the long history and traditions of their Jewish faith, threw up three images that made Jesus’ death unacceptable, or at least requiring some sort of resurrection or vindication. First, their situation once again, as before in their history, led them to cry out for a messiah figure (variously understood, but usually as political/military liberator). Second, at the heart of their religious tradition was the conviction that God would somehow, sooner or later, vindicate the innocent righteous, reward them for their suffering and save them from an ultimate death. Third, at this point in their history, many of them, including the Pharisees, had come to believe in the general resurrection of the righteous. What more natural than that these three dominant themes of their religion would shape their struggle to understand Jesus, interpret his death, and convince themselves that God had not failed them, and it was not the end of the story ?

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Very soon after his death his followers were faced with working out what it meant to be loyal to him. As a key part of that process they searched their scriptures (their natural practice in seeking to understand key events in the life of their nation) for clues as to who he was, and how he fitted into their God’s plan for their nation and their people. Their interpretations became

focused in the conclusion that Jesus was “of God”, and was fulfilling God’s purpose for their suffering nation; that he was indeed Messiah, i.e. God’s specially anointed servant, to liberate the nation from its oppressors and its suffering and to inaugurate God’s kingdom on earth. His death had to be interpreted not as failure, but in itself as God’s saving act, as sign of which he was raised to life again, and would soon return to inaugurate the new kingdom.

Most messianic claimants (in spite of their significant if not central theoretical place in Jewish religion) have always been in practice rejected by the Jews, except for small non-conforming sects, such as this new Jesus sect, and all have ended in failure. While expecting God’s intervention through a messiah, none of the historic claimants to this title and role, of which there has been a significant number, have for long been accepted. They have either seemed too human, or have failed to achieve their messianic goal, the liberation of their people and the inauguration of God’s Kingdom. The dominant messianic image was the national liberator, in other words, a warrior leader who was expected to achieve victory over the oppressor. The prophetic image of messiah as suffering servant, appealed, like the ethical dimensions of their faith, to only a minority.

So, to most Jews, Jesus not only failed, but his followers were clearly pursuing a dangerous agenda. These followers, like all reformers, represented a serious threat to their religion, i.e. to the status quo and its leaders, and a provocation to the occupying power. This could not be tolerated by the religious/political leaders of Israel, whose authority and religious freedom depended on co-operation with, and subservience to, the conquerors.

This messianic interpretation of Jesus is perfectly explicable in its Jewish context, but not only is it rejected by the religious leaders, but at the same time, the Jesus sect is confronting the pagan world and finding converts there. Something more than Jewish concepts and images is obviously required. So, interpretation begins to be expressed in terms of “God incarnate”, “Son of God”, “Saviour”, borrowed from the pagan world.

With the destruction of the Jewish state and temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, the Christian mission spreads out into the pagan world, and these new images become the relevant and dominant ones in a world full of competing religions and philosophies. They are, in fact, to prove successful in the dominant Greco-Roman culture of the next few centuries, be enshrined into orthodoxy under the Roman Emperor Constantine, and persist largely unchanged throughout the history of the church.

However, we need to remind ourselves again that these new interpretations do not grow out of the direct experience of Jesus by his earliest followers, nor out of Jesus’ own life and teachings as we can identify these from the records. They arise instead from the huge twin problems of trying to make sense of Jesus’ death, and turning to the Gentiles in the face of rejection and hostility from his own race and religion. And in that process and pre-occupation the clear teachings of Jesus’ life and ministry are disregarded in favour of first searching their own scriptures and then baptising and using key images from the pagan world. It is precisely this that we find presented in the four major Gospels of the New Testament, and subsequently developed in the next few centuries in terms of the contemporary Greek philosophy that dominated the world of that day.

We now know that those four New Testament Gospel interpretations are just that, interpretations, and that they are not the only, or the original, records and stories about Jesus. They are quite deliberate attempts to re-write the story of his life and mission to meet the specific challenges confronting the early Christian groups represented or addressed by them.

His divine nature, or the salvific effect of his death, were not the pre-occupation of his disciples and his earliest followers. They saw him as a rabbi, a teacher and healer, who introduced them to, indeed invited them to become participants in, and to experience life in, God's kingdom, i.e. under God's rule here and now.

Jesus challenged his followers, not to form a new church or religion, or define a new theology, but to do what he did, and to do greater things than he had done. Rather than making any claims for himself, he repeatedly pointed people beyond himself to God. He never talked about right belief, but always about right action. He never talked about the importance of church or religious practices, but of the service of God through the suffering service of one's fellows. He didn't define one's neighbour as someone of one's own tribe or race, but as anyone in need. He taught and lived the truth that God-like behaviour, God-acceptable behaviour, was love to suffering humanity through healing and hospitality, that true religion was the loving service of others.

He would have been horrified at the thought that he might come to be afforded divine status, or worshipped as God or God incarnate. This was characteristic of the Gentile world and pagan religion, but such would have been anathema to a Jew. Jesus called men and women to a way of life or living. Before long, he had been turned into the founder and central figure of a new religion.

This, of course, is a familiar theme throughout history. Great political, as well as religious, leaders have been elevated by their followers, and sometimes by themselves, to divine or God-like status, and myths and legends quickly grow up to enshrine that in the minds of their followers. Examples include some of the Caesars of Rome, and Alexander the Great. Among world religions, the Buddha is elevated to special status, and has become for many the object of adoration and worship. But it is not just a phenomenon of the past. Students of North Korea today assert that the cult of present leader Kim Il Jong takes precisely that form, with popular songs and stories elevating him to divine status. As well, he is praised as a genius in every department of life, and a great military leader. The Japanese emperor and the King of Nepal are likewise claimed to be descendents of the gods.

We can only accept traditional Christian orthodoxy if we first accept several pre-suppositions that suit our case, but for which there is no support from the original sources (rather than the later interpretations put into the mouth of Jesus by the writers of the New Testament, or those developed later, especially Greek philosophical thought, without reference to Jesus' life and teaching.) These dogmatic positions have their roots in the New Testament interpretations, and especially Paul:

- that the Holy Spirit is going to explain Jesus to his followers (as something other than what he understood himself to be);
- that God guided one centre of the early church to understand the truth about Jesus, but left several other centres in the dark, with different and erroneous interpretations;
- that finally God made life easy for the church by converting the Roman Emperor Constantine on the basis of his pagan superstition ("By this sign, conquer"). Constantine decided to take a punt on the power of the Christian's God, so that he could destroy his rival for high office. When that succeeded, he became a supporter of the Christian religion; it was established as the official faith of the Roman empire; and he became the arbiter of correct Christian doctrine for all time (enshrining in creeds the majority views of the day, which are still used to define orthodoxy). Christians no longer needed to bother to spread the faith (it became automatically the state religion of most of the

Western world and beyond). The other effect was to blunt any potential for the kind of counter-cultural stance central to Jesus' message.

It is a useful exercise to consider how modern 20th century or post-modern 21st century men and women would interpret Jesus, had he appeared among us now rather than then, and assuming he suffered death at the hands of his own state or an oppressor state. There would be a small lunatic religious fringe, who would announce some supernaturalist interpretation of the event, but there would be no way that we would be interpreting that life or death, as did the first Christians in terms of Jewish categories as salvific, or pagan categories as incarnational, and no way we would be proclaiming his bodily resurrection. Our context is worlds away from theirs, as is our understanding of our world. If we would not interpret such, or indeed any event today, as an incarnational salvific intervention of God, then to accept that such an event occurred in the past is to engage in a logical nonsense.

It is of great interest to me to recall that, in my early life, when I became a confessing Christian, and as a consequence, a member in a Congregational church, those who wanted to follow him in my tradition were not called to "come to Jesus in order to be saved". The call to Congregationalists then, was rather to join the fellowship of his disciples, to "follow" him. Membership of his church, his fellowship, was by "faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, and a life lived in conformity with that belief". (There was no mention of salvation, and no dogma to accept and confess to.)

Those who want to cling to dogma and tradition, (including even some former Congregationalists), and who are more comfortable if they are in the mainstream and the bosom of the historic church formulations, will quickly rise to point me to the Savoy Declaration and the Westminster Confession as central to Congregational tradition. They will remind me that my experience was in Australian Congregational churches much influenced by 19th century liberalism. I will respond, of course, that that period of Congregationalism recognised the historic creeds and confessions, and indeed the Bible itself, as witnesses to the faith we hold, but not as tests of faith, and not as definitive of the one we sought to follow, or of his "body", the church.

So, I am contending that the Congregationalism of my youth, for whatever reasons, and by whatever historical circumstances, was truer to a contemporary and scholarly understanding of the primary sources of our faith than all the traditions and creeds and confessions of the church, couched in ancient religious images and Greek philosophical thought forms, that Jesus himself would have vigorously dismissed, just as he did many of the dogmas, traditions, and religiosity of his own day and tradition.

CHAPTER 9

ETHICAL ECOLOGY – A BASIS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE LIVING

So, how do we arrive at a universal secular ethic or a cosmic imperative for our lives and our world ?

One of the problems in arriving at a universal ethic, or finding an answer to how we should live in this biosphere, or discovering a cosmic imperative to drive us to do the good, is that many people think that the answer is to be found in the religious supermarket. So they go shopping. Perhaps Christianity is found wanting, so they turn to Buddhism or the Muslim faith, or Hari Khrishna, or some version of New Age thinking. If you keep trying or shopping, it is believed, you will find the one that is right for you. This is the essence of what is called post-modernism, an age in which there are no absolute truths or even universal truths, but only what is true for me.

Unfortunately there are several basic problems with the search for the best religion.

First, whether in their traditional or contemporary garb, all religions are open to a variety of interpretations. This means immediately that they fail the primary test. They may be right for you or me, but they cannot therefore be a universal ethic or cosmic imperative.

Second, the popular practice of all religions, including Christianity, is found upon examination to be, for large numbers of people, unexamined beliefs which in practice amount to forms of magic and superstition. These beliefs often contain primitive animistic and pagan elements. Much of Christian prayer life falls into this category, including prayers for travelling mercies, which unconsciously derives from ancient Roman religion. The basic form of most religions is some type of ritual through which it is hoped to relate to, and generally appease and persuade the god or gods to ensure positive benefits for the practitioner. Ritual and prayer are to ensure god's favour and blessing, rather than one's behaviour in the world and towards others.

Third, most major religions have become deeply identified with a particular culture or society. This expresses itself in the popular view that Indonesians are Muslim, Chinese are Confucian, Japanese are Shinto, Western nations are Christian, Thais are Buddhist, and so on. So national and cultural loyalties and interests are often pursued as expressions of a particular religion. And political or ruling elites manipulate religious loyalties to achieve political ends and popular support for hostilities against other nations and internal dissidents.

Across the world, from Ireland to the Middle East, to South East Asia to Africa, to Europe (e.g. Bosnia, Croatia, Yugoslavia), cultural, economic, tribal, national differences or ambitions are expressed through so-called religious wars and conflict. In spite of the current flurry of inter-faith dialogue, there is no prospect here for a universal ethic.

Fourth, at the core of all religions there is to be found, in addition to rituals and beliefs, wisdom from the past as to how we should live. While some of this may appear to be common to all, the same English words may in fact refer to quite different values or meanings. For example, the compassion and non-violence of Buddhism is frequently quoted as akin to Christian love. This

is in fact a quite facile comparison. Buddhism's fundamental philosophy is a withdrawal from life so as to avoid evil and suffering, and the consequent involvement in the endless cycle of re-birth. Buddhist exhortations to compassion and non-violence derive from the maxim to do no harm, rather than the maxim to do good. Their motivation is, as with most religions, the "salvation" of the devotee, rather than the good of the other. Christian love (agape), on the other hand, is the transcendence of self, indeed the sacrifice of self, in the service of others. It is active good-will expressed not only in caring for the neighbour, but in political, social and economic activity for the good of all. I make this comparison, not to suggest one is superior to the other, but to highlight the difference, so easily confused by well-intentioned comparisons. So, quite apart from the superficial tendency to propose that there is a common ethical basis to all religions, in fact the ethical dimension of any religion is seldom at the centre of belief and practice.

Fifth, the popular understanding and practice of most religions, and indeed the official dogma, is that it is something I do for me. It is about my salvation, my sins, my forgiveness, my karma, my enlightenment, my security, answering my prayers, ensuring my good, and my future (whether it be my escape or release from the cycle of re-birth, my assurance of eternal life in heaven, my rewards in paradise, my enlightenment, my absorption into or identity with the Great Self or Spirit or Brahma or Atman.) None of this is primarily an ethical stance, in which the purpose is duty, responsibility, and the greater good of all.

Sixth, this religious focus tends by and large to lead to a withdrawal from the world, rather than to a saving involvement in and responsibility for it.

Popular Christianity abhors the idea of one's faith getting involved in anything other than personal religion and, for most, personal morality. And it is usually other people's personal (especially sexual) morality that is at stake rather than my own. Christian faith is commonly seen as an intrusion in the fields of business and politics. It is certainly seen by the average believer as a personal, indeed private, matter between the individual and God, rather than something with corporate and social dimensions; and often not even about the individual's body, but rather his or her "soul".

Finally, religions so easily succumb to the temptation to see themselves as guardians of truth, rather than the channels of love. Not only then is our version of the truth right (we have it on the authority of God or a sacred book), but we are thereby empowered to impose it on others and defend it by force. The aggressive political action of the religious "right" (Christian fundamentalism) in Western countries such as the USA and Australia is testimony to this mind-set.

When I was a theological student, we were taught that there could be no basis or authority for an ethical system without a religious foundation and motivation. While all religions have some precepts for human behaviour, the Christian religion, with its radical ethic of love (including the call to love one's enemies), provides perhaps the most demanding, challenging and counter-cultural ethic in the history of mankind, but this is seldom presented as its heart and purpose. When I was a youth seeking direction and purpose for my life, I hadn't then been taught about the supposed dependence of ethics upon religion. I was of course, nurtured in the Christian religion, and it helped shape my emerging life values. These values could be encapsulated in the statement that I had chosen good over evil, compassion over cruelty or indifference, the good of all over self-interest. My desire was to find a way to help make the world a better place. In other words, I had caught from my parents and their religion, and our involvement in the life and teaching of that religious community, a conviction that goodness, love and compassion are at the

heart of life. That is, I had no special interest as a child/youth in the Christian religion as such, except that it seemed to be a unique agency in the world for achieving a better world, if only its teaching could be widely spread.

Because I could see no other such agency actively promoting and nurturing the life of love, I decided to work for, and through that agency to help bring about a better world. That decision was first to follow the life and teaching of Christianity's hero, Jesus of Nazareth, and then to offer for leadership in this church. (Ordination seemed to be the accepted way into that role). For me matters of doctrine and religious practice were secondary, if not unimportant, merely the stories and mechanisms for sustaining the Jesus community in life and faith, so that it could do its work of love in the world.

While it is true, therefore, that Christianity influenced profoundly the formation of my values, it is also true that I chose the Christian way, because it reflected and expressed and enshrined the values of goodness, truth, and love that I had already internalized and wanted to live by. It is also important to accept the fact that many come to commit their lives to goodness, truth, and love, without having any religious basis for such a decision. So we need to understand that neither Christianity nor any other religion is the source and foundation of ethics, but simply one conduit or structure in and through which the ethical life may be sourced or cultivated and expressed. These days, I have left my religion behind, but the flame of my commitment to the ethical life remains undiminished, if not strengthened.

Religions keep changing over the centuries, but it may be helpful to look briefly at the origins of the great religions to help us in interpreting them for today.

Buddhism grew out of its founder's frustration with Hinduism, and is intended to be a way of life, rather than a religion or a speculative philosophical system about the meaning of life. It began as an attempt to address what its founder saw to be two false life positions. First, the life of grasping and hence attachment to the things of this world; i.e. life focused on satisfying my own personal needs and desires. Second, the withdrawal from this world, into seeking salvation or enlightenment through bodily denial and discipline, spiritual exercises, meditation, etc. Instead, a middle way is proposed, the noble 8-fold path.

However, the basic Hindu assumptions about life remain as its underpinnings.. Life is seen as impermanent, and beset by grief and illusion. We need to escape attachment to this life by removing passion and attachment to things.. But the way this was to be done was not by the extreme asceticism of Hinduism, but by the middle path of sane moderation, guided by a new knowledge system, "the noble eight-fold path". An ethically conditioned life was important, but this is almost exclusively expressed in negative terms, i.e to do no harm, to not hurt others. It does however reject the Hindu caste system, and hence the restrictive nationalism and social structure of Hinduism in favour of a potential universalism. Life's ultimate goal is Nirvana, i.e. the "waning out" of desire and hence suffering, the emptying of self or ignoble selfishness so that one could become identified (absorbed) with the Great Self.

So foundational Buddhism has no place for social service or social action. A reformed society is an idle dream since the world is "anicca"(evanescence). Traditional Buddhist philosophy is inimical to the progress of empirical science, or seeking to alter the social structures of injustice. Fundamentalist Christianity, through misunderstanding the core values of the Gospel, is likewise. If Jesus is returning soon (fundamentalist Christianity) or life is impermanent and an ultimate illusion (Buddhism), then science and social action serve no useful purpose.

Popular Buddhism as practised in Asian countries is largely a “good luck” religion, in which the Buddha, usually divinised and approached through his many graven images, is appealed to to give me good luck, good fortune, good life.

Western attraction to Buddhism is not so world-denying, since Westerners are addicted to the delights and “goods” of this world. However, the pressures and burdens and stresses of life in the capitalist consumer society scream out for times of withdrawal and escape and release from this “suffering”, this excessive action, activity. So the techniques of Buddhism, rather than the philosophy, appeal to many. Meditation and relaxation enable withdrawal into the self, offering peace and indeed compassion, for relationships of compassion can be places of peace and comfort, rather than conflict, competition and greed. Mindfulness is another brilliant technique which helps exclude the distractions and distress of life’s myriad demands.

Some, of course, see this withdrawal as a recharging for the battle against evil and greed, the battle for wholeness and harmony with man and nature. But this more contemporary impulse and commitment does not have either its origin or inspiration in foundational Buddhism, even where it is presented as part of modern Buddhism. Western attraction to Buddhism most commonly begins in a person’s search for inner peace, or enlightenment, or meaning, or personal discovery and development, crudely put, in a search for answers to my needs, what is in it for me. However important that may be, in the end it is not a basis for the ethical life.

For Hinduism, the way we should live is to seek to be in tune with, and finally in identification with, the Infinite, the unitary ground of everything (Brahma). Where the Christian God is seen as Being itself or Ground of Being, and our goal is communion with such, for Hinduism the ultimate goal is rather non-being. All moral and individual distinctions are irrelevant, because all and everything is a manifestation of Brahma. The world and all in it are illusory and therefore unreal. So complete detachment from life and the blurring of all moral distinctions is the inevitable outcome. So the ending of this life is the most desirable, sleeping is a simulation of this, and in so far as daily existence is necessary, yoga or a trance-like state is the best approximation. This technique of asceticism aims to achieve such control of the body as to render the “spirit” free from its influence. This dualism invariably devalues the body and this world. Activity or suffering (karma) locks one into the inevitable chain of reincarnation (samsara), and is hence to be avoided.

On the other hand, the religion of the later Bhagavadgita, like the Christian revelation, proposes the idea of Deity incarnating Himself out of love for his creatures, and desiring their devotion in return. For this form of Hindu faith all things are real rather than illusory, and constitute the “bodies” in and through which the Deity expresses Himself. Its theological expression is very similar to the Christian’s understanding of his or her relationship with God. In practice, however, most followers of this Hindu school of thought are worshippers of idols and propitiators of malevolent spirits.

Popular Hinduism is very animistic and pantheistic, with gods responsible for every aspect of life. So to ensure life goes well for us, the appropriate god must be suitably worshipped or addressed.

Hinduism expresses itself socially and culturally in a caste system which separates people into higher and lower castes, which generally reflect economic and social status. Where Hindu movements engage in social reform, education, and good works, it is difficult to find either justification or motivation for such activities in mainstream Hindu thought and philosophy.

The Muslim faith or Islam came into existence some 600 years after Christianity, and was clearly influenced by both Jewish and Christian religions as well as its Arab (Semitic)

background. Arab religion was polytheistic, but the prophet Mohammed was obviously attracted to a strong unifying monotheistic view of deity.

“Mohammed’s conception of deity is that of stark absolute transcendent power ... The will of Allah is entirely arbitrary, and can be changed at his pleasure in a contrary direction. There is thus no fixed moral standard at all.” (Bouquet, p. 271). The whole duty of man is “Islam” (submission) to the will of this deity. To quote from the Quran: “Allah leads astray whom he pleases, ... and every man’s destiny we have fastened on his neck”. (Quoted by Bouquet, p.271). As with Christian fundamentalism, where you have an absolutist arbitrary power as the Godhead, a sacred book, and a class of officials to interpret it, anything that can be declared God’s will is acceptable, even if it is entirely immoral on other grounds.

Moslems claim that Allah’s two commonest attributes are “the Compassionate” and “the Merciful”, but if these are subject to an arbitrary will, the claim becomes a hollow one, and certainly not a moral one.

Clearly there are many exhortations to good works, to charitable acts, and compassionate behaviour, but they rely on the arbitrary and authoritarian will of Allah, rather than a moral principle. Further, the primary motivation in Islam for all is the sensual delights of Paradise. Moral behaviour, and holy war are driven by the hope of reward, and hence by definition disqualify themselves as moral acts.

We have made sufficient reference to the Jewish faith throughout this book to require little further reference here. We saw that it was a profoundly moral religion at its best, but like all religions was subject to its moral heart becoming lost or obscured in its religious clothes. Harvey Cox draws our attention to the Old Testament understanding of "sin". Its meaning is abdication of responsibility, apathy, sloth. It can indeed be "law-abiding complacency and inactivity".

"Sloth means the determined or lackadaisical refusal to live up to one's humanity. It is the torpid unwillingness ... to share in the responsibilities of being fully human." Sloth translates the Latin word 'acedia', which means 'not caring'

Cox says that the "fall of man" theology in the first section of Genesis (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Ark, the tower of Babel) symbolizes the character of human sin. "They all concern the ways in which man abdicates his assignment of living in brotherly reciprocity with his fellow-man and with the natural order." "The first thing he (Adam) does is to let one of the animals tell him what to do. He surrenders his position of privilege and responsibility." Cox reminds us that, in the stories Jesus tells, a central character is the steward to whom responsibility is given by his master, and who is held accountable.

The failure of Christianity to make central this fundamental insight of Judaism and of Jesus, a failure Cox refers to as "the merging of faith and docility", forced people like Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche to become enemies of Christianity and Christendom in order to be heard.

Kierkegaard taught that the only real sin was "the despairing refusal to be one's self". Marx railed rightly against those who saw society as an eternal "given" rather than something for which man himself is responsible. Nietzsche saw correctly that "a vampire God who will not allow man to be a creator must be killed"

"Man's existence is by its very nature life with and for the fellow-man. This makes it essentially political. The apathetic avoidance of politics is the sophisticated way in which we, like Cain, club our brothers to death." (God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility. pp.41-49).

Orthodox Christian religion also suffers from precisely the same problem as Jewish faith and all other religions. Harvey Cox says that "...the Gospel of Jesus did not introduce a new religion; rather it utterly demolished the very basis on which all religions, all religious views of life, function; that is, the distinction between the sacred and the profane." (God's Revolution. etc. Harvey Cox, p.86.) Elsewhere in this book I have made the point that while the Christian ethic is a profound and even radical one, "to love one's neighbour as oneself", it is bedevilled and often compromised by the religious dogmas that clothe it. This is inevitable because of the Greek dualisms that early captured it, of body and soul, flesh and spirit, heaven and hell, and ethics sourced from religion. There is always the insidious temptation to save the soul at the expense of the body, to insist on right belief ahead of the work of love, and the mindless heresy that the work of love counts for nothing without accepting God's work of salvation. Don Cupitt suggests that "A simple way into Christian ethics is to take the whole of the traditional theology of redemption as our programme. Everything they thought God had already done for them, we are going to have to do for each other." (A New Christian Ethic. p.6.)

Cox also reminds us that in the Bible God's speech or word or 'logos' is not talk but action. The New Testament author who talks about the 'logos' of God also tells us that God is love. So if god's nature is love, then 'logos' is the action of love in the world. Jesus is God's logos because he does the work of love in the world.

Cox asks: "Why the Word as the medium of God's relation to man?" He answers, because to be addressed requires a response. He quotes Matthew 25: "Lord, when did we see you hungry (etc)?" and Jesus replies: "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." Jesus is the perfect example of a life in which word and deed were one.

Note also Luke 4: 16 ff where Jesus defines his own ministry in very secular and non-exclusive terms.

So what is the content of this 'logos' or Word of God? Cox says it is 'shalom'. "Shalom is a positive condition of peace, joy, .. reciprocity, social harmony, exalted justice" for the community. "It is love, joy, and peace". It has three main components: reconciliation, freedom and hope. "Freedom in the Bible is ... freedom for maturity, (i.e.) responsibility." It is freedom from bondage to anything, and freedom for others (service and relationships) and for life. So "God's program in history is to 'defatalize' human life, to put man's life into man's own hands and to give him the terrible responsibility of running it." (Cox. pp.54-67).

So, implicit in Judaism and Christianity is a profound moral imperative, but so long as it is attached to the God concept it becomes lost in the religious and dogmatic overtones which serve to obscure it.

I have undertaken this brief sketch of the major religions to try to disabuse the reader of the facile and frequently made assertion that all religions are much the same, or have a lot in common, or we all worship the same God, or they all equally require moral behaviour, or the more common view today that with the loss of religion we will have no basis for morality. My conclusion indeed is that given the philosophical bases of all the above, including Christianity, there is no basis here for a universal ethic. Indeed, until we detach from the great religions the ethical insights that they have preserved, they will remain largely obscured, ignored and misunderstood by a secular age that increasingly sees religion as a quaint hangover from the past.

The point I am seeking to make is not that religions cannot or do not have moral implications and teachings, but that by definition morality must be something done for its own sake, not

because commanded by a god or religion. As I have argued elsewhere in this book, supernaturalist religions of any kind will inevitably incorporate in their teachings some injunctions about human behaviour, derived from their community's experience of life, but attributed to the will of their deity. But by definition morality cannot be morality if based on the arbitrary will of any source, however "ultimate". We end up with as many moralities as religions, and we are left to argue which is right. Further, if we do not accept a particular religion, or any religion, we are not obliged to accept its moral code. Morality, by definition, is a human enterprise based on reason, and an attempt to understand and apply what is seen to be the common good.

In his excellent book "Godless Morality" Bishop Holloway makes the case that morality is a human construction, and indeed that behaviour cannot be moral if based on some external authority, but only if it can be objectively judged to be doing good rather than harm.

On the other hand, and in stark contrast to all religions, including Christianity, the Jesus Way (as opposed to the Christian religion) at its inception was a call to give life to others, not a call to find life for myself. Finding "eternal" life (correctly translated as "God's quality of life") was a consequence of the Way, not the purpose of it, or the reward for it. The same logic appears in my quote from Hugh Mackay later in this chapter. Jesus' call was to give life to others, especially the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed. Jesus called men not to come and seek or find salvation for themselves, or forgiveness, or a right relationship with God, but to be the bearers of new life and hope for others. People joined the Jesus movement, not to receive or find, but to give. He brought "healing" to troubled people, and then immediately challenged them to go forth to give "healing" and "hospitality" to others, who were then to be challenged to do the same.

There was no program of searching for God, or cultivating the soul, or finding inner peace, or ultimate meaning in life. God was a living reality (source of life and love), not to be sought after or propitiated, but to be taken for granted, and to be expressed in and through our lives in relation to other's needs. This world was his domain (not some other world), because it was his creation, and he loves unconditionally everything and everyone in it. Jesus' Way was the call to live the life of love (agape), i.e. doing good to all without distinction, and in so doing entering into the life and domain of God. Jesus' Way was world affirming and life affirming in its fullness.

In circumstances other than those of Jesus' own day, Jesus' Way would inevitably have led to social and political action and change. As we have seen, his Way was profoundly counter cultural, and led to his death, but serious social change was not an option for him as a citizen of a country occupied by a cruel, rapacious, and all-powerful occupying power. In that circumstance he chose the way of non-resistance, while encouraging and nurturing structures of community as places of healing and life and hope for those suffering from the social and economic deprivations of the occupying tyranny. That he could and would have been a social activist in other circumstances seems abundantly clear from his strident criticisms of and attacks upon his own religion (especially its quisling leaders), which he saw as adding to the burdens and oppression of those for whom it should have brought solace and strength for living. If we separate the Jesus Way from official Christianity, and if we translate the religious assumptions of Jesus into our contemporary understandings of our world, at last we have a basis for a profound ethic, rather than a religion.

Our world has reached the point where it needs to turn away from all its religions and their gods. While each has some wisdom for living, we can retain the wisdoms for what they are worth, but discard the vehicles which have brought them to us. Those vehicles are not equipped to show us

how to live in this post-modern world and into the future. Their calls to us to relate to another world rather than this one, and to focus inward instead of outward (which is the role of ethics) mean they are impotent to face and challenge the modern world's roller-coaster ride to death and destruction. They are not only impotent, but indeed a dangerous distraction from the threats that surround us; and indeed, as rival searches for truth (rather than ways of doing the good) hold within them the seeds of conflict and hence destructiveness. An other-worldly religion, especially when linked to the power of the state, can be the agent of cruelty and oppression, and produce terrorists and suicide bombers instead of peace and love, when the clerics and the religion find their authority in some untestable external source, and offer the rewards of paradise.

For some, perhaps many, there will be the need for withdrawal into times of renewal, rest, empowering, re-acquaintance with self; whether it be via meditation, relaxation, pleasure, creativity, emotional enrichment of many kinds. There will certainly be the need to pause and examine our motivations and values. But the job that has to be done is to tackle the structures of evil and greed destroying our world, and to go about doing "good", and to heal the damaged and broken hearted, and to save the very physical life-support systems (the natural environment) on which our lives depend. What the world needs now is a universal ethic; an answer to the question "How should we live?"

Religion at its best, gets people to do good, be good, provides a moral basis for their lives. But this is true only where that religion is itself moral, and encourages, or requires such from its adherents. So, in making such a statement as that, we are suggesting that morality is not only a category in its own right, but one which can be used to make judgements about religion.

What we need to understand today is that religion has been an inevitable, indeed essential step in human development. It is a primitive way of enabling primitive people to understand and respond to the world about them, in a controlled and ultimately moral way. It is an activity for humanity in its uneducated childhood.

Children need a source of authority and discipline in their lives; they need to know that that authority has the power to give or withhold (threats and promises, grace and favour, justice and mercy). Children need parents, a father figure, the comfort and love of a mother, in order to learn socially acceptable behaviour, and to know acceptance and forgiveness while doing so, and while developing the self-discipline and autonomy and responsibility of adulthood.

But if the need or the reality of this parenting persists into adult life, or needs to, the child is unable to become, or is prevented from becoming, a free, responsible, autonomous being. That is, one who has worked through and tested one's own value system, and internalized the once externally supplied values and disciplines, and who lives by their implicit authority and rationality. I say rationality, because internalizing someone else's authority and values does not make an adult. Subjecting them to one's own reality checks, confirming them for oneself through experience and knowledge, must complete the transformation. We do things at first because we are told to by some significant authority figure. We do things as adults, because we see it as right to do so, and because we must take responsibility for our own lives.

To need religion, understood as I have earlier defined it, and the God concept, in adult life, is to have failed to grow up, to be unable to operate without the security of external authority, consequences, structures, to remain dependent upon the need for rewards and the threat of punishment, or the comfort and assurance of being loved, though undeserving.

There seems to me therefore, to be an internal contradiction at the heart of Christian theology, which runs counter to the fundamental insights of secular ethics. Central to Christian theology

is the doctrine of Grace, i.e. that in the eyes of God we are of ultimate worth. He loves us, redeems us, justifies, forgives, accepts us for what we are and what we can become, not because we deserve it or can earn it. Certainly, this concept of “grace”, preferably understood in secular terms, is profoundly relevant to how we relate to one another if we are to break through the limitations of “tit for tat” approaches to human relationships. But Christian theology then seems unwittingly to deny this very doctrine by asserting that while God loves us for ourselves, we are to love others derivatively, or for an external reason – namely, because God loves us, or because God commands it, or wills it to be so. If we are to be God-like, or certainly if we are to be moral, we should love others for themselves, or at least for their own sakes. Understood “mythologically” of course, “we should love because God loves us” can be seen or interpreted as a way of asserting the truth that we cannot love unless we first have experienced being loved by another.

It is clear that if religion disappeared from the face of the earth, we would not thereby find ourselves without a basis for ethical living. The reason is simple. The ethical life is in fact self-evident and self-authenticating. It is finally a systematised way of acting in life-affirming and life-enhancing ways. Its authority lies in the recognition that to live thus is to be in tune with reality, to advance the good of all, whereas to live for self first (i.e. without a moral code), is to diminish and destroy both ourselves and our planet.

Jim Wallis talks about how change came to Los Angeles in the wake of the riots and uprising that followed the verdict in the first trial of the police who beat Rodney King. The young teenage members of the two major black gangs who had spent their lives stealing and killing "cause that's all we knew", described how they not only stopped fighting, but how they really came together, "began putting our heads and hearts together." "we just woke up", they said. (The Soul of Politics. p. 18).

In recent years, I listened to a psychologist working with troubled and difficult teenagers and their parents in one part of the Australian school system. She reported that the teenagers know what the problems are, and where the answers lie, while their parents are so conditioned there seems no possible way of changing them. Knowing the truth about life, what is good for you and for others, seems to be inherent in people. It does not need some revelation from a transcendent realm, or religious tradition. We want peace and justice and equality and community (supporting relationships), and joy and happiness and fulfilment for ourselves, - therefore these must be what all people want or need, these must be universal values.

In Desmond and More's book on Charles Darwin they recount how on the publication of "The Descent of Man" the Times newspaper saw this new theory as undermining religion and hence morality. In France similar "loose philosophy had rotted moral principles with dreadful results" - a reference to the carnage of the just concluded Franco-Prussian war. This response ignored the fact that in Britain, France and Germany the ruling elites and their army leadership were the religious establishment, not the free-thinking scientists and radical philosophers. In contrast to the Times and the defenders of the religious establishment, the brilliant editor of the Fortnightly Review, John Morley, affirmed that "the foundations of morality, the distinctions of right and wrong, are deeply laid in the very conditions of social existence." (Darwin. p.581)

From the beginning of human communities people have developed moral codes (with or without a religious foundation) to direct and safeguard their communities, - rules governing behaviour and relationships, to prevent communities degenerating into chaos, anarchy and self-destruction. Commonly these would govern matters like property rights, relationships, marriage and so on.

Communities have grown into nation states, and today into a global community. or potentially so. The great ethical issues of today cross all boundaries, whether they be issues of oceans policy, global trade and business, international relations or global warming.

All the motivation we need to do the good is the recognition that life works best this way for all, not just for some; whereas the pursuit of self-interest can be readily shown to be finally both self-destructive and destructive of the good of all living things. If we have known as children the sacrificial love of another, and the acceptance and sense of worth that it bestows, we know as adults that it is our turn to be the givers rather than the receivers.

Let me spell out then a basis for constructive living that is not derived from, or dependent upon, a religious foundation.

First of all, let me make you an offer. Which will you take; which would you prefer for yourself: love or hate; kindness or indifference; life or death; co-operation or competition; truth or lies and deception; justice or injustice; peace or conflict; forgiveness or judgment and condemnation? Which would you prefer to see active in the lives of other people, responsibility or irresponsibility; sharing or greed; respect for others or exploitation of others; the care and conservation of nature, or its exploitation? And we could add much more. The choice of the positive values in each of the above alternatives would surely be close to universal. All of us on the planet want them for ourselves, unless we are psychologically damaged or mentally ill. If we want them for ourselves, it is self-evident that they must be afforded to all.

Goodness, truth and love accorded to all living things is the self-evident and self-authenticating basis of life. It needs no external authority, no philosophical or theological underpinning, no God, to give it credence and authority.

Today, the scientific study of ecology adds a new dimension to our understanding of life. Ecology is the study of the structure and function of nature. It is about the planet's species-diversity, grounded in shared life elements and common life support systems. Biodiversity and nature-in-balance are grounded in interconnectedness and hence interdependence. We begin life by being given the gift of life. The life we receive is not only a gift from others, it is made from the very life of others. It is not only made from the living cells of our parents, but every living thing on this planet is made of stardust and, among other things, the remains of dinosaurs. While the natural system is a life support system of interdependence, it is also a food chain in which we exist and survive by taking the lives of others, and in which all forms of life, including our own, become the nutrients or life-giving elements for the lives that follow us. All living matter breaks down finally, to become the source and sustenance of other lives or living things.

We need to face the fact that parts of this system, especially that in which the human species is involved, include cruelty and exploitation, where we use other sentient beings for our life support. We need to make up our minds whether we should vastly reduce or strictly limit the population of our species and the need for others as our food, or whether we should work towards sustaining our lives from non-sentient living things, such as plants and vegetable matter. Our interdependence and interconnectedness implies, therefore, that we should live in harmony with the rest of nature, which means the minimum of interference in natural systems.

Next, while in most natural systems there is interdependence or "co-operation", there is also competition for life space and resources. As the only self-conscious creatures, however, i.e. capable of responsible behaviour, we humans should replace competition with co-operation and

sharing. Capitalist system economics, and especially economic rationalist theory, flies in the face of all ecological insights and values. The human species is seen as the only species of value. But even so some can be "used" for the good of something called the economy. Some can be discarded because they cannot contribute or pay their way. All else exists and is available for human use. There is no understanding of our interdependence with all of life. Competition is trumpeted as the fundamental basis of the economy. Economic rationalists obviously have no idea that they are thus claiming for our so-called superior species the lowest common denominator, the law of the jungle, as the sole motivator for successful human endeavour. Here is the assertion writ large in economic theory, that the human species is either amoral or immoral. We are capable of doing our best only when motivated by self-interest or greed, or the desire to eliminate the competition or opposition. How tragic!

In contrast to this view of the world of economics and commerce we would do well to pay attention to someone like Anita Roddick, founder of the very successful global cosmetics business, "The Body Shop". Her success and her book, "Business as Unusual", are eloquent testimonies to a secular and ethical approach to business. She says "Maybe we should redefine profit. We need to measure progress by human development, not gross national product." She refers here to the Council on Economic Priorities' auditable social accountability standard, and the United Kingdom's ethical trading initiative.

She concludes : "There is more to all this than measurement, and that brings us back to the word 'reverence'. There is a spiritual dimension to life that, for me, is the real bottom line. It underpins everything." "Spirituality, to me, is a very simple attitude that has nothing to do with organized religion. It means that life is sacred and awe-inspiring. the most fundamental of insights : that all life is an expression of a single spiritual unity. We are not, as humans, above anything, contrary to what Christianity tells us; instead we are part of everything." "This interconnection has to be sacred, reverent and respectful of different ways of knowing and being. ... We should be evolving into a new age of business with a worldview that maintains one simple proposition : that all of nature - humans, animals, the Earth itself - is interconnected and interdependent. We are all in this together and we are at a crossroads. We have the power to preserve or destroy the sacred interconnections of life on this planet."

She quotes Barbara Shipka : "A global business is a business - whether world-wide or not - that has a vision of questing toward wholeness - for itself, for the people within it, for the world at large." And from Albert Einstein : "It is high time the ideal of success should be replaced with the ideal of service." (Roddick. pp. 24-28).

Peter Singer, probably today's most well known philosopher and ethicist, says that most people live largely self-interested lives, mostly because they don't believe they can make any difference to the course of events. He argues persuasively that self-interested behaviour isn't an inevitable consequence of our biological origins and evolutionary history. He shows how historically humans readily subordinate self-interest to the interest of their group, whether it be family or tribe, and later even of large impersonal groupings like the nation. While it can be argued that these actions are ultimately acts of self-interest (my survival depends on the tribe or on its survival) they still indicate a capacity for "caring" about and for others, and sometimes at least at the expense of our own interests or lives; a recognition that my interests and well-being are bound up with the greater good, or the good of others or of "all", however defined. And globalization gives us an opportunity to enlarge that vision.

Writers like Robert Wright in "The Moral Animal", and David Barash in "Sociobiology: The Whisperings Within", spell out the evolutionary origins of altruistic behaviour and the importance of education in moving beyond the start that evolution gives us.

Singer suggests that the answers given by philosophers over the past 2000 years to the questions "Why should I be moral ?" or "Why act ethically ?" are in the end unsatisfactory. These answers propose solutions like the only ethical action is to do "good" for its own sake, or because an action produces the maximum pleasure out of all possible choices of action (utilitarianism). Unlike Kant, for example, Singer says that acts can be identified as ethical if they are altruistic (seeking the good of others, or of ends beyond or greater than ourselves or our own ends), regardless of whether we have other motives for doing them. The ethical life is to live "at odds with the narrow, accumulative and competitive pursuit of self-interest .. ". It is also "to act in a way that one can recommend to others .. " "that could , in principle, convince any reasonable being." Our actions, to be moral, must be universalizable. They must take account of the interests of all who could be affected.

In commenting on the 'New Age' movement he speaks of 'dead-ends', where those involved focus on looking inward into their lives, when they should be looking outwards; a focus on the self rather than the needs of others or the greater good of the cosmos. He says that we need to adopt, in Henry Sidgwick's phrase, "the point of view of the universe." Linked with this, of course, is the precept found in some form or other in the major religions and ethical traditions, namely the Golden Rule, "Love your neighbour as yourself", or "Do unto others what you would have them do to you." (How are we to Live? pp.170 - 232).

Ethical ecology asserts that the rational person's knowledge of the world, and of himself or herself, can lead to the understanding that the good of each depends on the good of all, and that our capacity for love and good can direct our energies towards successful ecological outcomes.

Finally, in a system of ethical ecology, the study of psychology is equally important. Behaviour is judged as ethical on the basis of whether it is life-enhancing, rather than life-diminishing, or life-taking, and whether the beneficiary is one or whether it is all. These all-embracing criteria can be applied universally. Does each action I take enhance life or diminish life? Through the study of human behaviour (psychology) we have come to know what enables us to reach emotional maturity and responsibility, what is the basis of self-esteem, how we can achieve trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity (creativity), integrity, independence, and so on. (With acknowledgement to Erik Erikson.)

We know that without first receiving love (i.e. affection, respect, acceptance, regardless of deserving), we cannot become mature human beings; indeed, we are incapable of giving love. Rather, we become self-centred and dangerous to ourselves and others. This insight lies behind whether we become directed outwards to the needs and good of all, or whether we become self-centred, inwardly focused at the expense of others and of the good of all.

M. Scott Peck talks of four basic life techniques : delaying gratification, assuming responsibility, dedication to the truth or reality, and balancing (giving up in order to grow and develop). The strength, energy and willingness to use these techniques are provided by love. And "love is an action, an activity, ... not a feeling." "But since it requires an extension of ourselves, love is either always work or courage. If an act is not one of work or courage, then it is not an act of love." "The principal form that the work of love takes is attention." (The Road Less Travelled. pp. 81, 124, 128.)

The study of psychology has taught us that love is the source and sustainer of life. It also teaches us that all behaviour has consequences. Quantum mechanics has taught us that everything that

happens affects everything. Ecology has taught us that we are all bound together in the web of life, and that unless we all learn to live together, we will all die together.

So the fundamental life question that ethical ecology or ecological ethics asks is not what is the meaning of life, or what is the ultimate meaning of life, or why am I here, but the question that is the title of one of Peter Singer's books, namely, "How are we to live?", or as I have put it, how should we live? The need to ask the question, is not because God requires it of me, but because the cosmos requires it of me, the life around me that gives me life requires it of me. An absolutely sufficient reason is because I am here. Nothing more. And the motivation to do the good is not only because we are here, and because my good is dependent upon the good of all, but because the alternative is death and destruction, (I like to call it enlightened self-interest), and because the good of all is eminently achievable, and eminently worth achieving. If you closely examine this paragraph you will perhaps be surprised to discover that in fact these questions are in a very profound sense "ultimate" questions; and that all the great Biblical/theological themes are there - "God" as creator and life-giver and sustainer of life, salvation, eschatology; grace, being in Christ - understood now not in supernatural images, but in terms of the womb of life from which we spring and to which we return.

Hugh Mackay, probably Australia's best known social researcher, tackles this question from another angle. He says that the pursuit of happiness is the first step in a long journey to personal and global peace. Let me quote some of what he wrote:

"... ancient wisdom suggests that the selfish pursuit of happiness is actually counter-productive.....: the more you seek it, the less likely you are to find it. But there is another possibility, illuminated by a different question; whose happiness is worth pursuing? .., you achieve your goal indirectly, by first attending to the needs of others. The more assiduously you (seek the other's good), the more likely it is that (others will eventually decide to seek yours). ...even the golden rule has always had a collateral benefit buried in the subtext: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" might sound like unbridled altruism, but there is a strong implication of reciprocity there. If you treat others the way you would like them to treat you, you improve the chances that they will indeed treat you just like that. But reciprocity is a moral minefield. It all comes down to motive: if you treat others well only because you expect reciprocal treatment, that comes dangerously close to exploitation, and the satisfaction you seek is likely to elude you. The trick is to embrace the central paradox of human happiness; we are generally at our happiest when we strive for the happiness of others. "Look out for No. 1" was always a dark, seductive con. "I've never been happier" is the almost universal cry of (those who) relieve suffering, hardship, poverty or despair in any way. It is also the common experience of those who devote their working lives to professions like teaching, medicine and counselling - where the entire focus is on the well-being of the pupil, the patient or the client, and where remuneration is a peripheral issue. The pursuit of happiness, it turns out, is a worthwhile exercise, provided we remember whose happiness we are pursuing. Perhaps that is the first step in the long journey to personal, and ultimately global, peace". (Melb.Age 22-3-03).

A Christian (or rather Jesus) ecological ethic will, of course, go that one step further. The really saving element in the cosmos will be those who aspire to live by an even more radical ethic enshrined in Jesus of Nazareth; i.e. people who not only live primarily with the good of all as their goal, but who if need be will sacrifice their own good in the pursuit of that greater good. In practice, this will mean putting compassion, forgiveness, and self-giving ahead of mere justice and equality; and understanding the need of all for acceptance, trust, respect, affection, and above all for community (community defined by those very qualities).

What might be the source of such altruistic or rather sacrificial behaviour? Psychology and human experience would suggest that the primary, perhaps only, way of generating such behaviour is simply by experiencing it, by receiving it from another, by being its recipient. To have been deeply loved is to have been given the power or capacity to deeply love others. And all this needs to be nurtured and practised in a community dedicated to such a way of life, and reinforced by the great stories of love and goodness and self-giving and compassion, especially those of the man from Nazareth.

Among the pioneers of this community will be those who have been fortunate enough to have been unconditionally and deeply loved in their infancy, childhood and adolescence. They will have the greatest strength and resources of love to love others, especially the unlovely and the unlovable. But unconditional love can also change adults who have been denied that love in their formative years, provided they are not too emotionally damaged. It is especially in the loving community that this miracle can become a possibility.

At the end of this chapter I set out for comparison a number of ethical systems or lists of basic ethical values or principles. These include the Ethic of Jesus, Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path, the findings of a global survey by the Institute of Global Ethics, a statement of what I call the rational scientific world view, and a list of basic ethical principles formulated in recent years by a secular study group.

But why should we bother ?

From time to time I ask myself this question. Is it worth the effort ? Is that effort really going to make any difference to a world of individuals, each of us hell bent on pursuing our own self-interest, and by implication our mutual destruction ? Is it in fact too late ? Why not just maximize my own life and enjoyment in the time that is left, not just for me, but for this biosphere ?

And the answer is a simple one. And it is a moral one. It is because my opportunity to enjoy this world, my life, my freedom, my security and comfort, my pleasures, my health and well-being, my job, my education, and so on, have been given me as a gift by others. I could have none of these had others not gone before me.

And the very best things I value have been given me not by the market or private enterprise, but by my parents, and before them, by the struggles, the blood, sweat and tears of those who fought against the various systems of domination and exploitation and slavery that the powerful of this world would always impose upon us.

You and I can leave it to others if we like. You and I can walk in and enjoy the National Parks that others fought for at great personal cost to set aside for us. You and I can take for granted the better working conditions that history tells us the "bosses" would never have freely given us. You and I can exercise the vote that had to be won by the struggle and indeed the lives of others. You and I can live without giving it a thought, in the security that we owe to the lives of young men and women on the world's battlefields (because not enough of us were busy at justice and peace-making).

Or, you and I can join the battle for justice and peace and the environment. The choice, of course, remains yours and mine. But the results of our choice are no longer in doubt.

Note: The source for many of my comments on the major world religions in this chapter is A.C.Bouquet, Comparative Religion.

SOME SOURCES FOR AN ETHICAL SYSTEM

Some definitions:

ETHICS - The principles of morality
- A system of moral principles by which human actions may be judged good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust.

MORALITY - Human behaviour judged against an ethical system, or a set of principles of right and wrong conduct

The Jesus Ethic (according to the New Testament). “Overcome evil with good.”
(See Matthew Chapters 5-7; also Luke 10:25-37; Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 22:35-40)

Have a higher loyalty than self. Be selfless.

Make God (goodness, truth and love) your highest values, and your goal in life.

The inner motive of love (goodwill to others, seeking their highest good) should direct all your actions, including those towards your enemies.

People and relationships are more important than things. Be a peacemaker.

Remain detached from material possessions.

Have compassion for and identify with all those who are poor, deprived, exploited, suffering.

Fight for, even suffer for, their rights, their good.

Be trustworthy.

Be responsible.

Be generous.

Be self-critical, humble and self-controlled.

Do not judge others.

Avoid prejudice, jealousy, self-deceit, meanness.

Do not be angry, insulting, contemptuous, defamatory, a gossip.

Never show resentment.

Never retaliate

Overcome evil with good.

Heal quarrels, differences, rather than seeking legal redress.

Be grateful.

Avoid temptation and evil.

Both practise and seek forgiveness, without limit.

So live that your goodness is both “salt” and “light” for the world. But don’t flaunt your goodness; let it be as inconspicuous as possible.

Buddhism. The Noble Eightfold Path.

Right belief
Right purpose
Right speech
Right conduct
Right livelihood
Right effort
Right mindfulness
Right meditation

The goal is the end of attachment, and desire, and ultimately the individual self, so that we enter into communion with the whole universe.

The Institute for Global Ethics – Results of a survey of 24 men and women of conscience from 16 nations.

Love – as indestructible good-will in action
Truthfulness – as the foundation of mutual trust
Fairness – treating others as we would be treated
Freedom – of conscience, expression, opportunity, with accountability
Unity – a global vision leading to cooperation and sharing, in contrast with individualism
Tolerance – as listening to others' viewpoints and embracing diversity
Responsibility – for self, others, and the planet / cosmos
Respect for life – as distaste for killing, cautious use of force

An Australian Discussion Group

Respect for life / others
Honesty (leading to trust)
Commitment
Responsibility
Fairness / justice
Having enough (rather than more than one needs)
Compassion
Avoid hurt / harm
Tolerance
My good must not diminish the good of others / all
Care for the environment
Long term perspective

The Rational Scientific World View as a basis for Ethics

Our evolutionary and ecological understanding is that all things are interconnected and interdependent.

We are all receivers of life.

We are all dependent on others, and the planet's ecosystem biodiversity and integrity.

We are formed or malformed by the gift or denial of love.

Our life choice is to be life enhancing or life diminishing.

Signs of Transformation

Jim Wallis, in his book *The Soul of Politics*, lists what he calls "**Signs of Transformation**" (pp.159-258), in which he seeks to translate concepts from the Judeo-Christian tradition into secular terminology. They could provide a check-list for ethical living.

Conversion - The priority of the poor

Compassion - No more us and them

Community - A moral foundation for economics

Reverence - Honouring the whole creation

Diversity - Beyond integration

Equality - Beyond inclusion

Peacemaking - The path to real security

Justice - The hunger that heals

Contemplation - The inward journey

Courage - Taking the first step

Responsibility - How change begins

Integrity - The quality of leadership

Imagination - Dreaming new possibilities

Reconstruction - From protest to rebuilding

Joy - The unmistakable sign of life

Hope - The doorway to change

CHAPTER 10

MAGIC HAPPENS

Let me begin this chapter by repeating a few lines from the Introduction to this book:

“It is time now to identify religion with a 'primitive' stage of human development, and to have the courage to discard it at last, as inadequate and inappropriate, at least in a liberal educated society, and to offer men and women the challenge of human maturity and responsibility in a recognition of our interdependence with all of life, accepting responsibility for all of life. This is what I call ethical ecology.”

“Ethical ecology relates us successfully to a modern scientific understanding of our world and our place in it. It successfully retains the dimension of transcendence in life. Transcendence means an awareness of the “beyondness” in life, of that which is greater than us, of a source of life and power that gives us life and maintains us in life, and calls us to responsibility for life. The ‘beyondness’ of an ethical ecological view of life is our total dependence upon, and interdependence with, first the whole biosphere, and beyond to the vast mystery of the cosmos itself, rather than singling out some supposed life-force or love-force within it or beyond it. If an awareness of our own smallness, rather than the arrogant assertion of our “crown of creation” status, is essential to our future, yet at the same time having a recognition of the wonder and mystery and the richness of life’s potentialities and possibilities, then ethical ecology is the way forward. Its ethical principles are humility and responsibility, co-operation and self-giving, so that we may all receive and live.” It means learning to walk softly on the earth, rather than “having dominion over it”.

But if we leave religion behind, will we not also lose all the wonder and magic of life? Indeed not. Ethical ecology can even embrace the New Age banner “Magic Happens”, so long as we understand that that doesn’t mean supernaturally-sourced happenings, but that life can be characterized by joy and surprise and wonder, if we learn to live in humility and harmony with our wonderful world and our incredible cosmos.

Magic happens and can happen in so many ways.

It happens when we keep in touch with nature, rather than when we immerse our lives in the concrete jungle, in business, in the pursuit of things, in glitz and glamour, in getting and spending, in seeking power over others and over nature.

It happens when we take time to stand in awe of a sunrise or a sunset, of a starry sky at night, of a mighty forest, of the power and majesty of the ocean, of a landscape or seascape that overwhelms us with its beauty, of a flower or a creature beautiful in its colour or the perfection of its form.

It happens when we listen to or create sublime or exciting music.

It happens too, in the midst of the demands and even the drudgeries or sufferings of life. It happens when someone takes the time and trouble to listen to us, to share with us, to sacrifice for us, to accept our giving to them. It happens when we experience the gift of love from another, first of mother and father, of brother and sister, of husband and wife, of partner or loyal friend.

It happens when we fall in love; and, when love has been hurt, when we are embraced again and forgiven.

Magic happens, not when I tell someone that God loves them, but when I love them, or they love me.

Magic happens, not when I tell them that God forgives them, but when I forgive them, or they forgive me.

Magic happens, not when I announce that God is the God of justice and righteousness, but when I work for justice and righteousness in the world.

Magic happens, not when I announce that God requires peace and reconciliation among men and women, but when I become a reconciler and a peacemaker.

Perhaps a few stories best make the point.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher", he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind: and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this and you will live." But wanting to justify himself he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, he passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling, came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend". Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy". Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10: 25-37)

Jesus went on to say, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger one said to him, "Father, give me my share of the property now". So the man divided his property between his two sons. After a few days, the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. He spent everything he had.

Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods which the pigs ate, but no-one gave him anything to eat. At last he came to his senses and said "All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here am I about to starve! I will get up and go to my father and say, Father I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers". So he got up and started back to his father.

He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms round his son, and kissed him. "Father", the son said, "I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son". But the father called his servants. "Hurry!" he said. "Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found".

And so the feasting began.

In the meantime, the elder son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard the music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him, "What's going on?" "Your brother has come back home", the servant answered, "and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound".

The elder brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. But he answered his father, "Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!" "My son," the father answered, "you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found." (Luke 15: 11-32)

Alfred Starratt, in his book "The Real God" (SCM 1965) tells this true story about his experience in China:

"Together with other foreigners on the staff of Hua Chung University, I had stayed at my post during the Communist revolution in the hope that I might be able to continue my work of teaching Occidental philosophy and religion. After a few months, it became evident that we could do no fruitful work. Furthermore, as Americans, our very presence in the University became a source of danger to our bravely loyal Chinese colleagues.

Permission to leave for home was long delayed. Then one day, I was ordered by the police to be in Hankow that afternoon to sail down the Yangtse to Shanghai where an American ship was scheduled to take Americans from China to the British port of Hong Kong. Er Lao, my household servant and friend, accompanied me, along with several policemen, on the journey down to the river.

The police would not let us board the regular ferry for the trip to Hankow, so we were forced to bargain with the boatmen, who row people across. These men were wise enough not to take a foreigner accompanied by police to the other side, without first demonstrating their "patriotism" by insulting me as a foreign dog, and demanding impossible prices for the trip.

While this sport was being enjoyed by everyone except Er Lao and myself, another boatman came rowing down the river. He saw what was happening, heard the insults and derisive laughter. He swung his boat into the shore, jumped out and helped my friend Er Lao get my trunk aboard his boat without saying a word about the price of the trip. Before the others could recover from their astonishment we had shoved off and were rowing towards Hankow. The police, who obviously had not liked this abrupt ending of their game any more than the other boatmen, rushed off to catch the motor ferry so that they could overtake us on the other side.

'This will bring you much grief, old one', I said to the man as he strained at his oar.

'It's not important', he replied, 'I also am a man!' " (pp 11&12).

CHAPTER 11

A NEW WAY TO BE THE CHURCH.

The death of religion and the “God” concept in its theistic form need not, indeed does not, require or imply the death of the “church”.

As we remarked elsewhere, the great tragedy for the church was its takeover by the state under the Roman Emperor Constantine, and its consequent institutionalisation and accommodation to the influence and power of the state. Membership of this once subversive, counter-cultural movement now became mandatory, rather than being an expression of commitment and loyalty to its Leader who stood over against both the state and the institutionalised religion or state “church” of his day. (While Jesus honoured the “Law” and the “Prophets” of his religion, he was strongly critical of its current form and practice, and its priesthood’s identification with its own oppressive practices and those of the occupying secular state.)

Under Constantine, however, its counter cultural ethos seemed no longer necessary, for it had captured the halls of power and the levers of authority, or so it believed. Its God had been chosen to replace the Roman gods, and it believed it was in the box seat to both influence the secular power and the masses at large who were now required to submit to church and faith. However, emperors and all in positions of national and international authority do not readily accept and adopt ethical stances that conflict with their personal or imperial ambitions, or submit tamely to the direction of others who claim to speak for God.

So, under Constantine, theology and worship were standardized, indeed sanitized, an act of acculturation and accommodation to the needs of the state. Theology was fixed in creeds, and heretics identified and removed from influence. Roman and other “pagan” shrines were replaced by Christian shrines or places of worship. Buildings large and small were erected everywhere as the locus of this new worship of this new God. Houses of worship and great cathedrals sprang up in cities and towns where previously Christians had gathered in homes and other places. And these buildings, rather than the community of believers, began to be called “churches”. (When Paul wrote to the various churches he had founded in Asia Minor, he was addressing the small Christian community or fellowship in each place, and not referring to a building or institution.)

In the New Testament (i.e. the writings about and by the early “church”, those early Christian communities) the word “church” (ecclesia in Greek) never refers to a building. The word means a gathered company, a community. It refers to the fellowship or community or company of believers or followers of Jesus. They understood their faith to be a matter of relationships – they belonged to Jesus Christ, their “Lord”; or to God through Jesus Christ. They therefore belonged to one another, to all who were his disciples. This common unity or community was the vehicle for, and the expression of, their relationship both to God and to the world, to the needs of humanity. Very early on some took this to its logical conclusion, and literally formed communities or communes in which they lived together, sharing their material possessions, - “they had all things in common.” Acts 2:44-45. Such communal arrangements made it easier

to incorporate into that community either new converts or the poor and dispossessed to whom Jesus had commissioned them to give both healing and hospitality.

Commune-type communities have seldom been successful through human history, though “religious” communities of “nuns”, “priests” or “brothers” have successfully persisted.

However, these have usually been religious communities of celibates, neither working in the world nor having spouses or children.

So the first thing to clarify about the meaning of “church” for Christians is that it refers to a particular type of community, not a building. Buildings may be useful for certain activities of the church, but they so easily become both the meaning and focus of church, and readily suggest that the church is what happens in that building, especially worship, prayer, and perhaps Sunday school for children. It further tends to suggest that church or being Christian is something that happens on Sundays, and that it is primarily an individual activity between each Christian and God, even though it is undertaken together with others. Christians thus commonly talk about “attending” church, or “going to church”, and as a consequence fail to understand that together they are the church, that they are called to share a common life with Christ and one another. They are to express what it means to be fully human and fully Christian in those relationships so that they can be the church, i.e the living expression of their “Lord”, in the life of the world.

The Constantinian takeover called for great acts of *public* worship, a concept foreign to the New Testament church. “For them (the earliest gatherings of the followers of Jesus) the whole necessity of religious acts of worship – for a cultus – had been abolished by Jesus.” (Harvey Cox. *God’s Revolution* etc. p. 87). Under Constantine every citizen was a Christian by edict of the state, and all were expected or required to “attend” public worship. Thus began the era of Christendom, where church and state became co-terminus, which has continued almost to the present day. This displaced the counter-cultural community, meeting in homes, where they gathered to strengthen and support one another over against a hostile or indifferent world, and in which gathering they provided healing and hospitality to the needy.

What did the early church do? Why did this community gather in this way?

To answer the second question first, they needed the strength and support of each other; and new converts needed to be welcomed and embraced in a community where they could be strengthened, supported and nurtured in this new relationship with Jesus as “Lord” and with one another.

What did they do? “They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

So the principal activity was *learning* from the “elders” about their new faith, which originally meant about their “Lord” and his teaching, especially his mandates of healing and hospitality. That was part of the over-arching task of building one another up in love, - caring, sharing, supporting, accepting responsibility for each other as brothers and sisters.

At the heart of this informal gathering was *a simple shared meal*; not originally a sacrament. But obviously as they shared daily bread and wine, they remembered their Lord who had so shared with his disciples (and perhaps especially that final meal before his death).

Let me quote here from the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar. (Funk and the Jesus Seminar, “The Acts of Jesus”, p.141-2).

“The last supper as it is depicted by Mark was not a historical event. Nevertheless the Fellows (the Jesus Seminar scholars) were clear that Jesus often ate meals with his disciples and others

and that these meals had symbolic value. They were expressions of egalitarianism: Jesus ate indiscriminately with rich and poor, powerful and weak, clean and unclean. He undoubtedly taught at meals, in the manner of the symposium. His behaviour at meals was viewed by outsiders as scandalous, so much so that he came to be known as “a glutton and a drunk”. Since Jesus ate frequently with his followers, there must have been a last meal with them. Mark’s narrative is not a report of that meal.”

Later we encounter a training manual called the “Didache”, which was developed to induct new converts into not only the faith, but the life of the community. It was a manual of church order and discipline.

And they shared in “*the prayers*”. The prayers were probably largely derived from their Jewish prayer life, and therefore “God-centred”, but intercession would have been at the heart of their life together.

The other key image of the church in the New Testament is “the body of Christ”, rather than that out of which it grew, namely “the people of God” (Israel). So the church is a body; a body of disciples. New Christians are immediately incorporated into this body, this fellowship, this community. They are not individual believers making their own way, living out a new philosophy or religion or “way” in their individual lives. By definition they are members of a body. They are the hands and feet and voice of their Lord, Jesus.

This body’s focus is not God, through Christ, but rather their Lord, Jesus. That is not to say that God was not a basic assumption of their lives, but that this community’s way of doing God’s will, of living in God’s Kingdom, i.e. under God’s rule, was by obedience to the Lordship of Christ in their lives. Jesus, his teaching, his example, his commands, were what the church was all about.

To summarize then. The Christian church today, were it to be faithful to its pre-Constantinian origins, would be characterized by four things : some form of shared life (fellowship or community); teaching or study (learning); shared meals (symbolic of relationship and hospitality); and reflection /meditation gathered around the needs of members and the needs of the world (what we used to call prayer), and leading to action programs and commitments to specific ways and tasks directed towards meeting those needs.

The new or re-constituted form of the church for the 21st century, or what we might call the “ethical ecological community”, might well learn from the early Christian communities, or model itself on their life together.

1) Study and Action.

At the heart of this community would be regular study and discussion about the meaning and content of ethical ecology. This would imply a study of ecology, of ethics, of the radical ethic of Jesus, of the world in which we live, and in particular the key areas of life in which ethical ecology needs to be applied. And finally, there would be study and skill development in the ways and means in and through which ethical ecological insights could be applied for the peace, well-being and harmony of this planet and all of life upon it.

Children and young people embraced within this new community would learn and grow in their ethical ecological insights and behaviour by the behaviour, lifestyle and political action of their parents and other significant adults, and their own involvement in this lifestyle of their parents

and the ethical community to the extent that it was appropriate and possible. Discussion in the home and in the life of the ethical community would reinforce these values. Indeed, story telling for children and formal learning opportunities for young people and adults would enhance the community's life.

Restored to its true counter-cultural role, the church would cease much of its timid and fearful anxiety as to whether religion and politics should mix, and cease to berate its politically active and courageous preachers, leaders and synods. It would quickly learn the most effective methods of politics and political influence and lobbying, because it would know that the primary method of change in society today is through the political process. It would learn from the right wing, economic rationalist, think tanks around the world that have had a profound influence in dehumanising society, opening up ever deeper divisions between haves and have-nots, manipulating fear and racism, exploiting the powerless bottom end of the workforce, and marginalizing and disenfranchising the poor. As it is possible to plan, organize, lobby and propagandize for greed and self-interest, so it is possible to do so for the good.

Worship of God would not be a part of this. As we have seen, this was not a principal activity of the early Jesus movement, (except perhaps for the ritual requirements of their Jewish faith - they began as a Jewish reform movement). It was not something Jesus taught or emphasized in its formal, ritual form, but rather an attitude of life he took for granted. Acts 2:42 certainly makes no reference to it as significant, or as the weekly ritual the church has practised for centuries. The earliest "Jesus" followers were soon forced out of the Jewish synagogues and so formed communities which met and practised the activities described in Acts 2:42. Carried over from the synagogue was especially the reading and exposition of the Jewish scriptures, which were soon complemented by the teachings and stories about Jesus. (Spong makes a fascinating case for this in his interpretation of how the Gospels came to be written). In any case, today belief in and language about God is no longer relevant. If we want to retain and express whatever "God-worship" has meant in a religious age, we will need to re-express it in secular terms.

We are constantly reminded that people are not merely rational; that we need also to nurture and express our deepest feelings, values and commitments. So in our being together we might want to find, at least for some, a place for ritual, or at least for story. Whether this would fit best with our times of study, or at our common meal, would be the occasion of experiment. It might suit some groups to do this at each occasion, or perhaps only from time to time on special occasions.

Such a time of ritual, celebration or story might include simple life-affirming affirmations about our oneness with all of life and with one another; about our mission to be bringers of good news and good deeds to the world (i.e. our unity and interdependence with all of nature, and our commitment to "love" the planet and all in it, i.e. our commitment to life affirming behaviour.) It could include the telling and re-telling, the acting out and dramatizing, of key stories that encapsulate our "faith" and move us to emulate the heroes of that "faith", especially Jesus of Nazareth. It could include readings from the great works of literature that inspire, challenge and comfort us, in so far as they are seen to be consistent with our ethic and our mission. It might include music and song where that was seen to be fitting.

2) Community / Fellowship

All the great human movements for good, and for change, have been grounded in the community or meeting together of their "true believers". Nothing much happens until great ideas or convictions are grounded in a committed membership of those who pledge themselves to work

out these values in the world. Values become programs when they are rooted in committed organizations dedicated to their achievement. This truth has been the genius of the church, and of all successful movements for change, whether social, political, environmental, or whatever.

This, I believe, is the true meaning and understanding of the theological concept of the “Holy Spirit”. Christians were from the beginning aware of a power outside themselves, empowering and guiding them, present always when they gathered together in community, seldom as an experience of individuals, and then usually as a derivative of their life in the community. The so-called Holy Spirit is of course not a divine person, but the inspiration, strength and guidance that comes from belonging to and sharing in a community of those committed to not just common values but to one another.

This then is a movement that is based on the concept of our interdependence with all of life, on the corporateness of life as the basis for and generation of our individual being and worth, the intention to “love” not only one another, but all of life, to heal what is damaged and broken. It therefore implies a community in which these values are *lived and learned and supported* in relationships, in togetherness, in give and take, in sharing, in decision making, in learning and growing, and in and through the loving and respectful correction of one another. So, we will have in the new church some form of community, of organization, of membership, and we will have mechanisms for caring for one another, and for both individual and corporate expressions of both caring and political action in the world, and ways of reporting and feedback and de-briefing if you like, to keep us honest and to refine and correct our ways of doing love.

3) Simple Shared Meals.

There is much to be said for a *simple* shared meal, at least from time to time, at the heart of this new community. For most human communities over time this was the way of welcoming strangers, of symbolically and actually expressing community, of sharing material, life-giving, life-enhancing things. It bonds and binds beyond what a formal or informal meeting can do. And it is important that it is a *simple* meal; a nourishing meal and a scientifically healthy one, not an indulgence. It is important that it expresses our respect for other forms of life, that it is not more than we need, but perhaps even expresses the discipline of “less”, or at least “enough”, and not more. It is important that it is scientifically sound, i.e. good for us, and not bad for us. And it will need to find a way of acknowledging that others may be going hungry, and so incorporate the basic values of both giving and receiving.

4) Reflection / Meditation / Quiet Time.

Study, research, strategic and action planning, is hard work, and involves much time, and especially much talk; fellowship and caring involves doing; the meal will be an active occasion preparing and sharing good things, - enjoying food, drink, stories, humour (especially humour), and growth in knowledge of one another through personal communication and conversation. And doing the work of love in the world is exhausting and often wounding. So, we will need a time of quiet and reflection, out of which healing and renewal, and wisdom, direction and insight can emerge, and we can be re-energized for the living of our lives.

5) Leadership / Ministry.

The concept of a priestly class as the “religious” specialists, as intermediary between God and

ourselves, and ourselves and God, has been one of the fundamental impediments to change and reform in religious communities. A class of persons that claims to be the mouthpiece and guardian of ultimate truth, and the leader and dispenser of the sacred rituals essential to this divine / human dialogue or transaction, has a profound vested interest in the status quo.

Leadership in the new community will need to be “ministry” in the true sense, i.e. see itself as “serving” the needs, objectives, and best interests of the community. In group dynamics terminology it will be equally as concerned about group maintenance and individual needs as it is about the task. Or, to put it another way, it will be as concerned about process as it is about content. Its role will be primarily that of facilitator or enabler. It will need to ensure that the group can access a range of knowledge, expertise and resources either from among its members or by importing these from outside from time to time. Basic will be group leadership skills (group dynamics), effective meeting skills, human relationship skills and insights, political skills, and of course the best available research and knowledge in understanding our world (including ourselves) and in the field of ethics, especially what we mean by ethical ecology.

Formal appointed or elected leadership is generally more successful than informal or shared leadership, provided the group has agreed about clear objectives, has defined the leadership role, and has a program of leadership training and development for members who show the potential for leadership. Such leadership will however be voluntary and unpaid; though the group will need to ensure that proper support is provided for the leader or leadership team, and that could involve a small honorarium or at least the covering of costs involved in the job.

If these groups or communities are linked into some federation of ethical societies they will be greatly strengthened by having a headquarters structure appropriately staffed by paid expert and administrative staff who will be able to resource local groups, particularly through research and training.

6) And We Need A Name

That is much harder. It needs to be something that focuses our mission, and in a way that is *unambiguous*. The problem with religion and church in all their manifestations is that they are open to a multiplicity of interpretations, and can almost mean anything to anybody. So “good” churches or forms of religion are given a bad name by “bad” churches or forms of religion. Both the public see them, and often the membership see themselves, in the light of distorted and ignorant popular images.

Perhaps we could be called the Compassionate Society, the Ethical Society, the Ethical Ecology Society, , the Interdependence Movement, or the Jesus Way or Society or Movement. Maybe it doesn't matter. I think I would favour “The Ethical Society” or "The Ethical Community" or “The Jesus Movement”. .Someone will crystallize it for us.

The important need is just to get started now, and to link up with others of like mind. Our lives and our life support systems are hanging in the balance. The time for discussion is past. I hope that this book may become a useful resource, and perhaps a template, for those who are ready to make a beginning.

AN ETHICAL MANIFESTO

We accept the proposition that acts can be identified as ethical if they are altruistic, i.e. seeking the good of others, and of ends beyond or greater than ourselves and our interests.

We recognize that ethical behaviour is not only about our personal lives, but about all of life, be it political, social, economic, business, environmental, local, national, international, global.

Acting ethically involves acting "from the point of view of the universe".

We desire to act ethically not only because we care, but because we are persuaded that life works best that way.

We recognize that we are bound up in the bundle of life, and we are totally dependent on this biosphere's life support systems; that we are the recipients of life, and that a proper response is to be the givers and enhancers of life.

A life-stance in the pursuit of self-interest is ultimately by definition destructive of relationships, of community, and of the natural world upon which we depend for life itself.

We accept the need and responsibility to care for ourselves; and equally the need to love others as we love ourselves.

So we agree that before acting from traditional, cultural, national, religious, economic or other important reasons, we must ask ourselves the question : **"How should we live and act so as to advance the good of all (all living things, including the biosphere and the universe.)"**

Questions that will help answer this basic question include :

What are the facts ?

Does it advance the common good ?

Does it enhance the life of the community ?

Is it sustainable ? i.e. Does it disregard or diminish, or does it enhance the good of the natural environment ? (Biodiversity, nature in balance, interdependence of all of life.)

Is it life-enhancing or life-diminishing ?

Is it an act of self-interest or sectional interest ?

Is it an act of goodness, truth and love ? Is it just, is it true, is it kind ?

Does it enhance unity, community, and trust ?

Is it an act of respect for others ?

Does it contribute to peace and harmony, rather than conflict ?

Is it an act of humility, responsibility, co-operation and self-giving ?

Is it an act of love (understood in the "Jesus" sense as the transcendence of self in the service of others; unconditional, unsolicited, unmerited, indiscriminating acts of good-will).

Does it seek to overcome evil with good ?

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Contemporary Jesus Study

What can we really know about Jesus of Nazareth ? Well, not a lot; but nonetheless enough. Today through contemporary Jesus study and research we have a much more accurate picture of him than at any time in the past, except for the first few decades after his death. Fortunately we can now identify both new and old documents that come from that early period, pre-dating the New Testament itself.

This contemporary knowledge has two major aspects. First we have a much better understanding of the times in which Jesus lived, and therefore of Jesus himself, derived from historical and anthropological studies. Second, we have a much better understanding of the texts which purport to record who Jesus was and what he said and did. These literary studies are greatly enhanced by the most recent textual discoveries and a new look at a wide range of other texts which have not been available to previous generations of scholars. Especially significant among these are the Gospels of Peter and Thomas, and the Sayings Gospel known as 'Q'.

A large number of scholars has contributed to this current research, and perhaps the most interesting and valuable contribution has come from what is called the Jesus Seminar. This is a collection of up to 200 scholars who work collaboratively on this historical Jesus project, both contributing and testing one another's work. The key books produced out of this process so far are "Honest to Jesus" by Robert Funk (1996), "The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus" (1993), "The Acts of Jesus: What did Jesus Really Do?" (1998), "The Complete Gospels" (1992) (New Translations by Seminar members of the four Gospels, the Gospels of Thomas and Mary, the Sayings Gospel ('Q'), and 13 others). Individual members of the Seminar have also produced their own books in this field. Chief among them are "The Historical Jesus" (1991), and "The Birth of Christianity" (1999), by John Dominic Crossan, "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time" (1994), and "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time" (2001), by Marcus Borg.

Alongside these I would place the work of John Shelby Spong. A Biblical and theological scholar in his own right, though not an academic teacher, he has the almost unique capacity (missing from most academics) for making available and intelligible to lay readers, not only his own insights but also the work of other leading scholars like Raymond Brown and Michael Goulder. The best Biblical scholarship otherwise remains inaccessible to the lay person because almost all academics write exclusively for their peers or their students in scholarly technical works. That is of course as it should be, apart from their failure to express their findings in popular non-technical form for the general reader, and dare I say it, for the average ordained minister and priest as well. Of the other contemporary scholars probably only Marcus Borg can be grouped with Spong in this way. One of the church's biggest problems has been the failure of clergy over generations both to keep up with contemporary Biblical and theological scholarship, or even if they do, to share it with their congregations.

So, what are the findings of the contemporary Jesus scholars ?

First, what do they tell us about the world in which Jesus lived, 1st century Palestine ? 1st century anywhere was a harsh and cruel world, but perhaps especially in Palestine. In the Jewish state of that time there were three classes of people, the small ruling elite of the rich and powerful who were also the religious leaders; the wealthy merchant class; and the peasantry and the dispossessed poor, the vast bulk of the population.

On top of that enormously inequitable society, there was the brutal fact of its occupation by a foreign power, Rome. Rome not only put down any signs of rebellion, but anything however innocent that appeared to have within it the slightest potential for trouble and unrest. Furthermore, while Rome controlled its occupied territories by its local governor and military garrison, it often used the local political elite where they would collaborate, and they usually did, for the effective day to day running of the country. So the Jewish state of Jesus' day was governed by its wealthy collaborating high priestly families, who not only stood to gain, but who in this way could also safeguard the practice of their traditional religion – provided that it was understood that Caesar and the Roman gods had ultimate priority and authority.

With the Roman occupation of Palestine came increasing commercialisation and urbanization. Rome built cities, especially as the seat of government, such as Sephoris and Tiberias, and both its armies and its urban populations had to be fed and resourced. What had been a self-sufficient peasant farmer society on small holdings soon became a society of dispossessed landless peasants and artisans, as both civil and religious taxes brought debt, and debt resulted in the dispossession of their land, peasants instead becoming labourers on the large estates of the wealthy, once their own land. Others who lost their farms were forced into the cities and towns as servants and labourers and artisans, builders and tradesmen like Jesus' own family. According to Crossan, carpenters were probably at the bottom of the economic heap, - peasants rendered landless, or surplus to agricultural manpower needs, or farmers' sons who could not be supported on the family lot.

So, peasant (i.e. the population at large) discontent and suffering was rife. Their exploitation and suffering was made worse by the triple burden represented by their own Jewish leaders, - agents and beneficiaries of their dispossession and exploitation, collaborators with the hated occupying power, and as religious leaders further exploiting their own people by the religious taxes and burdensome legalistic requirements they imposed upon them.

The key peasant leadership figures that arose out of this situation were brigands or robber bands, miracle or magic workers who performed healings, rebel leaders who gathered bands of fighters to throw out the invader, and teacher prophets who recalled people to their religious roots. In a depressed, hopeless, occupied, exploited society people responded to these kinds of leaders in their need for hope. Indeed such situations spawned Messianic type leaders, defined primarily in political terms, to liberate them from oppression or hold up the prospect of divine intervention or the millennial promise of the end of the age of darkness and the dawning of a new age of peace and freedom. Someone like Barabbas fits the rebel leader mould, and Jesus the teacher, prophet, healer / magician mould. Other messiah type figures arose around the same period. Indeed, the northern area around Nazareth was noted for its opposition and lawlessness. So much, then, for a brief sketch of the world in which Jesus lived.

Second, contemporary scholarship is giving us a whole new understanding of the New Testament, and in particular the Gospel records which purport to be testimony to the life and teaching of Jesus. Some of the key findings to help us understand and interpret the New Testament writings are as follows :

1) The Gospels in the New Testament were written decades after Jesus' death, and none of the authors are believed to have known Jesus at first hand. Mark was written 40 years after Jesus' death (about the time Rome destroyed Jerusalem, its temple, and the Jewish state); Matthew around 55 years; Luke (and Acts) 60 + years; and John around 70 + years .

2) All the Gospel writers drew on earlier written material of which no original texts or copies remain. As well they wrote their own contemporary interpretations to express the particular developing theology of the church or group from which they came and to which they sought to speak. Some are directed to churches made up entirely of Jews, while others sought to address the emerging Gentile churches.

3) All of them were driven by the need to explain the life and especially the death, and what clearly was the continuing inspiration and "presence" of this remarkable man, Jesus of Nazareth. Mark and Matthew especially sought to explain him in terms of the great themes of their own Jewish history, of God at work in their national life, atonement for sin, Elijah and the prophets, Moses and the Exodus, resurrection of the suffering righteous in the last days. Luke and especially John sought to interpret him to a Gentile audience in the Greek or pagan categories of incarnation, resurrection, logos, etc.

Many of the words they put into the mouth of Jesus, and the stories of his deeds they told, were rather allegories, metaphors, symbols by which they sought to say who he was for them and for the communities of Jesus' followers to which they belonged.

For example, the story of Jesus walking on the water was using a common literary device that recalled for the readers a well known image of God from their Scriptures. The intention was to say in a dramatic, concrete and colourful way that Jesus was God-like, a man in whom God was somehow uniquely present. The contemporary readers of that story knew their Scriptures in which their God is declared to have power over the "deep", over the waters of the earth. They would no more have believed that Jesus walked on water than that he flew like a bird. They would have immediately understood both the literary device and its key Old Testament reference.

4) Embedded in two of the New Testament Gospels, in addition to this interpretative or theological material, is a significant section reporting what Jesus taught. Textual study of this material which is common to both Matthew and Luke indicates that it comes from an earlier source or document (scholars call it 'Q') to which both authors had access, but which no longer exists or has not been found. In addition, the Gospel of Thomas, discovered quite recently, also like 'Q', is entirely about Jesus' teaching. Both these sources are clearly from an earlier period than the canonical Gospels (the ones included in the text of the New Testament).

From these key understandings described above scholars now conclude that after Jesus' death small groups of his followers, along with new recruits, began to meet in his name to carry on his work. These "disciples" not only spread the word but sought to live the "Way" that he taught.

The earliest written records show clearly that the first groups of followers saw Jesus as a Wisdom teacher and prophet, and sought to follow his teachings. These teachings were fundamentally ethical, concerned about life here and now in this world, but lived not by human standards, but rather in God's Kingdom, i.e. under the rule of God. They were about living the life of caring and compassion, especially bringing healing and practical help to the poor, deprived and sick.

These earlier texts know nothing of the later doctrines or explanations of Jesus in terms of virgin birth, incarnation, death, atonement, resurrection. Neither do they speak of him as Son of God or Saviour. It was only later when the Jewish followers of Jesus, initially a new sect within Judaism, were expelled from their historic Jewish faith, that these new interpretations of Jesus began to take hold and to find expression in their writings. This split occurred most likely as Christian Jews pressed their desire to universalise their Jewish faith and to liberate it from many of its ritual requirements that served to separate them off from others, and also to impede their growing mission to the Gentiles. When they also claimed their rabbi Jesus to be the long promised Jewish Messiah they were also declared anathema. They sought then to show the Jewish authorities that Jesus in fact was the fulfilment of their own religion, and to declare to the Gentile world that he was a new Saviour who could compete successfully in the marketplace of religions and gods that so characterized the Greek and Roman world of that day.

So we now know, that before the New Testament was written for the emerging churches, the initial movement that flowed from Jesus' life and teaching was what we could call the Way of Jesus or the Way of the Kingdom, not the Christianity we know today, so called after Jesus as the Christ, i.e. the Messiah. This "Way" was directed towards the support and healing of those who had been pushed to the margins of society, who had been deprived of their freedom and dignity by the re-structuring of society in the interests of the rich and powerful. It called men to live the life of sacrificial service to others in the pattern of Jesus' life and teaching.

It recognized Jesus variously or together as wisdom teacher, prophet, rabbi, not as God Incarnate or Saviour. It saw him as one who was concerned primarily about justice, compassion, healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, in this life, not about salvation for some future life. Even more importantly the "Kingdom Way" was not about bringing people to Jesus to be healed or saved, but doing what he had commanded, living the Jesus way in the world for others, being for them healer and saviour. Jesus' clear command had been "Go and do what I have done", and "You will do greater things than these".

By the time the New Testament was written "Christianity" was being born and developed. Jesus was becoming the Messiah, Saviour, God Incarnate, the Resurrected one who had died for our sins. His teaching and his "Way" were becoming secondary to this developing doctrine. The converts and emerging churches were thus called to focus on him as Saviour rather than on his call to his disciples to focus on "the other" in need. The Jesus who originally taught his followers not to bring people to him, becomes instead the object of worship and devotion. Jesus taught what Crossan calls a "brokerless" Kingdom, in which no intermediary was needed between us and God. Jesus sought to divert attention away from himself, nor did he set out to start a new movement outside his Jewish faith. Before long his "followers" were to be displaced by "churches", and by a "Gospel" which turned his teaching on its head, focussing attention on him as the author or means of salvation.

So, while Christianity has always also incorporated Jesus' teaching and his Way, that Way has more often than not been presented as secondary or derivative from the worship and devotion of

a Saviour / Redeemer who saves us from our sins for heaven. The church continues to assert that it knows better than its Lord who he was and how we should obey God. Jesus emphatically rejected the barriers cum intermediaries of his religion (both priests and ritual sacrifices) that stood between God and humanity. He taught that in loving others we were set free, for life with God now in this world, not the next world (a concept foreign to Jewish thought and religion.)

Now, after two millennia of the Christian church, notwithstanding all the good it has achieved in lives and in society in spite of having been transformed into another religion, if Christianity were to fade away and die, modern scholarship has set us free to rediscover and to recover at last the Jesus Way or the Kingdom Way that he taught and lived. Christianity could be set free at last from both the theological constructs of Jesus' own Jewish faith and the pagan additions from the Greek and Roman worlds which have overlaid and obscured the essential truth and simplicity of Jesus' own life and teaching.

Recent historical, anthropological and textual studies provide us with a new path back to the original Jesus and his Kingdom way of life in this world. This stands in stark contrast to the New Testament itself which presents a culturally and religiously sourced interpretation of Jesus powerfully determined by the conditions and thought forms of the times. What we need to face squarely, now that we have the benefit of this enabling scholarship, is that the Biblical record of the interpretation of events some two thousand years ago is in many ways a reversal, indeed contradiction, of the central truth of Jesus' understanding of himself, his way, his God, his teaching and his practice. The Biblical story, for all its power and wisdom, must be recognized for what it is, a culturally determined mythological interpretation of historic events and persons, shaped by a human attempt to make sense of the world and our encounter with the great moral questions of our life and our society. The Nazarene saw it all in much simpler terms: to love your neighbour was to know and love God. Nothing else was needed.

In the next few pages I want to record the key findings of the scholars of the Jesus Seminar concerning the historical Jesus, followed by my own attempt to summarize and express these.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS - THE FINDINGS OF THE JESUS SEMINAR

WHAT JESUS SAID

The Kingdom of God has come.

Be itinerants, caring, sharing, doing the message of the Kingdom. i.e. bring healing, hope and hospitality – the signs that the Kingdom has come.

You are to be the salt of the earth.

You are to be the light of the world. Don't hide the light.

You are to forgive; and you will be forgiven. How much? "Seventy times seven"; i.e. without limit. Forgive their debts.

See the beam in your own eye, not the mote in your brother's.

The humble will be exalted.

The first will be last and the last first.

The greatest among you must be the humblest servants. I am among you as one who serves.

To save your life is to lose it, and to lose it is to save it.

You are lambs in the midst of wolves.

The Kingdom grows from small beginnings. (The stories of the sower, the mustard seed, and the jar full of meal.)

Gaining the Kingdom is like killing a powerful man.

Whoever is not against you is for you.

The labourers are few.

You will be rejected. (The story of the vineyard).

Blessed are the reviled; they are in the Kingdom.

Blessed are the hungry.

Blessed are the sufferers.

Turn the other cheek.

Give more than is asked.

Love your enemies.

You are incapable of interpreting the signs of the times.

The Kingdom divides and separates. To be my disciples you must "hate" your family.

Do not be anxious about your life.

You cannot serve two masters.

You cannot patch an old garment, or put new wine into old wineskins.

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom.

Riches, money, keep men from the kingdom.

Don't lend for interest, but lend to the needy.

The rich man Lazarus misses out on the kingdom.

All are invited; most make excuses.

Give up everything, however valuable, to have the kingdom.

Actions are to be judged on motives and intentions.

The disciples request: "Let us fast and pray." What for? asks Jesus.

God cares for the "lost" sheep, the one "gone astray", more than for all the others.

Search for the lost coin.

He rejects the charge that he casts out demons by Beelzebub.

Beware of teachers (scribes) who wear long robes, and hob nob with the "important".

God (your father) will give you all good things.

God loves you, and the sparrows.
Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.
To him who has more will be given; from him who has not it will be taken away.
(The parable of the talents.)
Love your neighbour as yourself.
Be reconciled to your brother. This is a greater priority than worship.
Don't swear or take oaths.
Generosity is greater than justice. (The labourers in the vineyard.)
Be eunuchs for the kingdom.
The Good Samaritan.
Give in response to importunity (urgent solicitation), not only because of friendship. (Two stories).
The fruitless fig tree. Give it nurture and nourishment, but not indefinitely.
Count the cost.
The story of the prodigal son.
Be wise, be prudent.
The penitent "tax collector" justified, rather than the righteous religious leader.

WHAT JESUS DID.

Born naturally of his natural parents; or perhaps illegitimately or prior to his parents' marriage.
Lived a relatively obscure life, probably as a carpenter, until his thirties.
Was in all likelihood married (virtually mandatory for Jewish males, including rabbis), probably to Mary of Magdala.
Was attracted to and joined the apocalyptic movement of John the Baptist.
Differed with John on some issues, so began his own movement - the "Kingdom" movement.
Lived the life of an itinerant teacher (first as a wisdom teacher; later as a prophet) for a few short years.
Gathered a few disciples (including women) who were to do as he did.
Started a "healing and hospitality" movement to address the social and economic injustice and displacement of his day.
Was seen as a threat (disturber of the peace and of the status quo) to both the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman occupiers.
Was executed by the Romans. (Crucifixion).
His body almost certain to have been dumped on the town tip. No burial or tomb.

MY SUMMARY OF JESUS' TEACHING.

This is based on contemporary Biblical scholarship (including the scholars of the Jesus Seminar) which distinguishes between what can be identified with reasonable certainty as the authentic words of Jesus, and what are clearly later interpretations and words and stories put into Jesus' mouth by the emerging traditions and needs of the young church.

In a phrase: "Overcome evil with good".

The Kingdom, or rule or domain of God (i.e. of the good and the right) is present in
the rejected
the hungry
the lost
the sufferers
the poor
the reviled
the humble
the "last" (the lowest)

The rich cannot enter the Kingdom.
The self-centred cannot enter the Kingdom..

The Kingdom requires absolute loyalty – no compromises, no excuses (however important).
It will involve giving up everything that may require compromise; perhaps becoming a "eunuch". No one can serve two masters.

Life in the Kingdom is based on loving the good.

Living in the Kingdom involves:

forgiveness without limit
bringing healing
bringing hospitality
bringing hope
judging self, not others
being penitent
loving without limits
loving without discrimination
turning the other cheek
loving enemies
giving more than is asked
lending or giving to the needy
doing what is generous, not merely just
pure motives (not self-interested)
doing away with anxiety about self and things
loving one's neighbour as oneself
using one's talents, however small
being reconciled where there is division
patient caring and nurturing
being wise and counting the cost
accepting that you have all good things
accepting that you are of worth, loved, accepted.

JESUS HAS NOTHING TO SAY ABOUT :

- **the importance of worship and religious practices**, e.g. prayer, fasting, worship, sacrifices (rituals), attendance at religious ceremonies. In fact he is often quite negative about these.
- **being saved**; i.e. seeking salvation for oneself, especially through right beliefs. Rather, Jesus is about setting men free. “Salvation” for Jesus is about healing people, setting them free from self by the action of others’ love, enabling them to experience the freedom that is found in living the life of love for others.
- **right belief**. Jesus’ belief system was his Jewish faith. His insights came from that faith’s prophetic and wisdom traditions. He took for granted a God of compassionate caring for all of life, and the implications of that faith for social and political justice and righteousness.
- **God**. Jesus has little to say about God. He rather took God’s goodness and love for granted, telling a few stories to affirm God as loving father. But he taught no doctrines of God as creator or redeemer, or of the last things. His all-consuming concern was that we should live now, everyday of our lives, in God’s Kingdom, i.e. being God-like or doing God’s will. To please God is to do his will, i.e. acts of healing, hospitality, penitence, forgiveness, justice, caring and reconciliation.
- **a church or the church**, including ministry, and the sacraments (holy communion, baptism, etc.)
- **himself**. He makes no claims for himself; either as Messiah, Son of God, or anything else. He even rejects the suggestion that he is good.

This summary, which is based on contemporary Biblical scholarship, gives a quite different picture of the historical Jesus than that gleaned from a reading of the New Testament, which fails to distinguish between what can be reliably traced to Jesus himself, and the various interpretations of him, and the words attributed to him, by the writers of the New Testament.

Appendix 2

John Dominic Crossan

In the previous Appendix a number of references were made to John Dominic Crossan. He is widely considered to be the pre-eminent New Testament scholar of our day. In this Appendix I want to provide further detail on his major contribution to New Testament scholarship.

Crossan's two most significant works are "The Birth of Christianity" and "The Historical Jesus". These two substantial volumes deserve to be read by anyone wanting to understand the New Testament and Christian faith and church. They explore in detail the historical context in which Jesus lived and in which Christianity was born. As well, they examine the New Testament texts and a range of other contemporary texts and their sources which throw a totally new light on the New Testament. These studies disclose a quite different understanding of Jesus and his mission, and the several diverging streams at the beginning of the Jesus movement and the beginnings of Christianity.

Crossan, like most scholars, has been subject to a range of criticism, mainly from conservative scholars, as he has published his findings over recent years. What is especially valuable in the two volumes just referred to, is that he sets out where other scholars disagree with him, and examines and refutes these in detail.

THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY.

I venture the opinion that without a knowledge of Crossan's research it is not possible to hold a correct understanding of Jesus or the foundational Jesus movement and the major theological themes of the New Testament. His careful research and exacting analysis leads clearly to the conclusion that the New Testament as we have it, and orthodox Christianity itself, is a later interpretation of Jesus and his Way that does not accurately reflect the understanding of either of the two main original groups of Jesus' followers.

The two earliest 'Christian' or Jesus communities were to be found in Galilee and Jerusalem, and both understood Jesus and the Gospel quite differently from the later Markan and Pauline interpretations which are expressed in the writings which make up our New Testament. This New Testament interpretation represents the emerging missionary church's re-expression of the Gospel as it faced the hostility of the Jewish Christian sect and the task of taking its message to the non-Jewish world. Both the Galilean and Jerusalem expressions of the Jesus Way were but dimly reflected in the emerging Gentile church and in the New Testament documents that were written expressly to address the Gentile world.

Both the Galilean and Jerusalem expressions were understood by those Jewish communities as a return to the essential heart of their Jewish faith, in opposition to the ritualised and debased form of that faith practised at that time, and so strongly criticized and condemned by Jesus in

the face of the oppression of the people both by their religious leaders and the Roman occupiers.

The pre–New Testament Christianity that Crossan uncovers is clearly not a movement to start a new religion, or break from Judaism, but an attempt to reform and re-express Jewish faith in the light of its fundamental and historic understanding of their God as a god of justice and righteousness . In other words, these were Jewish sects, movements of reform within Judaism. Both the Jerusalem and Galilean groups sought primarily to express this faith that Jesus had taught by living it out in communities of love and justice, or as Crossan puts it, of “healing and hospitality”. Both groups in fact simply continued to live out their Jewish faith according to the Way or program that they had begun to live under the teaching, leadership and inspiration of Jesus.

The Galilean community expresses what Crossan calls the “Life Tradition”. This was understood by its participants as living out the Kingdom or Rule of God in their lives and relationships. They looked not to some future apocalyptic coming of God’s kingdom, but to God’s presence and blessing with them now, as they lived by his law of love. Jesus had taught them to express this primarily to the deprived and depressed members of society, through physical sustenance and shelter (“hospitality”) and restoring hope, health and self-esteem (“healing”). The program was neither charity nor social service, but each one healed was to heal another, to heal others, and to incorporate them into the community of love.

This earliest tradition makes no reference to the birth, death or resurrection of Jesus (all clearly irrelevant to the program), nor any suggestion that Jesus was divine or God Incarnate. The latter was an impossible concept for a Jew.

The sources for understanding this community are the ‘Q’ Gospel and the Gospel of Thomas (the Common Sayings tradition), and the Didache (a community rule document, independent of the Gospels).

The Jerusalem community expressed what Crossan calls the “Death Tradition”. Like the Galilean community the Jerusalem community expressed its life in following Jesus by living in a loving, caring community. It is described in Acts 2: 44-45 . However, unlike the Galilean community, the Jerusalem “church” was an apocalyptic community , living in expectation of the “end of the age” of evil, and the future inauguration of God’s Kingdom with the return of Jesus.

Two sources best illuminate this tradition. First, the Epistle of James, which is one of the few New Testament documents that reflects Jesus’ teaching about ethical living rather than a theology seeking to interpret who Jesus was. Second, the Gospel of Peter, with its account of the death and resurrection of Jesus. But, this earlier death and resurrection story is quite different from those of the later Gospel traditions. Here Peter is writing for a community suffering severe persecution , because they were seen as a threat to both the Roman peace and to Sadducean high-priestly Judaism. So Peter’s account reflects the long Jewish Biblical tradition of God’s vindication at the general resurrection of Israel’s suffering righteous ones. Jesus is recognized here not as divine Son of God, but as messiah, i.e. God’s anointed (suffering) servant raised up by God to save his people from their enslavement to a foreign power.

So, Jesus’ death is here understood as that of an innocent and righteous man (a prophet like Moses) who will be vindicated by God. This theme runs through the whole Bible and Jewish

history, that the righteous who have suffered unjustly will in the end be vindicated by God. They will be raised to life again at the general resurrection, with, as Paul says, Jesus as “the first fruits of those who have died”. (1 Cor. 15: 20) The scene of this resurrection in the “Cross Gospel” (Crossan) embedded in the Gospel of Peter, shows Jesus emerge from his tomb (along with two men sent from heaven to open the tomb) at the head of a great throng of the “saints” in the form of a cross. This is clearly the Jewish concept of the general resurrection of the righteous which includes Jesus, not the rising of Jesus only as the Son of God.

Crossan concludes this study of the birth of Christianity with a reflection on what the incarnation or revelation of God in the man Jesus, and the subsequent Christian community, really means. It depends, he says, entirely on our understanding of the character of this God who is being reflected in the lives of righteous men and women who suffer unjustly in this world. The clue, he says, is encapsulated in Psalm 82, which expresses the whole Biblical tradition’s understanding of their God, i.e. that he is above all a God of Justice. He goes on to illustrate this from the Bible, especially its covenants and law codes which demand justice in all one’s day to day dealings and actions, because this reflects the central character and demand of their God. Psalm 82 imagines God passing judgment on all the other gods and goddesses, not because they are pagan, but because they are unjust. They do not demand and effect justice (as distinct from charity and compassion) for the weak, needy, lowly, destitute and the orphan.

The Jewish law codes presuppose that divine justice involves radical equality, especially economically.

The requirements for ritual and personal purity were neither the marks nor signs of holiness or righteousness, but the means of approaching God to covenant with him to do justice in the world. Crossan drives home this point thus :

“If, confronted with the blinding glory of God, all convert freely not to Judaism or to Christianity but to justice and righteousness, then all is well in our religious imagination.” (p.586). And he ends with a reminder that the God of justice is not a God of revenge, but is by definition a God of compassion. “It is impossible ... to have justice without compassion, but it is possible (unfortunately) to have compassion without justice.” (p.586). And again : “Those who live by compassion are often canonized. Those who live by justice are often crucified.” (p.586).

THE HISTORICAL JESUS.

In his book on “The Historical Jesus” Crossan follows a three-level process in his historical Jesus research, namely cross-cultural and cross-temporal anthropology, Hellenistic or Greco-Roman history, and the literature (textual study and analysis) of the sayings and doings concerning Jesus.

In regard to the literature, Crossan examines all available texts, not just those included in the canonical scriptures (which were selected originally because they reflected the theological orthodoxy of the time). Crossan asserts that the best scholarly opinion today is strongly united in the view that the differences and discrepancies in the New Testament accounts are not due to differences in memory or perception, but to deliberate attempts to express and promote a particular theological interpretation of Jesus. He says that a scholarly study of all the literature of the Jesus tradition reveals three major layers, what he calls retention, development

(or application), and creation. These need to be sorted out by the methods of establishing inventory, stratification, and attestation.

Inventory means establishing, describing, and placing in historical and literary relationship, all relevant texts.

Stratification involves placing each text, or each source identified within texts, in chronological order (with emphasis on those closest to the actual events).

Attestation is establishing the number of independent occurrences for “each complex of the Jesus tradition”, with priority given to those with multiple independent attestation, and avoidance of those with only a single attestation.

The final aspect of his method is to begin with the earliest stratum or layer, and test working hypotheses derived from that layer against later layers of tradition.

So Crossan proceeds to elucidate Jesus against the social, cultural, political and economic context of his day, and then against the religious context of his day, especially contemporary Judaism, but also Greek, Roman and other dominant contemporary influences.

In respect to the Jewish religious context Crossan warns that “it is certainly quite incorrect to see Jesus’ current Judaism as uniformly, normatively, or even predominantly rabbinical”. (p.417). Rabbinical Judaism effectively came into prominence following and consequent upon the fall and destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish state in 70 C.E. There was only one sort of Judaism in Jesus’ day, and that is “Hellenistic Judaism, Judaism responding with all its antiquity and tradition to a Greco-Roman culture undergirded by both armed power and imperial ambition.” (p.418).

He refers however to two types of response to this external threat, namely exclusive or inclusive Judaism; on the one hand a conservative rejection of any interaction with Hellenism, and on the other a positive attempt to interact and adapt. The former finds ultimate expression in rabbinic Judaism, the latter in early Christianity (originally a reforming Jewish sect). Jesus is interpreted by Crossan against a background of inclusive Judaism, but not the educated philosophical strand, rather the “peasant, oral and popular” strand, of what he calls “Jewish Cynicism.” (p.421).

Cynicism involved both a mind-set and a life-style “in opposition to the cultural heart of Mediterranean civilization, a way of looking and dressing, of eating, living and relating that announced its contempt for honour and shame, for patronage and clientage”. (p.421).

The Cynics operated in the cities and marketplaces, whereas Jesus operated in the rural villages and countryside. They were without communal elements, unlike Jesus and his followers. In the face of the exploitative culture and Roman occupation, resistance movements arose in protest, including Zealots, Cynics, Stoics, Essenes and the Jesus movement. Most of these involved a communal life-style that exhibited a rejection of the culture around them. Crossan sets this picture against the background of Palestinian (especially Galilean) peasant turmoil, which found expression in the assorted violence or threats of violence of bandit leaders, messianic claimants, millennial prophets; and the non-violent actions of protesters and magicians. Jesus fits the category of magician, while John the Baptist that of millennial prophet.

Jesus can be best described as peasant Jewish Cynic. His mission and message, expressed both in words and life-style, was a profound acted protest against the dispossession and marginalisation and its attendant suffering experienced by his own class, the poor (small

landowner peasants) and the deprived (landless artisans, labourers, and those unemployed and discarded by society).

His strategy for himself and his followers was free “healing” in exchange for hospitality and meal, “a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power.” (p.422). As a wandering, homeless, magician / healer, he moved on, announcing, performing, and enabling acts of personal, social, economic, and religious liberation through healing and the encouragement of communal sharing (especially through shared food). Sharing food involves “individuals in matrices of social reciprocity, mutuality and obligation.” (p.341).

(Crossan uses "magician" as a technical term which means someone who is seen to be able to "make divine power present directly through personal miracle" or power, and therefore a challenge to institutional religion which is seen to control such power. Valid alternative descriptions are "thaumaturge, miracle worker, charismatic, holy one". Crossan says that Elijah and Elisha stand in this tradition, but as prophet magicians. p.138.)

Jesus moves on, as it were, to prevent the institutionalising of the “Kingdom” movement into a new religion, or a new version of the old. Mark 9:37 and John 12: 44b seek to shift the focus and the attention off both Jesus and his missionaries, and onto God himself.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” In these words, Jesus, like the Cynics, would claim that their life-style was simply the wisdom of common sense, open to all with eyes to see and ears to hear.

This program of Jesus was the announcing to, and healing of the poor and powerless, that what he called the Kingdom of God could be experienced by them now, in the midst of oppression and dispossession. “He was neither broker nor mediator (of that kingdom) but ... the announcer” that this kingdom was the “brokerless kingdom of God” that any and all could experience for the asking. (p.422). This practical program of Jesus, encapsulated in “magic and meal” or “miracle and table”, was undertaken deliberately in response and opposition to the “patronage and clientage, honour and shame, the very heart of ancient Mediterranean society.” (p,304).

The “rather swift spread of Christianity” required “both the ideological orientation and practical missionary experience of inclusive Judaism as well as the enabling vision and abiding presence of Jesus.” (p.422).

The split between Jesus as sapiential teacher of wisdom and John the Baptiser as an apocalyptic prophet of eschatology appears very early indeed in the tradition. The Corinthian church appears to have seen Jesus in “wisdom teacher” terms over against Paul’s apocalyptic view of him. The Gospel of Thomas likewise opposes an apocalyptic view. But neither knows anything of Jesus as Son of Man, the avenging judge.

The Kingdom sayings of Jesus greatly outnumber the Son of Man sayings. The Kingdom idea is about people living under the rule of God. The Kingdom was for the childlike, that is the powerless, the nobodies, the humble, those who serve. The word usually mistranslated the “poor” rather means the destitute, the beggars.

The bulk of the members of ancient societies were the landed peasant farmers and artisans. They were *the poor*. *The destitute* were those who had fallen below that level, those who had lost land and hence family and social ties and status, and who had thus lost honour and were

marked with shame. With that came the loss of self-esteem, marginalisation, the status of a beggar. As far as society was concerned they were expendable. Their lives were characterized by sorrow, hunger and persecution. (Note the Beatitudes). "Persecuted" was probably the early church projecting its own experience back onto the sayings of Jesus. So, consequently the "idea of the rich in the Kingdom is not only quite impossible, it is rather hilarious, like getting a camel through the eye of a needle". (p. 275). And from the perspective of the rich, the Kingdom is like a weed, and they are stuck with it.

The "treasure" parables involve the finder of the treasure in scandal and impiety; that is to obtain the Kingdom involves actions "neither socially acceptable nor morally approved." (p. 282).

Just as banditry and revolt were peasant challenges to oppressive political power, so miracle and magic (the role of thaumaturg) were to oppressive spiritual power, namely orthodox religion and its demands. Crossan in looking at Jewish history states that "Elijah and Elisha, Honi and Hanina, were magicians, and so was Jesus of Nazareth". (p. 305).

The victims of an oppressive occupied country were then blamed for what society had done to them. Excessive taxation and exploitation left the poor "physically malnourished or hysterically disabled". (p. 324). But, according to the belief system of the day, sickness and poverty were seen as the consequences of sin or the action of evil spirits, and the cure for this was in the Temple. But the poor could not afford the gifts and animal sacrifices for their ritual cleansing. They saw them simply as intolerable burdens, as well as confirmation that life for them was without hope. In this context then, if Jesus accomplished healing, then by definition their "sins" were forgiven. When Jesus forgave sin it was to bring about healing. And all this was of course counter cultural and therefore subversive.

All this of course will also lead to death for Jesus. Jesus' so-called purification of the Temple is, according to Crossan, a symbolic destruction of the Temple, and hence all it stood for. His symbolic act "destroys" the Temple by stopping its "fiscal, sacrificial and liturgical operations". (p. 358). He also asks: what about the last supper as an institutionalised celebration of his death? He concludes that "Mark is opposing an institutionalised eucharistic ritual that does not allow for Jews and Gentiles at the same table ... and that emphasizes the presence of Jesus now rather than the coming of Jesus soon within that liturgy." (p.366).

Further, the Didache, the oldest Christian church order, written at the end of the 1st century C.E., has two separate eucharistic celebrations or meals. Neither makes any reference or connection to Passover meal, Last Supper, or the death of Jesus. The two-part sequence of bread and wine is simply typical of a Greco-Roman formal meal. The Didache meals or eucharists "parallel, in both ritual and rhetoric, the oldest Jewish prayers." (p. 363). A ritualistic last supper or sacrament or eucharist in remembrance of Jesus' death is clearly a later construction of the church. Its "worthiness warning" requiring either repentance or baptism is a move backward from Jesus' open "commensality". (Commensality means table fellowship, sharing food.)

"Jesus' closest followers knew nothing more about the passion than the fact of the crucifixion." (p. 375). In the earliest version of a passion narrative, the "Cross Gospel" embedded in the Gospel of Peter, it is the harrowing of hell, the despoiling of the demonic regions, that is used to explain why Jesus must die and be buried and still, in the genre of innocence rescued, be saved "from death" before the very eyes of his enemies." (p. 389).

Mark was the first writer to use and develop the “Cross Gospel”. But in doing so he made three profound changes. First he changed the dominant theme of innocence rescued to martyrdom vindicated. Only at the parousia would he and his persecuted followers be resurrected and vindicated. Second, he duplicated the trial process. Third, he developed a “better” historical account of it all, which the other Gospel writers follow.

And what about the resurrection? Mark, while accepting the “Cross Gospel’s” passion sequence, was not willing to accept its resurrection account (which includes apparition and ascension). Crossan believes this was because of his “parousia” theology, but also because “a glorious revelation to the righteous dead in order to lead them into heaven is very hard to reconcile with one to the apostolic authorities in order to send them forth to preach.” (p. 396). The resurrection appearances in the Gospels are meant to serve the issues of mission and leadership in the early church. So, for Crossan, the resurrection is “the continuing presence in a continuing community of the past Jesus in a radically new and transcendental mode of present and future existence.” (p. 404). (“Parousia” in the New Testament refers to the second advent or the return of Christ to earth at the end of the age.)

The above comments and quotes from Crossan will be too summary, and perhaps too technical, for most readers. However, they are intended to provide a taste of the detailed and tightly argued scholarship and research that characterizes Crossan’s work. They cannot replace or substitute for the works themselves. Crossan is eminently readable and understandable, but if we are serious about New Testament interpretation we will need to read the 1000 odd pages of these two works, or accept the judgement of the majority of scholars that this man is the outstanding New Testament scholar today, and to hope that I or someone else has sufficiently conveyed his central conclusions for the general reader.

Appendix 3

How We Missed The Bus

Contemporary Theology & The Question of God

In this appendix we will look in more detail at some of the key figures in the debate about God over the last half century, recognizing of course that these questions were raised by other important thinkers as far back as the Enlightenment, around the 17th and 18th centuries, when truth was no longer to be determined by authority, but by reason.. These recent thinkers include Rudolph Bultmann, Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, Bishop John Robinson, the “Death of God” theologians (Vahanian, Van Buren, Hamilton and Altizer), Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering, Bishop John Spong, Marcus Borg, and the Process philosopher / theologians Whitehead, Hartshorne, Cobb and Charles Birch. (A separate appendix deals with process thought). There are of course others, but in my view these have been the most influential, and one could say the most helpful.

Paul Tillich’s radical restatement of theology influenced many of the other writers I have listed, and his concept of God as Ground of Being has been taken up by many others. Bultmann’s demythologising of the New Testament helped to break open New Testament interpretation, and Bonhoeffer’s radical questions posed from his Nazi prison cell have troubled us ever since. Much has been written to explain away his talk of “man come of age” and of “religionless Christianity”, but his close friend, correspondent and biographer Eberharde Bethge leaves us in no doubt that Bonhoeffer meant exactly what he said. There are of course some references to Bultmann and Bonhoeffer throughout this book, for example in the description of Paul Van Buren’s work that follows.

Robinson is a good guide to Bonhoeffer’s key thought. He says: “Tillich, Bultmann, and on Bonhoeffer’s behalf Eberhard Bethge, his correspondent and biographer, were all gracious enough to say that I had interpreted them aright” (in *Honest to God*). (“Exploration into God”. p.25).

DEITRICH BONHOEFFER

Bonhoeffer’s theological writings consist in a number of earlier works, such as his extremely popular and challenging reflections on the Christian life in “The Cost of Discipleship” and “Life Together”, his “Ethics” which he saw as his major life work, and mainly written during the second world war, but before his imprisonment by the Nazis in 1943, and his re-thinking of theology while in a Nazi prison for two years before his execution in 1945. These last thoughts or fragments of thought are preserved for us in his “Letters and Papers from Prison”, collected and edited by his close friend Eberhard Bethge. These later confronting and challenging

thoughts have disturbed Christian orthodoxy so much that many writers have been keen to dismiss them or explain them away.

I will not attempt an exposition of Bonhoeffer, but will draw on a few of his best interpreters to elucidate several of his key phrases and thoughts that have direct relevance for the subject of this book.

From an excellent publication, “Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age”, I will quote from Paul van Buren on the phrase “Living with God without God”, and from Eberhard Bethge on “religionless Christianity”, and “a world come of age”.

Towards the end of his life Bonhoeffer talked about “Before and with God, we live without God”. Van Buren seeks to explicate this as follows :

- 1) It means “to take full responsibility” for our world and our lives without the need for calling on God for help. Bonhoeffer observed that Christian faith was now living in a secular world, a world in which men no longer need God or the “God hypothesis” for living their lives and explaining the universe.
- 2) For Bonhoeffer, to be a man (to cope with life in purely human terms) in this secular age, was to work things out in terms of the despised and rejected man Jesus, whom he described as “the man for others”.
- 3) Bonhoeffer wanted to emphasize that whatever that story tells us of God, it does so in human terms provided by the human figure of Jesus Christ. To experience God, he wrote, means to meet Jesus Christ. To be in a relationship to God means to live for others, sharing in that form of life which was Jesus Christ’s.
- 4) For Bonhoeffer, the Christian faith did not commit one to what he called “the God hypothesis”, that is the theism of Western thought (the omnipotent prime mover and ground of all being). For Western theology (i.e.theism), in order to talk about humanity and the creation one must first speak of God, and of man and the world in terms of their relationship to God. (God has ontological priority). Bonhoeffer’s God, however, can only be known for us through the story of Jesus Christ as “the man for others”. This means that the God Jesus reveals is characterized not by absolute power, but by weakness or powerlessness. Jesus has the ontological priority. We can only speak of God in terms of Jesus, not the reverse. This is a “Christological humanism”.

Eberharde Bethge elucidates Bonhoeffer’s phrase “religionless Christianity”.

He says that Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity” is “first and last” Christological, and his Christology is always presented via a non-religious interpretation. “Who is Jesus Christ ?” is indeed a question about transcendence and my personal existence because it is “the question about love for one’s neighbour”. (p.52). “He wished to relocate genuine transcendence in this world in the person next to me.” (p.55).

For Bonhoeffer, “religion” is the transformation or conceptualisation of Biblical faith into a metaphysics “within the philosophical framework of both the Greeks and the idealistic philosophers of the 19th century”. “It is thus about a part of life rather than the whole. It is about a Deus ex machina ... over against ... a suffering Christ.” (p. 55). It is about the individualizing of the message, “me and my salvation”.

“The Christian religion had set up guardianship relations to men, held under tutelege of priests as the mediators of life and of pastors and theologians as the administrators of truth. The patronizing feudalistic character of Christian institutions and creeds had transformed the freeing

majesty of the powerless servanthood of Christ into power-structures of sterilizing dependencies." (p.56).

Bonhoeffer spoke of his greater natural sympathy with the non-religious, and insisted that "to be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way ... but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world." (Letters and Papers from Prison. pp.222-3).

By "a world come of age" Bonhoeffer is referring to a given historic process within Western civilization; not an assertion of man's moral progress or perfection. It refers to man's growing freedom from a religious world-view, into a growing autonomy and acceptance of responsibility for his own life and the life of the world. "The religious act" is always something partial; faith is something whole, involving the whole of one's life. Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life. (p.59).

PAUL TILLICH

Tillich is perhaps the principal contemporary pioneer of "non-realist", humanist, rational secular theology. His theology is orthodox in the sense that he adheres to the traditional themes of revelation, of God as Creator and Redeemer, of sin, evil, and salvation, of Christ and his saving death and resurrection (in Christ "the eternal unity of God and man has become historical reality." p.148), the divine Spirit, the Kingdom of God, the Church, and eternal life. However, where he becomes unorthodox (and for many traditionalists heterodox or heretical) is that he starts from the position of man rather than God, and asserts that the language of the Scriptures and of theology is symbolic and does not refer to objective realities, including the concept of God, and proceeds, not to deny the central Christian doctrines, but to correct and reformulate them where they offend our reason and knowledge.

Since 19th century "liberal" theology became discredited, theology shifted decisively back to (neo-) orthodoxy, especially (in reaction to the Second World War and the Holocaust) under the influence of Barth, Brunner and other exponents of Biblical theology. The insights of the post-Enlightenment theologians such as Schliermacher, and the search for the historical Jesus, were to be forgotten and buried.

But the Enlightenment had done its work. The centrality of reason and the overwhelming impact of the secular scientific world would not be denied. Existential philosophy declared that our existence or our existential situation is a state of estrangement from our true or essential nature, rather than from some personal God. There was no doubt as to our need for salvation, but it no longer made sense to talk of God as an objective personal being who intervened in this world and took on our flesh and died to achieve our salvation. So, honest thinkers like Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, and Tillich set out to express the truth of the Gospel or Christian faith in categories consistent with rational and secular thought.

Tillich's theology is philosophical theology, and it is hard work even for scholars. But I will try very briefly to describe and comment on its main features. It is focussed around the question of ontology, or the study of being. The answer to man's being is to be found in "being itself" or God's being. For Tillich the primary task of theology is to answer the questions of human existence, and his method is to seek to correlate the questions that arise from human existence with the answers of the Christian revelation.

At the heart of his system is his concept of Christ as the New Being, as the universal principle of salvation. While he accepts a critical and scientific approach to Biblical criticism, and interprets much of the Biblical narrative as myth, yet he rejects the need to discover the “Jesus of history”. For him, the New Being revealed in Jesus as the Christ is beyond history, and having happened in the experience of Jesus is available to all regardless of what we may learn about Jesus’ historical life. So for Tillich it is a mistake therefore to concentrate on the words or teaching of Jesus, or even whether Jesus of Nazareth ever lived. It is rather the New Testament “picture of Jesus as the Christ”, that is, as the New Being, that is at the heart of Christianity.

Jesus’ life is the life of perfect freedom; that is, there are “no traces of estrangement between him and God and consequently between him and himself and between him and his world ...”. (p.126). There are no traces of unbelief or self-centredness. But, for Tillich, Christ’s goodness and sinlessness are not special ethical qualities, but rather the expressions of the estrangement of human existence overcome in him.

As McKelway says, it is only with the greatest difficulty that we can ascribe any real meaning to abstract concepts such as “being”, but we must if we are to understand Tillich, and what he means by God (Being itself) and Christ (the New Being). Man’s true being is described as his “essence” contrasted against his “existence”, that is the ideal versus the real, truth versus error, good versus evil. The question of God is the question of what power can save us from this loss of our true being. God, however, is not a being who exists, he is Being itself.

Tillich’s philosophical theology can in fact stand alone entirely without the Biblical “revelation”, except for the witness to Jesus as the Christ, that is as the New Being. And presumably, even the perfectly free man can be “pictured” by philosophy, even without the New Testament picture. Nonetheless, this is a brilliantly analysed and argued system of philosophical thought, and as such serves as a rational analysis of what ordinary mortals (themselves unlikely to engage in or comprehend philosophical thought) sometimes experience in their lives, and may more readily comprehend through an explanation derived from psychology rather than philosophy. Let me then turn from Tillich’s philosophy, to attempt to express these ideas through the more familiar concepts of psychology.

The discipline of psychology tells us that we are self-conscious beings who can reflect on ourselves and our existence, how we relate to our “world”. We are capable of good and evil, and we are free to choose. We can put self in the centre of our existence, and thus experience the contradiction that we become estranged and separated from others and from fulfilment (from ourselves). Or we can live the life of true freedom; free from self at the centre of our existence we can be free from evil and desire and striving, and so free for others and free for life and fulfilment. (This is the freedom we see in Jesus.) This freedom from self-centredness is what can be called “salvation”, being saved from enslavement to self and the estrangement it brings from the possibility of love and mutuality and responsibility, and truth and goodness and fulfilment.

What is missing from the philosophical analysis of our condition, which is central to the psychological description, is that man’s freedom is conditioned, that is we are very limited in our freedom and power to choose. Human development, how we are treated, the circumstances and environment in which our persons are formed, militate strongly against our freedom, as does our evolutionary biology. Those facts must be derived from observed reality, not from rational thought.

Tillich is right nonetheless even though few, other than academics or students of theology, will read or understand him. But for him to persist in using the traditional theological categories, especially the concept of God, while it ties his analysis to the Christian tradition, no longer speaks intelligibly to our secular world. Further, Tillich's dismissal of the need for an accurate knowledge of the historical Jesus and his ethical life and teaching is perhaps necessary to make his point that the New Being in Jesus is the key to our being truly free and fulfilled persons. However, it is mistaken in that we see the New Being best, not just as an ideal but as possible for humanity, in the lived life of a man on the stage of human history. And central to that lived life was not only what he did, but what he taught.

Again, if we are to grow in freedom and fulfilment, we need to be taught and shown and supported in how to live the ethical life, for in its day to day application is our freedom, or it is nowhere at all.

Tillich, while for the purposes of his theology downgrading the significance of Jesus as ethical teacher, strongly supports the contention that ethics do not flow from religion, or more properly from theology.

"...Every valid ethical commandment is an expression of man's essential relation to himself, to others and to the universe. This alone makes it obligatory and its denial self-destructive." ("Love, Power and Justice". pp. 76-77, Quoted by McKelway, p. 212). He rejects the idea of the moral commandments as expressions of a divine will. Submission of the will to another's commandments is not to act ethically; indeed is to exchange slavery to self for slavery to the will of another, however exalted.

One of Tillich's great contributions to theology, and to our understanding, is his explication of "faith". It is both profound and simple. Faith, says Tillich, is the state of being ultimately concerned. Whatever is a man's ultimate concern is his "god". One's ultimate concern necessarily makes an unconditional demand upon us because it is at the same time the promise of ultimate fulfilment. If then our faith or our ultimate concern is for something less than what is ultimate, ultimate fulfilment will be illusory. "Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being." (Systematic Theology, Vol.1,p. 14). For Tillich, love therefore is the other side of faith. It is the passion and commitment that must inevitably accompany ultimate concern.

Tillich is also right in pointing to the church, understood as it is meant to be, as the community where salvation is a possibility. The church, that is the community of love, is to be the embodiment of the Kingdom of God, the community in which we can meet the truly free man, Jesus of Nazareth (or for Tillich, Jesus as the Christ, the picture of the new being); the community where unconditional love can free us from enslavement to self, and into the life of service to others.

JOHN ROBINSON (Honest to God)

The modern ferment and debate about the concept of God began seriously in 1963 with the publication of John Robinson's book "Honest to God". Robinson himself points to precursors like Tillich, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann, who greatly influenced his thinking, and also men like Nietzsche and Feuerbach. Robinson's book, while not a simple read, nevertheless managed to speak to a much wider popular audience than his predecessors' more academic works. Not only did he attempt to write in a more popular style, but his book was published in a relatively cheap

paperback, had a catchy title, and received enormous and controversial exposure in the media. Thousands wrote to him expressing their gratitude and relief that a Bishop had at last given them approval no longer to have to believe ancient, out of date ideas about God and religion. Many would not have understood all he said, but they certainly got the message.

Robinson argued for the end of supernaturalism or supranaturalism and the theistic view of God that goes with it. He wrote his book, he said, because for most people “what matters to them most in life seems to have nothing to do with ‘God’; and God has no connection with what really concerns them day by day.” And “the traditional imagery of God simply succeeds in making him remote...” (“The Honest to God Debate”, p.277)

“God is, by definition, ultimate reality. And one cannot argue whether ultimate reality *exists*. One can only ask what ultimate reality is like - whether...what lies at the heart of things and governs their workings is to be described in personal or impersonal categories”, whether God is understood to exist as a separate supernatural entity, or whether the word rather refers to ‘the ground of our being’. (“Honest to God” p.29).

“Theological statements are indeed affirmations about human existence – but they are affirmations about the ultimate ground and depth of that existence.” (p.52.)

“The real question of God is not the existence of a Being whom we visualize as embodying these” (love, trust, freedom, responsibility, purpose) “in his Person. It is whether this conviction about the ultimate nature and meaning of things is true.” “My sole question is whether this conviction about the nature of the ultimate must necessarily be framed in terms of the existence of a divine Being.” (“Exploration into God”. p.36)

Robinson asks “what is meant by speaking of a personal God ?” Not a supreme person, he says, but that “reality at its very deepest level is personal” (“Honest to God”,p.48), that personality is of ultimate significance. For the Christian, the final definition of this reality is the love that is “incarnate”, is demonstrated and lived out, in Jesus of Nazareth. “To assert that ‘God is love’ is to believe that in love one comes into touch with the most fundamental reality in the universe, that Being itself ultimately has this character.” (“Honest to God”,p.53)

Robinson, as a Bishop first, and a scholar, had the pastoral needs of people in mind, and so helped a whole generation to re-examine what the word ‘God’ meant or referred to, and gave them permission to discard an outdated and increasingly incredible belief in a supernatural world and a supernatural Supreme Being that no longer made sense in our scientific secular world.

But Robinson’s *solution* as described above is based on a set of unexamined, unexplained and unsupported assertions. It hangs on the reality and relevance of concepts like “ultimate reality”, “ground of being”, “ultimate significance”, the “depth” of existence, “the personal”, “personality”, and “love”. He assumes, rather than demonstrates, that there is such a thing as ultimate reality, and that it makes sense to call it personal.

What I suspect Robinson wants to say is that love is at the heart of the Biblical understanding of what the God concept refers to, and that today we would say that love is at the heart of all life that is worth living, especially human life and relationships. Unfortunately, Robinson’s thesis, like that of many other contemporary writers on this theme, centres on the human, and indeed the Christian, blind spot, that the human experiment is the culmination of creation, ignoring the ecological dimension of life.

He seems to believe that by attaching the word or concept of God, or ultimate reality or ground of being, to the idea of love as basic to life, that it somehow lends authority or validity to the concept of love. Elsewhere in this book I have challenged the idea of using words like “ultimate”, used to suggest that ultimate things or values are built into the fabric of the universe. Even if it could be shown that this was the case, which of course it cannot, it is naïve to believe that this would convince people to live by those values, anymore than talking about God does. To talk about ‘ultimate’ things, is, like talk about God, just another attempt to posit some external authority for the truth about life.

In a secular, scientifically understood world we can only ask what is it that matches reality, what makes life work, what actions are life-enhancing or life-diminishing. Religious or philosophical questions about ultimate values and ultimate meaning or ground of our being are no advance on the idea of a personal God.

Nonetheless it was Robinson who encouraged many to ask the ‘God’ question, and to find the courage to leave behind the unexamined but increasingly unsustainable ‘comfort’ of the Biblical world-view and language, and to ask what was it that this supernaturalist and anthropomorphic language was being used to describe and address. Robinson must be given credit for honestly asserting that the concept of God as a personal being in a supernatural realm, willing and acting in interventionist ways into this material world, can no longer be credible in our modern secular scientific world. His alternatives are, in my view, inadequate, except indeed for God as symbol for “love” itself. God as Love does not refer to either Being itself or a Being, but the supreme and indispensable value which undergirds and expresses itself in life that is worth living, and life that works for the good of all.

While “Honest to God” caused an enormous stir in both the community and in theological circles, in fact the responses it drew from the general public and the academic critics were and are for me more interesting, more significant and more revealing than Robinson’s thesis itself. Many of these were published in a sequel titled “The Honest to God Debate” (Ed. Edwards). Some of the lay people who responded castigated Robinson for taking away their faith, like telling a child that Father Christmas doesn’t exist. That comment is particularly revealing. First, most children quickly manage to survive the shock of that revelation. Indeed, if at first it is hard to give up the wonderful myth, sooner or later all of us come to that understanding for ourselves. We “come of age”, to use Bonhoeffer’s phrase. That is, our growing knowledge of the world and our intelligence tell us that Father Christmas as a real person is a myth that points beyond itself to the values of giving and receiving and loving.

Second, when we do give up believing in the objective reality of Father Christmas we don’t thereby lose or give up valuing what the myth or story or occasion stands for (at least to the extent that we have been taught and shown its ‘value meaning’). Probably more unbelievers today sing carols, and more commercial firms play them at Christmas than Christians do, and nearly everyone, however unthinkingly, recognizes Christmas as a time of gift giving. Indeed, many keep alive the magic and the imagery and even the story (either the Santa Claus one or the Manger one or both.) The Father Christmas story and what it signifies doesn’t depend on believing Santa is a real person. It never did. The ‘myth’, i.e. the story, points to something “real” or “important” in people’s lives, and that is what keeps it alive.

But most of the lay people who responded to Robinson (he received 4000 letters) expressed their relief and gratitude that they no longer had to believe what they suspected was unbelievable, and that rather than take away their faith, he had, on the contrary, helped to restore it. They now

had permission, as it were, from a bishop, to **hold** to Christian values (rather than give them up) without having to give assent to concepts their minds found incredible. Whether held literally or not, these ancient concepts in which Christian faith was expressed, either had to be accepted as literal truth, or if seen as metaphors, they had no reference point in a modern, secular scientific age.

The responses of clergy and academics are however the more interesting. Many practising priests, including Robinson's boss, the Archbishop of Canterbury, saw Robinson as a threat, a threat because he was seen to be risking disturbing the faith of ordinary Christians. Underlying that, and of course unexpressed, he in fact presented a threat to the clergy's own clerical, priestly, religious domain in which they find both a living and a 'guru' role, which such honesty threatens to undermine.

Academic theologians, on the other hand, usually in theological colleges or universities, were mostly untroubled. Not only is their academic domain a secure haven from the realities of the ordinary everyday world and citizen, but they are not required to convince anyone of the validity of their views, only to be able to argue persuasively for them in an academic setting and in academically acceptable terms. So they commend Robinson for his courage in raising these issues, but feel it necessary to remind him that the God concepts at which he tilts have never been understood academically as anything other than "myths" or analogies. Their replacement concepts, like "Being", "ground of being", "ultimate reality", "the transcendent" are old hat or at best nothing new. For example, and I quote: the supernatural is "not another 'superworld' but the transcendent character of this world .." (Debate p.174).

Some assert, as I do, that replacing 'God' with 'ultimate reality' takes us no further forward. Some, like David Jenkins, insist that traditional "theism" understands God as "personal", but not as 'a person' or 'a being', the latter concepts representing, he suggests, "the scandalous poverty of much current 'theism'...which seems to very many people to be recognizably the theism of (today's) Christian church". (Debate.p.195). However, Jenkins ducks the issue, claiming he has neither the time nor space to explain the difference between a personal God and God as personal, even though he goes on to talk without explanation about "the possibility of relationship to him (God)". (Debate. p.197). I want to suggest that such a distinction is impossible to make intelligible to ordinary people in ordinary language, and that such academic hair-splitting is simply seen as obfuscation by lay people. In any case, for an academic theologian to suggest that the popular view of God both in the church and in the world is scandalously wrong is surely a damning criticism of his own profession and of the clergy in the churches.

Herbert McCabe, another academic theologian, says; "Every student in a seminary is taught that to say that God spoke to the prophets is not to assert a change in God (i.e. that God actually spoke) but in the prophets, and that the Incarnation is not an event in the history of God but of man ...(etc,etc.) All this is, and has been for centuries, the ordinary teaching of Christian theology, but hitherto no theologian (a reference to Robinson) has suggested that because of it we should cease to speak of the Word 'coming down from heaven', of 'the descent of the Holy Spirit', or of Christ 'ascending into heaven and sitting at the right hand of God the Father'. To reject such forms of speech surely shows as much theological naivete as to take them literally." (Debate. p.175).

Now, this is really amazing. Here is a leading academic theologian telling us plainly that the language of faith and of theology is and always has been metaphorical or mythological, and not

literal. But somehow he and his colleagues have failed to tell the churches and their long-suffering laity ! Only an academic could talk like that, with such arrogance and such indifference to the plight of the churches and their faithful people that he supposedly is there to serve and enlighten. What is worse is that his students, once they become practising priests among the ordinary believers, fail to tell them that these words don't really mean what they say, but that they are images, myths, symbolic language. What is worse again is the failure of both theologians and priests to grasp the fact that such language, while foundational and traditional, is both inappropriate and meaningless as symbol or metaphor in our contemporary world.

Some of Robinson's critics also insist that he misunderstands the supranatural (or supernatural). Robinson wants to do away with the 'supernatural' because it seems to refer to a realm of reality or a being beyond this world or this life, not subject to the laws of nature, indeed in charge of them. Tillich here uses the word "supranatural", but for our purposes the more commonly used word will do. Robinson says that for many thoughtful people today this concept of a realm of reality beyond this world makes no sense in a secular scientific world. There is simply no evidence for it, and what the average person thinks is evidence can better be explained in other more natural ways for which there is plenty of evidence.

But the critics assert that the "supernatural" properly understood, is simply a particular dimension of the natural; the 'beyondness' or 'transcendent' dimension of this life and this world. Robinson himself insists on the reality and importance of the 'transcendent' (the 'depth' or 'height' dimensions of life, or the "ultimate" values such as "love" which give "meaning" and "grace" and "salvation" within this life.) The critics affirm that the supernatural and the transcendent are in fact the same. They are a way of talking about the "value" dimensions of this world, not some other world. So Robinson is charged with making an issue of something that for academics is simply a popular misconception.

Perhaps this discussion simply further illustrates the futility and pointlessness of language like supernatural, transcendent, ground of being, being itself, or ultimate, or Love (capitalized), or, of course, God. We have other everyday language to refer to these aspects of life, words which have referents that we can understand and which relate to our experience. Neither God (theistic theology) nor Ground of being (traditional philosophy) is our language today. Love of course is, but such a debased word needs very precise definition each time it is used. As one brought up in the language of the Bible and the church, and professionally trained in theology and for Christian ministry, I have to say that I have never experienced the "transcendent" or the "supernatural" or the "spiritual" or "Love" or "God". On the other hand I am aware when someone is kind to me, and of the importance of truthful, compassionate and just actions towards others (i.e. to love), and how hard it is to love (actively care for others without discrimination). So everyday terms like goodness, truth and love, while themselves needing definition, cannot be mistaken to mean some external reality or authority elsewhere, but for most of us are about our behaviour here and now. To talk about 'God happenings' or 'transcendent events' or 'holy occasions' or 'spiritual experiences' communicates nothing that can be commonly understood, and is thus both meaningless and unnecessary.

Robinson refers to the fact that the capacity for what some people choose to describe as religious or mystical awareness or experience seems to be more a matter of natural endowment, as is aesthetic or artistic or musical sensitivity and awareness. Some of us are tone deaf, and most of us would deny having any such thing as a religious experience, except in so far as some have been induced or persuaded by others or emotionally charged events to believe that they have.

Indeed the great bulk of the population of a modern secular society has no desire to have such an experience even were it available or offered to them.

Talk about religious experience or encounter with God seems to me to ignore the clear message of both the Old and New Testaments, that “God” is to be found or met in doing his will, i.e. in acts of unconditional love. The still small voice or the vision or the blinding light described as part of this encounter is the emotional power or the psychological shock or the depths of the commitment that in different degrees at times accompanies an awareness that I must **act, and act ethically**. It is never merely the experience of the mystics of overpowering love or absorption into the divine, but rather the call to face the cost of doing the “good”.

The supposed contrast between humanism and Christianity is also taken up by Robinson. He illustrates this by suggesting that there is a world of difference between the phrases ‘God is love’ and ‘Love is God’. By affirming that “love is God”, he says, humanists affirm their conviction that ‘love **ought to be** the last word about life’, and their commitment to the practical implications of that assertion. By contrast, he says, for the Christian, the affirmation that ‘God is love’ affirms that love **is** the last word about life, that Christ is the disclosure of life’s final truth and reveals what ultimate reality is (as if to know that love is how we should live needs some special or divine or ultimate disclosure which has upon it the stamp of authority – My comment).

This distinction eludes me. I don’t know on what grounds Robinson knows that humanists believe love ‘ought to be’ life’s last word. To believe that it ought to be is to believe that one should so act and to live in order to universalise this truth. It makes no practical difference to the Christian or his behaviour in the world to know that love **is** the last word, unless we want to suggest that Christians are more moral than committed humanists, or assert that the Christian’s personal comfort is aided by some special knowledge that all will be well in the end. The difference surely lies only in what either the Christian or the humanist is prepared to do about their belief or conviction, and what each means by “love”.

Robinson offers us a false choice. For me there is a third way; not Christian or humanist, but the ethical path. The question or the test is to what extent any of us are actually doing the work of ‘love’. In the end that doesn’t depend on which particular belief system or philosophy or theory we may support, but whether we simply understand that what happens to be my deepest need for love is in fact the deepest need of all living things; that we should therefore accord to all that which we most need and desire for ourselves.

THE “DEATH OF GOD” THEOLOGIANS

Unlike Robinson, the writings of these scholars were not widely known outside the academic community. Nonetheless they created quite a stir in academia and to some extent among clergy, and contributed to the opening up of the debate about God. Coming hard on Robinson’s heels, they came to be known as the “Death of God” theologians. They include Gabriel Vahanian, Paul Van Buren, William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer.

Each of these men took his own distinctive approach, but what they had in common was the thesis that the God idea had died in our modern secular world. They announced or pronounced “the death of God”. They were saying that this ancient religious symbol or concept no longer spoke to modern man, had no reality or relevance in a world which had no place for supernatural

realms or beings, or a concept that used supernaturalist language to refer to the values and powers that they believed existed at the heart of their lives and their history.

In what follows I attempt a summary of their views based primarily on a useful analysis of their work by Charles Bent in his book “The Death of God Movement” (1967).

While Bent’s analysis is excellent, his negative critique of all except Vahanian is totally inadequate. Instead of dealing with their arguments, he simply dismisses all but Vahanian on the grounds that they fail the test of orthodoxy, as established by the historic creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon. He is sympathetic to Vahanian because he seems to support a Biblical and transcendental view of God.

GABRIEL VAHANIAN.

Vahanian, along with many others today, says Bent, concludes that “the dominant thought forms of Western culture are now characterized by a radical immanentism that is diametrically opposed to the Christian conception of a transcendent and sacramental dimension pervading human existence.” (p.2)

“Views of man and the world that are radically immanentist, scientific and secular have replaced outlooks that were transcendental, mythological, and sacral-sacramental.” (p.56)

“Religion today resembles magic and is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate from superstition.” (p.8)

To quote Vahanian: “We have domesticated God in such a way that ... he has become so diminutive as not to be recognizable any longer.” (p.8)

Bent quotes Vahanian as asserting that modern man believes both that “all is grace” and that “God is dead”. “For if life is meaningless, then there must be no God. But if it is meaningful – and it must be, or else it contradicts itself – it is meaningful by virtue of some kind of *immanent* grace; therefore God does not exist.” (p.20).

Statements like this are endlessly asserted by philosophers and theologians as if they were self-evident logical necessities, and needed no supporting argument or evidence. In fact the very opposite is true. Who, to begin with, is “modern man”? All modern men or even typical modern men do not believe that life is meaningless; indeed, most don’t even consider the question. And, even if some, at one time or another, believe that life is meaningless, we should ask why it is so. Perhaps it is so simply because it has in fact no intrinsic fundamental meaning, and experience teaches us that neither does God exist. And it is not at all clear to me that life must be meaningful, whether by virtue of God’s existence or immanent grace, “or else it contradicts itself”.

Vahanian is perhaps equating modern man with contemporary or modern novelists, or other writers, as if what the world believes is to be equated with its literature and its academics. In examining some of this literature Vahanian comments on Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” and Archibald Macleish’s “J.B.” He says that while Beckett is content to psychologize man away, Macleish defies man. To quote: “The distance between Biblical man and post-Christian man can be shown by comparing Job and J.B. Job’s predicament is that, though he believes in God, he acts at times as if he doubted. But he cannot be convinced of his doubt. J.B.’s predicament is that he does not believe in God, but he acts as if he does or wishes he did” (p.23) Vahanian seeks here to suggest that Job’s experience is truer to life than J.B.’s. Whereas, for me, J.B. more accurately reflects most people’s experience of life. i.e. that life is without intrinsic meaning or value or justice, but it would be a wonderful comforting thing in such circumstances if God did in fact exist.

Bent seeks to express the orthodox Biblical view of life which Vahanian hankers after for modern men and women in this typical convoluted argument. The argument seems to say that though there is neither sense nor justice in life, this is our fault and not God's, and is therefore not an argument against God. God is "wholly other" and a "mystery", and he is always faithful towards us, and therefore our predicament can't be held against God. How convenient, how strange ! What is expressed here is a preconceived view of God which we have to believe if we believe in God at all (and we want to believe in God), but which conveniently relieves God of any responsibility for the human condition which is of his creating and his purposing.

Let me use Bent's summary of Vahanian : "In this world the just man suffers. Why ? In the eyes of Biblical man, God's justice is something more than retributive justice. The sufferings of the just in this world lead to a tragic view of life. But man's justice and injustice, wisdom and folly, invariably point to the *otherness* of God despite – or precisely because of – the underlying correlation between man's justice and God's justice. God, therefore, remains wholly other even when grasped by faith. It follows that the existence of God cannot be deduced from the amount of justice in the world, nor can it be denied because of the evil and suffering in the world. For Biblical man, the tragic element of life consists in this : suffering (and human experience as a whole) separates man from *himself*. In theological terms, the presence of God is a mystery or an abyss, and human experience appears as the possibility of man's self-alienation. But beyond this threat of self-alienation lies the affirmation of God's faithfulness to man. In Biblical terms, therefore, faith is the response of the wise man's vision that all is grace; such faith cannot be justified by any theory of reward and punishment, or by any reasons, good or bad, because it is grounded in a different kind of logic, a logic based on human experience." (p. 23,24)

It is worth examining this statement in some detail, and in the light of the relationship between human parents and their children. In respect to the human analogy of parent and child, a child's alienation from self, others and the world, can readily be explained. Such alienation can always be traced to an inadequacy in the parents' relationship with the child, whatever other external circumstances may also have a bearing on it. It is not, nor can it be, simply due to life's harsh circumstances or injustices, nor the child's wilfulness or waywardness alone. Human parents, of course, cannot "love" perfectly, but even with imperfect love, the best parents manage to provide their children with sufficient self-esteem, sense of worth, security, and a degree of protection, etc. to enable them to cope successfully with life. This cannot avert tragedy, injustice and suffering caused either by ignorance, or the evil of others, or the vagaries of life and the natural world. But it can avert alienation and despair.

If God exists, and if he loves us with a perfect love, however "wholly other" he may be, then we would expect him to do better than the best of human parents in giving us the gifts of life and love. The least we would expect is that the majority of his "children", if not all of them, would by definition be provided with enough of his love to ensure the degree of self-esteem and wholeness of personhood, and responsibility for self and others, that a "God-like", loving and moral human parent can and does provide. On the pattern of human parenthood (itself presumably God's ordained way), God's love would have to be shown to each individual in direct and unambiguously recognizable encounters, not by chance reference to an isolated indirect revelation at one or several points of history in the past. Humans, encountering this direct and perfect love of God, would not, indeed could not, (psychologically and morally) seek to harm and hurt others. Any suffering they caused to others would be through inadequate knowledge and understanding, not through self-will or self-centredness or disregard for the

welfare of others, or lack of a sense of responsibility, or sheer lack of moral intent. Any suffering in the world would be the consequence of natural causes or human shortcomings, but not of evil and “sin”.

But to believe in the faithfulness of God, one would also expect him to have provided us with a much less capricious and less dangerous world. We seem (on scientific grounds and the necessity of the freedom of the creation) to allow God to be author of a capricious natural order, and equally we seem to attach to him no blame for a human and moral order in which human-caused suffering is a major and inevitable ingredient. But such a God who designs and permits such a world either does not exist or is not worth believing in.

Those, such as Vahanian, and all orthodox theologians such as Bent, who contrive such self-contradictory arguments to justify God, have persuaded themselves that it could not be otherwise. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this book, if theologians were to study less philosophy and more psychology, their arguments would not be characterized by the forms of special pleading that we have been examining, which simply leave the average layperson cold.

But these apologists for Biblical faith in God and his otherness and his faithfulness will protest against my assertions about human behaviour and what causes it, that such a condition as I describe would somehow predetermine human behaviour and deny our free-will. This of course is a failure to understand what I have been describing. A world of emotionally and morally mature people, as described, whether brought about by loving and emotionally and morally mature parents, or by God arranging for himself to be less “other” and more available to his creatures, would not be a perfect world. Morally and emotionally mature people are not automatons; nor are they perfect. They also hurt people, often unintentionally, or because their own needs are not being adequately met, and they have to decide and determine each day of their lives to do the good rather than merely to serve their own self-interest or their own ends. But they are not people who actively do evil, or hate others, or start wars, or exploit others. People who do those things have been denied adequate love, and are deficient, needy, and often “sick” personalities.

Vahanian’s analysis of the current religious crisis is that for modern people God is dead for all practical purposes, since a radical immanentism, scientific humanism, and religiosity rather than Judeo-Christian faith, has replaced a transcendental world view. In commenting on this, Bent supports the essentials of his analysis, but believes he is somewhat overstating his case. Unlike Vahanian, he believes that many modern Christians successfully integrate a truly Biblical faith in a transcendent God with their humanistic values, secular interests and scientific knowledge. In fact, he reminds us correctly that Biblical faith has always been grounded in the secular in which this world is seen to be the immediate sphere of God’s activity, while finding its source and power in the transcendent. Its God is both immanent and transcendent.

Bent, however, in fundamentally agreeing with Vahanian’s analysis, says :

“... the mental climate of the present era militates against a continued acceptance of the Christian world-view” (i.e. the idea of the transcendent, however expressed). He goes on to assert : “an intellectual rejection of belief in God is becoming more widespread today. More and more reflective people are discovering that, for them, the Judeo-Christian God is either absent, hidden, withdrawn, irrelevant, non-existent, or dead. An increasing number of serious thinkers are concluding that God is completely irrelevant to their daily lives, and that for all practical purposes he might just as well be dead. In the final analysis, whatever else one may

say about the problem of God, one thing is certain : the existence of God is not a self-evident fact.” (p.47)

Bent then seems to fall into the trap besetting so many Christian apologists, in asserting a number of typical but unsupported and, I believe, unsupportable propositions.

“An ultimate choice must be made between secular humanism and Christian theism if (we) are to live purposeful and meaningful lives.” (p.47). But as I state in the earlier chapters of this book, there are other choices, especially the ethical ecological one.

It is taken for granted, rather than argued or proved, that one of the above positions is self-evidently more beneficial to the world and to individuals than the other. Let’s have the evidence.

There is the common assumption that all and any humanist positions by definition deify humanity, and at the same time make light of sin and suffering. “Modern secular man ... subscribes to an anthropocentric world view in which man is the measure and standard of all things.” (p.50). That may have been true of earlier humanists, but is no longer true today. I hope that my own thesis successfully denies that charge.

“Modern man is currently searching for a viable understanding of the polar relationship between the sacred and the profane”. (p.48). There is simply no evidence for such an assertion. Neither is it made clear who is “modern man”, nor what constitutes the “sacred”, and whether such a realm as the “profane” means irreligious, or pagan, or secular, or what.

“A valid conception of God must reflect authentic human experience of God ... (but) “there can be no real adequacy between the transcendent reality of God and man’s finite and limited comprehension and conceptualisation of God.” Well, I’ll leave you to ponder that conundrum. But what I think he is saying, in the close-to –incomprehensible language of academia, is that we can only know God by experiencing him (I may add, without any way of knowing that what we are experiencing is in fact something we can call God, and know what we mean by the word). But even then, he says, that such knowledge still cannot be said accurately to reflect who God is or what he is like.

Enough said !

WILLIAM HAMILTON

Bent quotes Protagoras (5th C . BC) “that man is the measure of all things” as a concise paraphrase of what he calls Hamilton’s “anthropocentric vision of modern man living in the age of the death of God”. Hamilton speaks as a radical Christian, but with a religionless approach that is ethical rather than psychological or theological. He takes his cues from Bonhoeffer.

Modern men and women live in an age marked by optimism rather than pessimism, (says Hamilton in the 1960's), and are “come of age” in the sense of being self-reliant and autonomous, with the ability to solve their own problems without recourse to the God – hypothesis. We “must learn to live with radical uncertainty, without the God-hypothesis, in a Godless world where love alone has the power to give meaning to human existence”. (p.53). We are not innately religious, and the idea of a religious ‘a priori’ must be rejected. He

believes that theology must be constructed within the culture of its time, as it has always been. Like Van Buren, his theology is directed towards personal righteousness and social justice. Unlike Van Buren he is more concerned to present a new theological vision rather than a structured theological system, except for the central example of Jesus Christ, as the viable Christian way. The Christ way is “selfless love of others”, one “who put himself at the disposal of his neighbour”, and “to be a man for others”. (p.55).

“... God is dead in the sense that modern man does not know, adore, possess, or believe in God”, nor in the traditional doctrine of revelation. (p.54-55). Modern “man” affirms the death of all forms of theism. Consequently he or she sees no place for worship, preaching, prayer, ordination and the sacraments, but the potential nonetheless for new forms of community.

For Hamilton, the death of God means that human experiences to which we have given the name God must be redescribed, even though many moderns no longer experience them. The “religious” experiences of dependence, awe, reverence, wonder, mystery, have been seen as pointers to the mystery of God. But while some still have these experiences we also have developed human sciences and arts to clarify or explain them. Hamilton defines religion as any system of thought or action in which God or the gods serve as the fulfiller of needs or the solver of problems. God is not a necessary Being; he is not needed to help us avoid despair or self-righteousness.

Nonetheless Hamilton’s thesis is not primarily one of negation, but rather of a positive movement towards the world and the neighbour. “Faith has almost collapsed into love, and the Protestant is no longer defined as the forgiven sinner, ... but as the one beside the neighbour, beside the enemy, at the disposal of the man in need.” (p.56, quoting Hamilton.)

The death-of-God theologians refuse to be seen as expressing some kind of typical atheism, but as theologians and Christians speaking out of the Christian community. They assert a Christian atheism, because of its element of hope and optimism, vis-à-vis pessimism and gloom, and its Christological ethic. Hamilton’s Christian atheism is also to be distinguished from atheistic humanism by its focus on Jesus Christ, both in discovering Jesus in the world, and in the neighbour, and in striving to become Jesus in and for the world, for others.

Hamilton turns to Bonhoeffer, not only in his analysis of modern “man” as “man come of age”, and his concept of a religionless Christianity, but in his search for the meaning of Christian love in a world come of age. ‘Man come of age’ for Bonhoeffer means humanity reaching an adult phase in a psychological sense (i.e. autonomy), and it also means adopting an affirmative attitude to the secularising process which is the dominant characteristic of our modern world. “God must not be asked to do what the world is fully capable of doing : offer forgiveness, overcome loneliness ... (etc).. “ (Bent, quoting Hamilton).

Hamilton shares my contention that an understanding of psychology is essential to a modern critique of theology. He employs characters from Greek drama and Shakespeare as symbols of this analysis. Oedipus represents the traditional theological position in which he exhibits the individual’s psychological bondage, lack of freedom, and lack of clear direction, as he strives to solve the problems and questions of his adolescence. On the other hand Orestes represents the individual who has resolved his identity crisis and come of age, reached maturity, capable of free and deliberate choice. Orestian theology means an end to preoccupation with inner conflict, agonizing over faith and unbelief, and also to the confession of sin. Or there is Prospero (Hamlet) who represents the man who moves from the realms of the sacred, and of magic and

religion, to the world of the city, to absorption in the people and plight of this world. Another literary model he uses is the story of the brothers Karamazov. (Dostoevsky).

Bent's criticism of Hamilton is typical of orthodox theology's response to all radical positions throughout history and in recent decades. Instead of dealing with the specifics of Hamilton's thesis, he simply judges him as failing to be orthodox, as well as being unclear, ambiguous, and too fragmentary and unstructured. This is particularly obvious in his assertion that Hamilton "overlooks the major Christian thinkers of the past 2000 years". This brazenly ignores Hamilton's central thesis that modern men and women live in an era and a culture which pre-modern patterns of thought cannot be expected to understand or address.

Bent's principal criticisms are that Hamilton leaves one uncertain as to what he really means by "the death of God", and that his Christology lacks both supporting argument and clarity. Why choose Jesus if he is not divine? For Bent, apparently, Jesus' life and teaching is no more outstanding than many other historic individuals. Surely an extraordinary assertion! Even though Hamilton's Christology leads him to a way of life in which personal righteousness, social justice, and suffering service of the neighbour and the world are central, this draws no analysis from Bent.

Hamilton does seem to be modestly suggesting that his Christian atheism or religionless Christianity is perhaps an interim position, with the possibility of a new faith to come to fruition in the future. Had I read Hamilton in the 60's I suspect I would have seen him as a threat, as too radical, as did most in the Christian institution at that time. Reading him in the last couple of years, I found him speaking my language, a language we failed to hear some 40 years ago.

THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER

According to Bent: "Thomas J.J. Altizer's God is a process deity who has annihilated himself in a truly kenotic (self-emptying) way so that we might be liberated from all oppressive servitude. Only the Christian can speak of the death of God as a joyous and liberating event because he or she alone participates in the death of God. He confesses a wholly immanent and totally incarnate Word, a fully kenotic Word that is currently operative in our world. To be truly meaningful, says Altizer, the incarnation must effect a change in God himself, resulting in the complete self-annihilation of God. With the death of God in Christ, the ultimate and transcendent source of all human repression and alienation has been completely abolished. The result is that we are now free to pursue full human integrity, maturity, and autonomy within the framework of a wholly radical immanence, in union with a totally immanent God who is now present in every human hand and face." (p.197).

What Bent is seeking to express is that Altizer suggests that, for the concept of God to have meaning and relevance for modern people, God must cease to be some remote power who visits us, but rather enters fully and totally into the human scene, fully incarnates himself (incarnation) and empties himself (kenosis) into human life, so that Godness is fully part of us. We need to express God in our lives rather than calling on some external force to empower us.

Altizer begins, like the others, with the assertion that the era of the transcendent is over, and while the sacred has been lost, it can be recovered in the realm of the profane. His theology not only asserts that Christian faith is bound in the cultural images of the past, but that its early systematizers also got much of its theology wrong both logically and theologically, e.g.

incarnation, atonement, redemption, forgiveness of sin, etc. In particular it got its understanding of God wrong. He maintains that religion finds its most repressive form in the Christian view of a wholly other, transcendent God. He asserts that Christianity of all the religions has most isolated humanity from deity.

Unfortunately, his theology is by and large too philosophically sophisticated and complex to communicate effectively to anyone other than academics. However, in his own way, he is calling attention to the inappropriateness of concepts of transcendence, of a higher realm, of a Wholly other Being, and of our need to be saved from self and sin by the intervention of a reality external to human life. He shocks our religious sensitivities by presenting the Christian God idea as a supreme source of repression and alienation, totally at odds with our contemporary experience of autonomy. If we can resist the temptation to leap immediately to God's defence, perhaps we can begin to hear echoes of what a rising chorus of serious Christian thinkers are trying to say to us.

Bent's analysis of Altizer is a repeat of his approach to the others. He can understand atheistic humanism, but not Christian atheism. He cannot see that Jesus of Nazareth can be of central religious significance unless he is God incarnate. Once again, he fails to deal with any of Altizer's arguments, but simply dismisses him because he does not fit his orthodox presuppositions.

PAUL VAN BUREN

Of all the attempts to restate the Christian Gospel in contemporary secular terms, there is no doubt that Van Buren's is the most persuasive, the most consistent, and the most helpful. Indeed, Bent, our defender of orthodoxy, largely agrees with my evaluation, though he cannot bring himself to accept the Van Buren thesis. He concedes that one "is struck by the precision, logical consistency, and inner consistency of the work .." (p.157).

Van Buren's starting point is the secular orientation of modern man. He describes secularism as a reaction to the Idealism of the previous century, as a focus on this world rather than the next, as a lack of interest in what were once thought of as the great metaphysical questions (philosophical speculation about 'ultimate' realities based on reason alone), as the character of "a world come of age" where we no longer believe in a transcendent dimension of reality. So, he says, in the same way, our inherited language about the supernatural has also died. We can no longer ascribe reality to it as we do to people and things of this world. Van Buren, therefore, sets out to examine theology or the language of faith by the method of linguistic analysis; i.e. to know the meaning of a word or statement we must look at the way it functions in actual use. Religious or faith statements cannot be said to refer to objective realities, because they are not subject to the tests to which other objective realities are subject. So religious or faith statements can be said to refer to values, but more, to values to which the religious person or the person of faith is committed.

He also adopts R.M.Hare's theory of non-cognitive BLIKs. "A BLIK is defined as a viewpoint, ... a commitment to see the world in a certain way. Religious or theological statements are not ... about how things are, but how we see them. (p.110).

He also finds helpful Collingwood's theory of history, that meaning in history represents the interpretation of the historian, not some reality underlying the empirical facts, i.e. the meaning reflects the BLIK of the viewer.

Van Buren says that many modern theologians suggest that one of the chief difficulties we face is the confusion between religion and Christian faith, or between bad religion and good religion. He argues, however, that the problem lies rather in the character of the language of faith. 'Religion', according to Bonhoeffer, involves the view that there are two spheres of reality, the natural and the supernatural, and the use of the God concept to explain life. So, Bonhoeffer set out to attempt a non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts. Bultmann set out, likewise, to de-mythologize the New Testament. He sought to interpret it in terms of a contemporary philosophical system, that of the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger.

'Myth' is understood as a way of talking about the transcendent in terms of this world. But "The mythological view of the world has gone, and with it the possibility of speaking seriously of . . . a historical drama of salvation, in which God is said to have acted at a certain time in this world to change the state of human affairs." (p.25 "The Secular Meaning of the Gospel" by Paul Van Buren.) Modern men and women cannot any longer even speak analogically about God (that God is similar or like us or something we know or understand). The problem lies in the word 'God' itself and in all other words purporting to speak of the 'transcendent' dimension of life. He asks whether the Gospel is something 'religious' and distinct from secular affairs, or is it a human stance taken in the midst of and relevant to our secular culture. Bonhoeffer stressed that to separate faith and life is to reject the very heart of the Christian Gospel.

So Van Buren affirms that most theologians now reject a theistic or objectified understanding of God, but continue nonetheless to speak of God. But, he says, since the 'non-objective' use of the word 'God' cannot be verified, as other objective language can, it is therefore meaningless. He asserts therefore that simple literal theism is wrong. It is based on a dualistic view of reality and a special religious way of knowing. He asserts equally that a qualified literal theism is meaningless. "It will not do simply to translate the difficult word 'God' into some highly or subtly qualified phrase such as 'our ultimate concern', or worse 'transcendent reality', or even 'the ground and end of all things'. These expressions are masquerading as empirical name tags, and they are used as though they referred to something, but they lead us right back into the problem of ancient thought, or they put us in a worse situation of speaking a meaningless language." (p.172).

The language of faith, however, does have a meaning, according to Van Buren, and linguistic analysis can explore and elucidate that meaning. And in using linguistic analysis we do not have to "attempt to speak of God analogically or indeed in any other way, for where existentialist theologians would speak of 'experienced non-objective reality', we have spoken of situations of discernment, including a necessary prior acquaintance with important features of these situations, and we have spoken of a contagious freedom." (p.172).

So myth is not merely to be discarded, but rather to be interpreted. So, Van Buren, rather than rejecting the Chalcedonian definition of Christian faith in 451 C E (the formalizing of orthodox Christology) as mistakenly tied to the Greek philosophy of that day, suggests that Chalcedon's formulas accurately reflected what the early Christians wanted to say about Jesus, but in language which we no longer use or understand, unless interpreted.

The issue for, and the language of, Chalcedon is all about Christology, that is about holding firmly to the *humanity* of Christ above all else, while at the same time acknowledging his 'divinity'. This 'divinity' of the man Jesus was their way of saying that the life of the man Jesus was the expression of that which is 'transcendent' in the human and historical – something universal, eternal, absolute, which is what they at that time meant by the word God.

The New Testament (and later formulations of Christian faith like Chalcedon) gives its answer to the question about God by pointing to the man Jesus. "Whatever God means - as the goal of human existence, as the truth about man and the world, or as the key to the meaning of life – he is to be found in Jesus, the 'way, the truth, and the life'." (p.151).

"Jesus of Nazareth was a singular individual". What singularly characterizes him is that "he stands out as a remarkably free man The content of his teaching reveals the same freedom,..(and) his freedom, finally, is evident in his making no claims for himself. (He) was above all free for his neighbour. ... his compassion for those who suffered, his openness to all whom he met, his willingness to associate with those whose company was avoided by respectable people." (pp. 126-128). For him, freedom was the freedom for humble service of others.

The emphasis finally is on his death, "but we need to remember that ... the New Testament speaks of the 'cross' or the death of Jesus as the consequence of his life." (p.154). This is a fact often ignored by orthodox theories of the atonement. And "When the New Testament says that he died not only for 'our' sins, 'but also for the sins of the whole world', it reflects the fact that Jesus was free for every man, those who did not acknowledge him as well as those who did, and it articulates a perspective by which all men, not just believers, are seen." (pp. 154-5).

Van Buren says that the Biblical witness to Israel and then to Jesus is that they were called by God "for the sake of the world". Jesus was called by God to be supremely the man who lived for the sake of others. e.g. Virgin birth was a mythological way of saying that his life was unique, that he was to uniquely fulfil that role. So, "The mission of the Christian is the way of love upon which he finds himself, the way towards the neighbour, not the way of trying to make others into Christians. His mission is simply to be a man, as this is defined by Jesus of Nazareth. (p.191). "When Easter is in the centre of the picture, however, we can then say that the meaning of the Gospel is to be found in the areas of the historical and the ethical, not in the metaphysical or the religious." (p.196).

"Have we not reduced theology to ethics ?" asks Van Buren. "If this is (indeed) a reduction ... it is the sort of reduction which has been made by modern culture in many fields. Astrology has been 'reduced' to astronomy ... ; we have excluded from the study of the stars a cosmological or metaphysical theory about their effect on human life. Alchemy was 'reduced' to chemistry,In almost every field of human learning, the metaphysical and cosmological aspect has disappeared and the subject matter has been 'limited' to the human, the historical, the empirical." But in this reduction, "we have left nothing essential behind." (pp. 196 &198).

DON CUPITT

Don Cupitt was ordained an English Anglican priest, and has been for many years Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion in the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Emmanuel College Cambridge. He is a prolific author, over recent years producing at the rate of about one book

each year. His two seminal books are “Taking Leave of God” (1980) and “The Sea of Faith” (1984). These books, like those referred to above in this appendix, shocked the religious establishment which began to see Cupitt as a threat to orthodoxy. Cupitt’s contribution to the debate, however, is crucial, not merely because he is a notable scholar, but because his field of expertise is the philosophy of religion.

It is as a philosopher that he comes to the conclusion that philosophy itself has passed its use-by date as a way of talking about and understanding our world. In the light of contemporary linguistic philosophy the metaphysical and supernaturalist language of religion needs to be re-expressed in what he calls “non realist” terms. Religion has a history, and if that is so, then it is a human enterprise. “It is not a body of immutable and supernaturally -certified truths It is a creative and expressive human activity” (Only Human. p.159). Religious concepts and experiences do not have a reality or refer to a reality "out there" apart from our experiencing of them and our language about them. (Realism).

He says that the function of our ideas of God “is to stabilize the self, to hold it calm and poised in the face of the enigma of the human condition. Religion is our way of making sense of a life that otherwise would make no sense at all.” (Ibid. pp.190-1). So, seeing religion as a human construct leads us to “look with fresh eyes upon the one thing needful : the neighbour, the next step, the present moment, and the primacy of the ethical. (Ibid. p.195). “ ... a truly religious person (as opposed to a superstitious person) is distinguished by a particular kind of purity of heart or integrity of will, a quality of unconditional dedication of his whole life, a sense of his vocation and of his life as a pilgrimage, which is unmistakable.” (Ibid. p.201).

This, he says , represents the distinction between religion based on dogma (superstition) and religion based on “spirituality”. He says that the historic process leading to this conclusion begins with the Buddha (two and a half millennia ago), finally appearing in the West in 1781 with Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason”, then Schopenhauer (1818), Nietzsche (1880’s), and Wittgenstein (1930’s).

Wittgenstein’s linguistic philosophy shows us what language is, and thus “produced a radically man-centred and practical philosophy which aims to cure us permanently of the metaphysical impulse.” (Ibid. p. 203).

Original Christianity was already pointing to just such a view of religion. “.. from the beginning (it) represented a drastic humanization of religion. God becomes man, the ceremonial is translated into the ethical, extraordinary charismata are given to ordinary people and diffused through common life, and God is no longer a fearsome objective Being but an indwelling spirit or guiding ideal in the heart. Above all, religion itself is no longer an external apparatus of domination, but an inner spirit of liberty.” But then it was captured by Platonism, “the faith corrupted by being allied with dogmatic metaphysics and embodied in authoritarian institutions.” (Ibid.p.206). “ ... objectivity in religion (is) spiritually degrading and superstitious. ... To reify (thingify or objectify) religious entities is to corrupt them.” (Ibid. p.210).

“A simple way into Christian ethics is to take the whole of the traditional theology of redemption as our programme. Everything they thought God had already done for them, we are going to have to do for each other.” (The New Christian Ethics. p.6). “The morality that it is rational to prefer is the morality with the greatest power to inject value into life, and that morality is the Christian morality, which gives worth to the worthless and justifies the ungodly.”

“Thus ethics (redefined) coincides with what I have elsewhere called ‘spirituality’ : the varied forms of consciousness, the styles of selfhood.” (Ibid. pp.13,40).

Cupitt, like Van Buren, and drawing on the French philosopher Derrida, says that we need to understand how the language we develop and use shapes our world, i.e. our understanding and interpretation of it, so that the beliefs we hold and the language in which we express them, determine and limit the experiences we can have. Further, the language of other times and places expressed a different view of the world.

So Cupitt sets out to outline the effects of a changing world on our understanding of Christian faith. “The slow process of secularisation, the impact of science and then of biblical and historical criticism, the shift to an ever more human-centred outlook, the encounter with other faiths, and then finally the awesome and still incomplete transition to modernity – all this makes up a story which for Christians has extended over some three or four centuries.” (Sea of Faith”, p.4)

“But the impact of ... new technologies ... is as nothing compared with the impact of the new ways of thinking that underlie those technologies.” Science is based on “a new method of arriving at truth whose procedure is the very opposite of that traditionally taught in religious communities ... The method is systematically sceptical. ... what fails is ruthlessly discarded, however widely it has been believed and however great the authority who has taught it ... all theories are merely human and provisional. (This) critical spirit can equally be applied to history and other arts subjects, and to religious belief as well. ... This happened in the age of enlightenment ... the eighteenth century.” (Ibid. p.6).

“Since critical thinking on principle cannot accept dogmas at all, but must invariably question and undermine them, the effect on the supernatural dogmatic beliefs of Christianity was very severe, and theologians have been attempting ever since to pick up the pieces, with – on their own admission – only limited results. .. The result of all this has been to degrade faith into superstition. ... The older supernatural types of explanation have ... since the time of Darwin ... played no part (as they had in the past) in any major branch of knowledge” (Ibid pp. 6-9). So, to resist relegating religion to the margins of life, we must demythologise it and reconnect it to our modern world and culture. This has already happened with Christian ethics, now expressed as social ethics, in which “Christianity in its effective practice has already been intensively translated into a movement of radical religious humanism.” (Ibid. p.11). Not so with Christian doctrine, however, which still clings to its referent in a supernatural and an ideal metaphysical order which is ultimately derived from Plato.

We need to be reminded that the “New Testament itself is the record of the deep transformation of the earliest faith so that it could become a message intelligible to the Graeco-Roman world (with) similar shifts of meaning in the time of Constantine and at the Reformation.” (Ibid. p.16). Today therefore “religious beliefs should be understood not in the realist way (as literally describing real beings, forces and states of affairs), but rather as being more like moral convictions. They are not universal truths, but community truths, and they guide lives rather than describe facts. They express what it means to belong to that (religious) community , to share its way of life and to owe allegiance to its values.”

“Coupled with all this is a large-scale philosophical shift, the so-called ‘end of metaphysics’ All meaning and truth and value are humanly constructed and could not be otherwise.”

“This doctrine (of) radical humanism or anthropocentrism ... was taught (throughout the last few centuries) by Marx, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and others.” Cupitt sets out this historical development in the course of *The Sea of Faith*.

“So *The Sea of Faith* seeks to make the shift from a realist to a more art-centred vision of what religion might be. ... The religion we have received seems exhausted. It spends its time boringly recycling a fixed canon of truth. ... (A) post-religious religion ... will be a form of radical Christian humanism. Thomas J.J. Altizer, the American death-of-God theologian, has said that the present strange, paradoxical, dead-but-won't-lie-down post-modern condition of theology is important to us all, because theology was the first subject to die. Today's theologians are post-theologians, living after the end of their subject but still convinced of its importance. ... Something similar has already happened, or is now happening, to ethics, philosophy, art, politics, history and individual human selfhood.” (Ibid. pp.1-3).

As a philosopher of religion Cupitt gives a historical / rational explanation of religion (and in particular the God concept) in its traditional orthodox form. God is the objectifying of man's need to achieve the highest spirituality, i.e. the highest degree of autonomous self-knowledge and self-transcendence. This is the religious concern and requirement.

He shows that objectifying this goal or requirement effectively prevents its achievement. That is, true spirituality is a function of autonomy and disinterestedness, not dependence on another; it is self-surrender, not surrender of self to another. Therefore an objectively real God is rationally at odds with such a God's supposed purpose, and hence inimical to true faith and spirituality. True spirituality is our response to the intrinsic worth of the religious requirement, rather than response to an external (divine) authority and action. Further, “It is spiritually important that one should not believe in life after death but should instead strive to attain the goal of the spiritual life in history. It is in this life, and in relation to social and economic conditions presently prevailing, that we have to struggle to realize religious values.” (Ibid. pp.8-10).

For Cupitt the religious requirement or our highest spirituality is not some withdrawal into self or the development of the self. It is rather the very opposite. It is about transcending self, or what religion calls salvation. Faith in the religious requirement or religious values leads to personal change, to self-transcendence or salvation. And this is not primarily for the sake of the individual, but for the sake of the world and the cosmos. The religious individual (true to the Jesus tradition) is inevitably counter cultural and “inwardly alienated, for he lives by another value scale. He is a critic and protester. ...” (Ibid. p.11).

So, Cupitt says, we “ have taken leave of the God of metaphysical theism. (But) I continue to speak of God and to pray to God. God is the mythical embodiment of all that one is concerned with in the spiritual life. He is the religious demand and ideal He is needed, but as a myth. We need myth because we are persons. ... Myth is the best, clearest and most effective way of communicating religious truth”. (*Taking Leave of God*. p. 166)

Cupitt prefers to keep the God concept for its continuity with humanity's long spiritual or religious journey, updating its understanding in terms of our modern knowledge and concepts.. He contrasts this position with what he sees as other less adequate modern attempts to restate theology. These include restatements in human-centred terms, and the position taken by secularisers who want to discard religious categories and terms altogether, as I seek to make a case for doing. He also asserts that responding to the religious requirement is prior to and

essential to morality. Again this is in contrast to others who reject the connection between religion and ethics, as we have seen.

This differentiation of his position from those whom he suggests want to move to a 'man-centred' theology is, it seems to me, to play with words and to make a false distinction. Cupitt claims to be putting "God", i.e the religious requirement, at the centre, rather than 'man'. But on his own definition the religious requirement is 'man' using language to formulate his highest values; it is "the inner imperative that urges us to fulfil our highest possible destiny as spiritual self-conscious beings. (Ibid. p.95.) Surely this is a 'man-centred' theology. If it is not putting 'man' at the centre, it is putting 'his' highest values and 'his' spiritual destiny at the centre.

Indeed, he sees all religions as being concerned with the religious requirement, that is autonomous spirituality, but that the best set of religious *values* is the Christian set. He suggests, however, that Buddhism is our best religious *model*, in so far as it puts spirituality above theology by exalting the Dharma (the Way) above the gods.

Cupitt's other writings focus around ethical issues and what he calls a more 'art-centred' way of expressing what it means to be religious. These writings should be of considerable interest to students of religion and to academics, but like many other contemporary writers who have sought to redefine the God concept or replace it, Cupitt's attempts to build or suggest a new way of being religious I find unconvincing and I believe not much help for the non-academic or non-artistic.

The principal difficulty I find with Cupitt is his extensive use of the terms 'religion' 'spiritual' and 'spirituality', in ways that contradict normal usage. Common usage often refers to Buddhism as a religion, but a concept of God or gods is peripheral to Buddhism, which is primarily a "Way" of living. Whereas religions, commonly understood, are seen to be about our relation to God or gods, and the way of life that seeks to express that relationship. As my earlier chapters propose, in a secular age it is best to find new ways of talking about ideas and experiences that have been traditionally about religion and about God.

Unlike most other contemporary writers on the God concept, Cupitt's work has been seen as so liberating that it has resulted in the formation of a significant group of followers who form groups in many parts of the world, often by establishing an organization called "The Sea of Faith" which people can join, whether they meet in face to face discussion groups, or receive regular newsletters and invitations to seminars hosting key speakers on these issues, including regular visits from Cupitt himself. "Sea of Faith in Australia" for example, states its purpose as follows: "S O F I A is a net work of groups and individuals interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of religion as a resource for enhancing meaning and purpose in life. Sea of Faith is not a church; it is a forum for discussing ideas and possibilities."

In "Taking Leave of God" Cupitt gives little help as to the practice of the Christian or religious life and the role of the Christian community, except to indicate that prayer and worship can be practised and understood in terms of his redefinition.

His use of the words religion and the religious requirement are no doubt defensible, but he must surely be speaking of the intent and the highest content of religions rather than the expressions and practices of religions down the centuries. The practice and official intent of religions has surely been the very thing of which he wants to take leave. It is highly doubtful therefore that

his proposal to spiritualise it and discard its tendency to objectify the spiritual requirement will be successful.

For my part, religion is too intimately associated with the supernatural or other-worldly to permit redefinition, as is worship and the God-concept too associated with a submissive and dependent relationship with a personal objective reality. The way forward is to make Cupitt's transition, but then to discard both the God concept and the religious language and practice that is so intimately and inevitably bound up with it.

Cupitt's critics, as is the case with the other reformers, as usual fail to deal with the substance of his argument, dismissing him for his lack of orthodoxy, and presenting instead a counter argument. A good example is Keith Ward in "Holding Fast to God". Ward not only misrepresents Cupitt's claims, but seeks to make the traditional case for theism as "a compelling and attractive philosophy." (p.2). He attempts a definition of an objective metaphysical God, and in the process proves Cupitt's point that the abstruse language and thought forms of metaphysical philosophy are all about ideas and constructs that have no meaningful referents in our contemporary world.

LLOYD GEERING

Geering is one of the few significant Christian scholars whose re-thinking of theology leads him to discard the God concept. Very few have had the courage to go this far. Most choose to retain the concept and indeed the word, while reinterpreting it as Love or Ground of Being or the sacred or the transcendent or whatever. Keeping belief in God has been for most an honest choice in order to retain what they believe is the core of Christian faith, and an essential continuity with Christian tradition. It has also allowed them to remain within the life of the church, even if under some suspicion from the orthodox. But, as I have said elsewhere, the justification for this position is in the end inconsistent with their theses, and is generally just asserted without the rigorous argument they have applied to the rest of their theological reconstruction.

Geering, as one might expect, suffered the fate of a heresy trial, on the usual grounds of failing the test of orthodoxy. Such a charge always relieves the church and one's accusers of any obligation to deal with the arguments and to take them seriously as in fact an expression of the deep faith and commitment of one who up till then was accepted as a dedicated leader of the church and a man of academic ability and integrity.

I have known of Lloyd Geering for many years as a pioneering and controversial New Zealand theologian, and have heard him speak a number of times on radio, but had never read anything he had written until recently. After I had completed the first draft of this book his latest book, "Christianity without God" was published. His title not only suggested what I myself was trying to say, but emphasises the point that he does not want to discard the heart of Christianity, but to rediscover its truth without reliance on mythological concepts from another age. The assumption is always so readily made that if you don't believe in God (at least in a realist way) you can be dismissed as an atheist, and assumed to be discarding Christian faith itself.

Geering says very much what I have tried to say, though from a more scholarly background, and with his own particular emphases. The question he raises is best framed, so he says, as "Can Christianity exist without theism?" He sets out to show that it really does not depend, even

originally, on theism, and in its doctrine of the Incarnation was already moving away from pure theism.

Geering's book is an excellent treatment of the issue, and should be read by anyone interested in our theme. For me, its only lack is that which is characteristic of most of the authors I have dealt with, namely the need to spell out some adequate alternative way that speaks with power to our contemporary world. But perhaps that is unfair. Not everyone who sets out to deconstruct Christian theology intends a thesis on its contemporary replacement, if any.

JOHN SHELBY SPONG & MARCUS BORG.

Lying behind the major thesis of my book are two fundamentals. The first is to take seriously the secular nature of the world in which we live, and how profoundly different this is from the religious world which in one form or another preceded it. This religious world includes the era of Christendom, in which Christianity and the state were co-terminus in the West, and also in those parts of the world where the Eastern Orthodox Church flourished, and in many places where Christian missionaries had converted whole populations (via the Chief or ruler) .

The second fundamental that has forced a re-examination of the God concept and of Christian faith is our new understanding of the Bible that has flowed from contemporary Biblical scholarship.

It is as superb interpreters of this second phenomenon that I want to draw attention to the writings of Spong and Borg. The best Biblical and theological scholarship over the years has by and large remained unknown to the average lay person. That is because it is written by academics for academics, or for those undertaking academic study, especially those preparing for ordination. Unfortunately, these academics, and these students upon becoming parish ministers, rarely, if ever, share this new knowledge with their parishioners, either in their preaching or even in their teaching, assuming that such formal education for adults ever takes place in the church, which sadly it seldom does.

John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg stand alone in their ability to share the best contemporary Biblical scholarship in terms that lay persons can understand. I would encourage all readers of this book who have not already done so to read these two authors.

Borg is an academic Biblical scholar teaching in a state university to secular students. At the same time he is a deeply committed Christian involved in the life of the church. He was brought up in the Lutheran Church where he encountered a conservative and even a somewhat fundamentalist version of the Christian faith and of understanding of the Bible which in time he was to reject in the light of the new insights he was later to encounter. Read his books : "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time", "The God We Never Knew", and "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time". These are outstanding popular introductions to the Bible (both Old and New Testaments), to contemporary Jesus study (Borg is a member of the Jesus Seminar), and to a non-theistic God concept. I should perhaps point out, however, that I do not agree with Borg's conclusions about God, nor the heart of his latest book "The Heart of Christianity", though much in that book clearly affirms the key findings of contemporary study.

Spong too is an outstanding scholar though he has not served in academic positions. His whole professional life has been spent as pastor and priest in the Episcopal Church in the USA, and for

the last nearly thirty years as a bishop in that church. He came from a rigid fundamentalist background, but in training for the ministry encountered scholarship which enabled him to gain new, exciting and liberating insights into his faith. He determined thereafter to keep abreast of contemporary Biblical and theological scholarship, and not only to teach it to his people, but to make it widely available through publication.

In addition, this liberating scholarship and its new insights into the Christian Gospel encouraged him throughout his ministry to lead successful movements for reform in the Episcopal church, over against the narrow judgmental views of his fundamentalist youth, which he was to continue to encounter in many clergy and in the councils of his church. These included issues such as homosexuality, women in the church, and racial discrimination. His books are brilliant expositions of the Bible on these themes as well as presenting the best contemporary Biblical and theological scholarship, and its implications for our understanding of God, and the future shape of the church.

It is unlikely that men of the intelligence of Spong and Borg would be in the church today had they not encountered Christian scholarship that spoke to their minds as well as their hearts. Read everything Spong has written, especially "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism", "Liberating the Gospels", "Why Christianity Must Change or Die ?", and "A New Christianity for a New World". If you are interested in the fascinating life story that lies behind these books, and an insight into why the church is probably a lost cause, read his autobiography, "Here I Stand".

Once again, I point out however, that I do not share Spong's conclusions about God, in which I believe he stops short of the implications of his own best scholarship and insights.

Spong acknowledges his debt to Bishop John Robinson of "Honest to God" fame, and confesses that his "unfinished work" did not become obvious to him until he had written "Why Christianity Must Change or Die ?". Up until this point in his writing Spong had not seriously confronted the God question, and I remember wondering whether he would finally face this inevitable outcome of his other scholarly research. He has now faced this fundamental question, and what flows from it, but, as I have said elsewhere in this book, his re-interpretations remain unsatisfactory for me.

To give a taste of his valuable work, in the following appendix I give a summary of his "A New Christianity for a New World", with a few comments as well.

Appendix 4

A New Christianity - John Shelby Spong

As I have said elsewhere in this book, we all stand very greatly in debt to John Spong. In the course of his many books he has made available and intelligible to lay people the best biblical scholarship and theology that would otherwise remain confined to academic circles. In addition he has tackled head on many of the great ethical issues of our day. But not until writing this book we are about to summarize and reflect on did he confront the central issue of what we mean by the God concept, and its relevance in a secular scientific world.

All of Spong's books should be read, but his ideas reach a kind of completion in "**A New Christianity for a New World**", one of his most recent publications. (2001) Spong acknowledges his debt to Bishop John Robinson of "Honest to God" fame, and also refers to his own "unfinished work", especially the need to confront the question of God. He confirms my own remarks elsewhere that Robinson's message was left unanswered, while the critics simply attacked him in the name of something called "the faith once for all delivered to the saints". (Jude 13). Spong refers to his own similar experience with the critics, indicating that 90% of the positive letters he receives come from lay people, and 90% of the negative from clergy.

We have then in this book Spong's comments on basic Christian theology or dogma, with particular attention to the God concept, as well as a very useful summary of contemporary scholarly understanding of New Testament interpretation. Spong lists a host of commonly held Christian beliefs as things he no longer believes, and asks whether in the light of this he can still be a Christian. In answer he says that he seeks "the God-experience which ... lies underneath the Biblical and theological explanations ..." (p.8).

Drawing on Tillich and Freud, Spong believes theism is the human response to the trauma of self-consciousness, - personalizing the frightening powers that surround primitive people, and seeking whatever beneficence might be available from them. Now, with the death of theism, as science answers most of the mysteries of life, we can relate instead to "that in which our being is grounded, that which is more than who we are and yet part of who we are? A transcendence that enters our life but also calls us beyond the limits of our humanity, not towards an external being but toward the Ground of all Being ..." (p. 54). That sentence, while a valiant attempt to translate the God idea, is most un-Spongian. That is to say, such language seems to me to depart from the realm of discourse that speaks to me, to secular men and women, and I suspect to most lay people.

Spong asks the following questions:

“Can I experience God without being able to define God ? Is there anything to the sense of transcendence; is there an experience of otherness ... ? Is there a spiritual realm ...? Is there a reality that we agree to call by the word God ... whose effects I can see ?” (p.64).

He answers thus :

“The theistic God of yesterday is a symbol for the essence, the being of life in which we share. God is life, we say, and we worship this God by living fully. God is love, we say, and we worship this God by loving wastefully. God is Being, we say, and we worship this God by having the courage to be all that we can be.” (p. 73).

This of course is a strong echo of Paul Tillich, and like Tillich, is not the language of you and me. It is not at all clear what Spong means by “Being”, nor how this concept in essence differs from “Life”, and what is the difference between “living fully” and “being all we can be” .

What does it add to life, love and being to attach the God concept to them ?

“Living fully, loving wastefully, and being all we can be”, is a wonderful mantra or goal for living, but attach it to a concept that has passed its use-by date and we are no further forward.

Spong then asks whether it is possible to tell the “Christ story” if we no longer accept a theistic concept of God (or, I would ask, if we dispose of the God concept and the word God itself).

He remarks that the orthodox picture of Jesus as God incarnate, or in Trinitarian formulation as part of the God-head, is an assertion that Jesus is “the theistic God in human form.” (p. 81).

He wants to differentiate himself for example from Robert Funk of Jesus Seminar fame, who wishes to demote Jesus, that is to remove from our understanding of him any divine claim or connection. Spong, on the other hand, wants to suggest that his new definition of God is perfectly expressed in the man Jesus; and that the concepts of ‘human’ and ‘divine’ do not speak of separate or different entities. He seeks a view of Christ that “preserves divinity but not supernatural theism, ... a human being who ... makes visible the Ground of all Being.” (p. 85). I’m not sure that I know what is meant by preserving divinity, or if I did, whether it serves any useful purpose. Why not say that in Jesus we see a living example of life and love being lived to its fullest ?

Spong then proceeds to summarize very effectively and usefully contemporary New Testament scholarship which shows that the orthodox Christian understanding of Jesus cannot be found in the earliest records, and how one can trace its slow emergence in the later New Testament accounts. (This is the widely acknowledged agreement among New Testament scholars including the Jesus Seminar.) I set out here Spong’s summary.

What are the earliest accounts ?

First, the ‘Q’ document. Matthew and Luke drew on existing sources to write their Gospels. ‘Q’ is the common material used by both Matthew and Luke that is not found in their other major source, the Gospel of Mark. Most scholars believe this represents earlier written material that is now lost. It is a collection of Sayings or Teaching.

Second, is the Gospel of Thomas which is also believed to pre-date the New Testament documents, and is an early collection of Jesus’ sayings.

Neither of these earliest sources have any miracle stories, or stories of a supernatural birth, or crucifixion, resurrection or ascension. Neither are there any parables. Rather, Jesus is presented as a teacher of wisdom, with hints of a telling humour. There is nothing to suggest he is seen as divine or of supernatural origin.

Next comes Paul. Paul's writings are the earliest documents in the New Testament, around 50 – 64 CE (compare Mark, 65-75 CE). So Paul wrote before any canonical Gospel had been written. Like Q and Thomas, Paul makes no reference to Jesus performing miracles, nor to a miraculous birth for Jesus. There is no suggestion from Paul that he understands Jesus' "resurrection" to be a physical event. He records none of the resurrection stories which are to appear later in the Gospel writers. For him, resurrection and ascension are two ways of describing the same reality, that is that God "designated Jesus to be the Son of God" and raised him into his eternal presence as a recognition of his godly life and (sacrificial) death. (Note 'Son of God' did not mean fathered by God, or the 'incarnation' of God, but a specially godly man). Paul lists what he describes as resurrection appearances to the disciples and finally to himself, clearly indicating them to be spiritual experiences or encounters with the spirit of Christ empowering their lives and his. There is no reference to an empty tomb or experiences of meeting the living Christ in the flesh.

So, for Paul, to meet or encounter the Spirit of Jesus, or the Living Christ, was indeed a God experience, since the Spirit of God was present in the man Jesus (just as he was and can be in others). But that is very different from asserting that Jesus is God or that he is God Incarnate, statements that orthodox Jews like Paul simply could not make.

After Paul comes Mark, the first canonical Gospel. (around 70 CE).

Mark talks of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God". Spong asks, what is being said here? "The Christ" is a Jewish title in its Greek form, meaning the Messiah. This means a special person anointed or set apart by God for a special divine mission. It can never mean 'God Incarnate'.

"Son of God" is another Jewish title meaning a good man, a man worthy of God's special blessing.

In Mark, God's spirit is poured out on the man Jesus so as to identify and mark him as a person in whom God's spirit is present, not as an incarnate deity.

Mark also knows nothing of a miraculous birth story or virgin birth; and he presents Mary in a negative light and as lacking understanding of Jesus' mission, perhaps seeing him as deranged, mentally unbalanced. Again, the raised, resurrected Jesus doesn't appear in Mark. His story ends with the women fleeing in fear, as they might well do.

Spong makes a fascinating case for Mark's Gospel being written primarily as liturgical (worship) material for the new reforming Jesus sect within Judaism. Designed deliberately for synagogue worship, it was to tell the Jesus story so that it could be read at Sabbath services alongside the Torah for those congregations of early "Christians" who at first remained within Judaism.

Then come the later elaborations on these earliest sources of the Jesus story to address the emerging problems and challenges of the Jesus movement as it was forced out of Judaism and into encounter with the Gentile / pagan world.

Matthew is written about the mid 80's. If the liturgical theory of Mark's Gospel holds, it seems to be supported by Matthew. Mark provides lectionary readings for only part of the Jewish liturgical year, from Rosh Hashanah to Passover. Matthew expands Mark's account to cover the whole Jewish calendar with "Christian" readings.

He is also the first to tell a story of Jesus' miraculous birth. The women at the tomb also meet a physically resurrected Jesus; they grasp his feet. Matthew however seems nevertheless to understand the resurrection like Paul, with Jesus being raised by God into his heavenly presence.

Luke (and Acts) are written by the same author between 88 and 95 CE.

Luke also gives an account of the virginal conception of Jesus. In writing for his Gentile audience he presents Jesus as a divine figure in human clothing. This was familiar territory for Gentile / pagan religions, and if Jesus was to compete in this environment, Luke had to give him divine status. Caesar and Alexander the Great, among others, were credited with divine origin, so what could not be said to Jews (for religious, not for truth, reasons) was a perfectly normal way of speaking of him to pagans.

Luke's resurrection account expands greatly on his physical presence among his disciples and others. (He eats and is touched). This too rings true in the pagan context. Luke therefore separates the ascension event from the resurrection to account for the time needed for Jesus' appearances. As a visiting deity he is shown to have miraculous powers, so he is presented as performing miracles at will. Here we have the supernatural invading this world and overriding its natural laws. Luke also follows Mark and Matthew in providing a lectionary for the liturgical year.

John is the last Gospel in the New Testament, written around 95-100 CE.

For the virgin birth story John substitutes a grander vision, as the Christian Gospel confronts the sophisticated world of Greek philosophy. For John, Jesus becomes the pre-existing word of God (or Logos). God's active Word, by which he achieves his purposes, was with God from the beginning, and now took on our flesh in Jesus to fulfil his saving work for mankind. Again, this visiting deity can and does perform magical acts; and claims God's Biblical title "I am".

He is also the Passover lamb of the Jewish liturgical celebration. So we are to "feed on him"; "to eat his flesh and drink his blood". And as the Yom Kipper lamb he "takes away the sin of the world".

So, with each step in the development of the story, Jesus' humanity diminishes in favour of elevating him to the Godhead. Spong asks: "How could a human being have the Holy Spirit as his father and still be fully human? How could the pre-existent Logos be enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth and still be fully human?" (p. 111). The Nazarene teacher becomes Son of God, then God Incarnate, and finally the second person of the Trinitarian God (three 'persons' in one God).

Spong finishes this analysis by pointing out that in time Jesus' mother Mary also had to be declared as immaculately conceived when the world later discovered that women were not just the birthing repository for a male generated child, but also passed on their genetic inheritance to their offspring, hence passing on inevitably the sin of Adam. So to safeguard the doctrine of Jesus' sinlessness, his mother must also be without contaminated human parentage.

As other scholars tell us, this developing theology arose particularly in response to the challenges faced by the young church as it was expelled from Judaism and confronted the vibrant religious marketplace of the Gentile world, and especially the intellectual challenge of Greek philosophy.

In his chapter "Changing the Basic Christian Myth" Spong shows effectively how doctrines such as Incarnation (and Virgin Birth), Ascension, Atonement and Original Sin, are not only seriously flawed, but were devised "to address a human condition ("fallen sinners") that is simply not true". (p. 124-5). And in "Jesus Beyond Incarnation" he fleshes out the New Testament picture of Jesus in contrast to how many of us in the church behave.

Jesus is one who breaks down all barriers that separate people – racial, tribal, religious, sexual, gender, prejudice, and so on. Love is at the heart of his life, as is freedom from all that limits

(especially self and fear). And Spong adds his concept of Jesus' "being". As I have said earlier, Spong's discussion of this concept of being is unsatisfactory, as it must be. For modern secular people philosophical concepts and discourse no longer speak to us. In addition, Spong wants to differentiate between how we see and experience the fullness of life and love and being in Jesus, and the "source" of those qualities (namely what he calls the "ultimate source" of love, life and being – the "Ground" of all these.) (pp. 144-5). This, I believe, is a false distinction in an attempt to safeguard a place for God in our thinking and living, indeed worshipping; especially as it seems he has pre-committed himself to the Tillichian definition of "Ground of Being". This distinction also smacks of Platonic dualism, of the real which is only ever a pale copy of the ideal, a dualism which Spong elsewhere dismisses.

This concern to keep a place in life for God, however differently defined, leads also to another illogicality. Spong is anxious to identify the source of "good" in some "divine" Ground of our being, while accepting that the source of its opposite (evil) is to be found in evolutionary biology and chance selection. Spong is properly greatly concerned, as I am, not to be falsely accused of failing to take evil seriously, as this was the way the 19th century liberal theologians were so easily dismissed. He treats this subject at some length, and concludes appropriately that our evolutionary history with its genetic drive to survival and self-centredness lies behind much that expresses itself as evil. Further, he refers to other genetic and chemical imbalances that lead to aberrant and hurtful behaviour. It seems to me, however, that he does not give sufficient attention to cultural and social factors, that is, environmental as well as genetic influences, though he briefly suggests that the former are to be traced back to the latter. While that is true, we need also to take serious account of psychology's conclusions that deprivation of love in early childhood, and in later life, as well as the lack of a caring community, are at the heart of much evil in the world.

The illogicality to which I refer is not his analysis of the origin of evil, but his need to treat his analysis of the origin of good differently. "Good" apparently can only be explained by some external authority or value source, namely the Source of life, love, and being (with "Source" capitalized), or "Being" itself (again capitalized). Clearly he wants and needs to hang on to the God concept, though in a philosophical rather than a personal objective form. He goes on then to ask what will rescue us from sin and evil, if we reject the traditional "atonement" doctrine. Here he turns to a Jungian concept of symbolically taking evil into the God concept, so that it can be embraced and transformed as part of our quest for wholeness. (p. 166). He acknowledges that this is a very difficult and startling concept, and so it is. Perhaps it is the germ of an idea that merits further study and explication, but for the present it is not for the "man or woman in the street".

Spong, however, does strike oil in his conviction that the Christian community (that is the community of accepting love) can and should be the place of rescue, of healing, of transformation, of redemption in people's lives, because it is called to be the community of Christ, the community of accepting good-will, that can empower us to be whole, and sustain and support us in living fully, loving wastefully, and being the best that we can be. But, may I add, the church needs to see its mission, not only to be the community of love, but to work in all the places of the secular world to help establish the role of accepting love in all life's relationships, especially in the nurturing roles in families and in society, such that we grow mature people who will express it and live it in work, and politics, and international affairs, and wherever life takes us.

Spong comments then on the church's central practices of prayer and liturgy. These, he says, are the key security blankets for those who believe in the theistic God. So if theism goes, we have to think of prayer and worship in new ways. For prayer, he suggests contemplation and meditation, and indeed the very way we live our lives. In worship we approach God as if he were an ancient king or emperor. We praise and flatter, entreat and beg him (to do our will). Spong spells out some new understandings of the liturgical or celebratory events of the church's life, in which at least we will continue to re-tell and re-hearse our great stories from the past, especially the Jesus story, and avoid the impression that our symbolic statements and truths are to be taken literally .

Finally, in speaking of ethics he also acknowledges that the traditional theistic basis for Christian ethics or any ethics can no longer stand. Ethics cannot be founded upon some external authority, and the departure of the theistic God brings ethics back to earth. I am encouraged to find Spong using the concepts that are referred to in my chapter on ethics, namely the distinction between actions and activities that are either 'life-enhancing' or 'life-diminishing'. He and I agree that Christianity is about what Jesus called "the Kingdom", that is, according to Jesus, about doing the good, about living as loving; about doing not believing.

Appendix 5

God in Process Thought

Process thought is a contemporary form of philosophy that has been taken up by some theologians as a basis for an understanding of life, and therefore, of ourselves and of God. Of all modern attempts to rethink and redefine God, it is perhaps the most attractive because its understanding of life is akin to, or based on, a contemporary scientific explanation of the world, as is expressed in quantum mechanics, biology and ecology. In particular, its primary emphasis is ecological. Process thought affirms that process rather than concreteness is fundamental to life, existence, being. To be actual, to exist, is to be a process. For example, a human person is not some unchanging mass or structure that is a discreet entity that may or may not decide to relate to other entities. Persons are a large collection of processes in constant interaction and relationships, and at the same time that total entity is in a process of relationships with all around it, and with the biosphere and beyond. The basic building blocks of the universe are no longer thought of as particles, atoms, or protons, but as energy in process, or what could be described as events.

“Since the world as we experience it is a place of process, of change, of becoming, of growth and decay, the contrary notion that what is actual or fully real is beyond change leads to a devaluation of life in the world”. (p.14 Cobb & Griffin. 1977)

Process thought characterizes human experience as a high level example of reality in general. And “all individual entities such as protons and atoms resemble human experience in the sense of taking account of their environment...All have subjectivity and responsiveness. Their response is purposive, even if unconsciously so. This is their self-determination”. (Birch, “On Purpose”. 1990 p.xii).

Most people today still see the world and its objects in terms of Newtonian mechanics, if not something more primitive, namely, “totally determined physical bits and pieces that are non-purposive” (Birch.1990 p.ix), while at the same time seeing ourselves as conscious, rational, free and purposive.

But particle physics and biology tell us that objects, or what process thought calls “individual entities”, are bundles of particles or energy, in a fluid or moving state, with both internal and external relations, otherwise described as “actual occasions” or “occasions of experience”. To quote Birch again, “an electron is a succession of actual occasions, and so is the flow of experience that can be identified as a human person”. (Birch.1990 p.xii).

So, it is asserted (rather than argued), God’s relation to the world is of the same kind; God is internally related to the world and the world is internally related to God. i.e. God interpenetrates all of life as the life force that calls us into life and fuller life, rather than being seen as the external creator of the world.

Accepting for a moment this view of the world and of God, this “post-modern ecological worldview” leads Birch to the concept of purpose or purposiveness as the central concept of his understanding of life. (Cobb 1988 in Birch 1990).

He finds “purpose pervasive throughout the individual entities of the universe”, and asks therefore, what permanent value does the whole evolutionary process have in the light of “the inevitable eventual demise of.....the universe”.

He says that the choice is between the creation having no permanent value and a belief in “a cosmic life, a divine life, able to appropriate and retain as experiences in its life our lesser lives, and that of other individuals of creation”. (Birch 1990. p.xvii).

He says he is impelled to argue this because for him materialism (which he fails to explain or define) cannot explain experiences he has had, does not account for the findings of modern physics, and of biology, which suggests that “the urge to live is as basic to life as are DNA molecules”. (Birch. 1990. p.xv)

The leading process philosopher of our age is Alfred North Whitehead. His thought “gives primacy to interdependence as an ideal over independence”, (Cobb & Griffin. 1977. p.21) not as some ideal state but as a description of reality as science reveals it to us. Further, there is a force or purpose or purposive process at work, interpenetrating all of life, to which all life processes (entities) are related, drawing us and all things to fulfilment and our full potential. “We all know, at the pre-reflective level (i.e. instinctively) that there is a sacred reality, whose existence is supremely valuable, and that our lives finally have meaning because of our relation to this holy reality.Further, we all feel an impulse to be the best we can in each moment, and to contribute the most we can to the future”. (Cobb & Griffin. 1977. p.32).

For process thought, the best description of this divine reality is the word “love”, but understood as both creative (active good will), and responsive (a sympathetic, compassionate response to the needs and feelings of others). Process thinkers criticize the traditional Christian understanding of love (expressed as ‘agape’) as being solely creative, and lacking the compassionate responsive dimension. This seems to me to be some kind of hair splitting to make a point. It is to misunderstand creative love, or unmerited goodwill, compassion; to fail to see that it is implicitly responsive to the object of that love; it is reaching out because it is affected by what is happening to the ones loved.

So, process theology rejects five common connotations of the word God: God as Cosmic Moralizer, God as the Unchanging and Passionless Absolute, God as Controlling Power, God as Sanctioner of the Status Quo, and God as Male. God is neither all powerful nor unchanging.

So, what, if anything, are the problems with such a philosophy or theology?

It appears obvious, in reading process philosophers and theologians, that the principal exponents (e.g. Whitehead, Harshorne, Cobb, and also some of their disciples like Birch) start from a ‘God stance’, i.e. a pre-existing belief in God, or desire to retain the God concept. This is reinforced by statements like: “We all know ... that there is a sacred reality ... we all feel..” (see above). This reality or God is the ground of order. We “all immediately apprehend a common reality in every moment of our experience”. (Cobb & Griffin. 1977. p.30-31.) even if this does not emerge into our conscious awareness. There is, however, no explication of this assertion about what we are all supposed to do.

Their philosophies or theologies are attempts therefore to find a new way to talk about God, or understand God, and to do this by using categories derived from contemporary understandings of life and the universe.

Traditional understandings of God have been similarly expressed in terms of traditional understandings of life current at the time. E.g. the Biblical understanding of God is expressed anthropomorphically, and in terms of the cosmology of that time – a three-storied universe. The classical view of God is expressed in theistic terms derived from a view of the world based on Newton's mechanics of the 17th century. Process thought is based on a contemporary understanding of life derived from biology and physics, and its images are therefore “organic and ecological”, according to Birch.

So process thought begins with the assumption of the reality of God, rather than deriving the concept or necessity of God from our greater understanding of the world, or logically arguing the case for God from the world view that science provides.

Such a stance is useful if the intention is to provide a sounder basis for those who want to hang on to the God concept, but it does nothing for those for whom the God concept has ceased to have meaning, or has died for other reasons than the supersession of Newtonian mechanics by quantum mechanics and ecology.

Secondly, process thought proceeds by transposing scientific concepts and realities into ordinary everyday language, and into philosophical terminology, without explanation or justification. E.g. all entities (even protons and atoms) “take account of their environment”, and their response is “purposive”, even if unconsciously so. This is... “self-determination”. They have “internal relations”. All “individual entities” are bundles of particles or energy. The life force or the urge to live, is finally transposed into an incarnational Love force that beckons and calls all of life to become fulfilled, to maximize its potential. This Love force is then identified as God, “conceived as process”. “God is to the world as self is to the body”. Birch asks the question: “What in particular do individual entities respond to? The answer is – the possibilities for their being, including their future”. “The potentiality of the universe is conceived as cosmic mind”. (Birch. 1990 p.90-91). To speak in these ways seems to me to be making a mockery of language.

Paul Davies, in “The Mind of God”, comments “ “Process theologians reject the traditional Christian concept of creation out of nothing in favour of a universe that had no beginning. God's creative activity manifests itself instead as an ongoing process. But the steady state theory of continuous creation on which this is based has been disproven by astronomical observations of space and the discovery of the presence in space of low level heat radiation which is best explained as the fading glow of the primeval heat that accompanied the birth of the cosmos in the big bang. ... Nearly all cosmologists now accept that we live in a universe that had a definite beginning in a big bang, and is developing towards an uncertain end.” (The Mind of God”. pp. 56-7).

As well as making a mockery of language, what is more, in its rush to make links between science and religion, process thought makes unsupported assertions, rather than arguing a case. For example, a plant, genetically programmed by evolutionary processes to grow and reproduce itself, and respond to its environment, or seek nutrients from its environment, is best described thus, rather than attributing to it assertions that it “takes account of its environment” and is engaged in an act of “self-determination”. And how come the life force in living matter becomes a love force or cosmic mind or God?

Certainly, the discoveries of science have revealed that matter is energy, that all matter and/or energy is interconnected and interdependent, and whatever else quantum mechanics may reveal. But from the point of view of the layperson, all my lifetime I have understood that living entities

are continually responding to their environment. For some entities some of that response involves choice or purpose, but for many, perhaps most, there is little choice about it. Whether it is a proton, amoeba, tree, rat, or a human, there is very little activity that could be described as purposive in the normal use of that term, except in terms of what we have always understood as the sheer drive to live, and in some cases to enjoy, which expresses itself in most entities or living things essentially and exclusively in the drive for existence, for nourishment, and for reproduction, including the preservation of the species.

These are sheer physical realities. We could perhaps stretch to talking about self-actualization or realization, but “self-determination” suggests something beyond our normal use of language. It does nothing for my understanding of the universe or of myself and my relation to the cosmos to suggest that there is some noble purpose at work here, or that what is calling this forth is the power of Love. The power of love, understood both psychologically and theologically leads to self-forgetfulness in the service of others. What we see happening at all levels of life in the universe, is indeed the opposite. We observe a life force at work which encourages and results in self-centred or species-centred behaviour, and almost invariably at the expense of some other entity or species.

The biosphere in which we live is clearly and unequivocally a giant food chain, quite apart from the indifferent, chaotic, and randomly destructive behaviours of the universe – its immediate threat (meteors), and its ultimately final threat in the death of the planet (solar death). To talk of Love as the driving force, or life force, in this context, is simply to play with words, or at worst to be naive or dishonest.

Love (i.e. disinterested good-will) is, as I point out elsewhere, confined to the only self-conscious entity in existence, the human species. Love is in fact created and called forth by this reflective species, not generated from some life force or Love force. Love is repeatedly and incorrectly presented as a power or an emotion. Love, properly understood, is an act of will. It may or may not be reinforced by strong feelings. It is an intention, and then an action, directed to living in positive, life-enhancing relations with other entities, both human and non-human.

Some Physicists are prepared to declare that quantum mechanics suggests (e.g see Davies) that we can now conceive of mind apart from a brain. I have yet to see a scientific demonstration or a case arguing for this, rather than an assertion based on speculation. Indeed, this is a further example of an inappropriate use of language, of using a word such as mind, to talk about implications of scientific theories about reality that have to do with forces, energies, reactions and interactions.

This leap of imagination by some physicists leads them to postulate or hypothesize about parallel universes – the one we can identify through sense perception (what we usually refer to as the “physical” universe – whether consisting of matter or energy, doesn’t really matter), and another which is “unseen”, the realm of energy, mind, spirit.

As I have said elsewhere, “energy” or “life force” doesn’t translate into “spirit” or “God” or “mind”. “Unseen” is presumably because the “individual entities” of that level of life (protons, etc) are too small to see, and whether conceived as pure energy or whatever, are the building blocks of what we see and recognize as matter, in various identifiable forms. The brain, and every part of the human animal, may be scientifically understood as a fluid collection of interacting protons, but they cannot function in a self-conscious, free-choice (brain) way until operating in a particular assemblage as matter (indeed the human form of matter).

“God is to the world as self is to the body”, says Birch. (p.91). In my understanding, self is the body’s self awareness, and its ability, via the brain “processor”, to process incoming information, sort it, store it, and make decisions on the basis of it. Self is a function of a brain, just as mind is a function of a brain. There are no grounds for using the word in relation to the laws of nature, or the laws of physics, or the drive to live.

The consequences of evolutionary life are not purposive (in any normal use of that word) but random, chance, indifferent, and almost universally cruel. If, in any sense, they can be said to be purposive, this purpose is clearly survival and self-interest, and nothing beyond that. Philosophy, like theology, is a fascinating mind game, but it has little relevance to our living in, and understanding of, the real world. Cupitt argues persuasively that it is no longer a relevant discipline, and I agree. The only branch of philosophy that has some relevance is ethics. Its relevance doesn’t, however, derive from its place in the field of philosophy. Relevant ethics can only be derived from asking the question: “How should we live?” The answer to that question is essentially a practical matter, but subject to the process of reason and deduction. I have sought to show in an earlier chapter how ethics is derived from an ecological understanding of life, rather than a philosophical one. The point of that is that once we understand and accept ecology as the basic scientific description of life, ethics flows automatically from that understanding, if we want to survive; whereas philosophical ethics is a deduction from thought or reason. Philosophical ethics may sometimes be theoretically impelling to intellectuals, but lacks the power to move most people, as it is a theory rather than a description of how life is. Ecology teaches us that ethics is the choice, not just between good and evil, but between life and death. If that is not sufficient motivation, the alternative of our “childish” desire to seek some external authority or force, and call it “God” or whatever, has already proved inadequate to the task.

What is finally inadequate about process thought is that it does not provide a sufficient basis for an ethical understanding of life. It is true it gives primacy to interdependence,,,,,over independence. It is “ontologically given...We cannot escape it ... the perfection of human life involves maximizing our relatedness to others, and hence our dependence upon them”. (Cobb & Griffin. 1977. p.21-22). So, life understood as process, presumably derived from quantum physics, has within it the concept of interdependence essential as a basis for ethics. But such a scientific/philosophical connection is too esoteric for most, as the basis for a practical life ethic.

To move beyond that connection to hypothesize about a life force, or life-giving force (whether we call it God or whatever) interpreted as having theological and ethical implications, is to go beyond the evidence. I have already shown that in fact, the reverse is the case. The life-force is the urge to live, not the urge to live ethically, or responsibly, or altruistically.

Birch goes on in his book “On Purpose” to make a strong case for the ethical approach to life. He makes it in the context of a thesis based on process thought. But he makes no compelling case (nor does process thought) for process thought’s ethical implications. His ethical thesis is indeed based instead on an ecological understanding of life (as one might expect from a biologist), and properly so, and he in fact acknowledges it to be so. While he may believe it has some connection with, or derivation from, process thought, he fails to make the case.

Finally, Birch explains his impulsion to derive some sort of meaningful God concept from life, and in particular via process thought, because he needs to believe that the whole evolutionary process has some “permanent value”, in spite of the eventual demise of the universe. He apparently finds this guarantee of permanent value, and finds the comfort or purposiveness that

he craves, in the “conviction” or understanding at least, “that there is a cosmic life, a divine life, able to appropriate and retain as experiences in its life our lesser lives....Either we and the rest live for what transcends ourselves, or we live without ultimate meaning and ultimate purpose”.

There are two things wrong with that statement in the sense in which Birch intends it to be understood.

Firstly, it is meaningless, except perhaps to a philosopher. Even though he acknowledges that the whole enterprise is doomed to end cataclysmically, a cosmic life will somehow retain our lesser lives. That is not only impossible to translate into anything intelligible to ordinary people, but as a purposive or meaning statement, it simply lacks substance, relevance and meaning. Understood ecologically, however, it does make sense. The cosmos does in fact retain our lesser lives after our death as we become the nutrients that give life to other lives. Secondly, Birch continues to speak, as theologians and philosophers have always done, about “ultimate meaning and purpose”. As one who is constantly referring to our post-modern world, and world view, he seems to overlook the fact that central to post-modernism is the denial of ultimate values, final truths, etc. Our philosophies, theologies, value systems therefore, if they are to speak to post-modern men and women, need to address that reality, not fly in the face of it. Post-modern humans, or certainly contemporary men and women, are simply not asking ultimate questions or whether life has some ultimate meaning or purpose. Theologians in general continue to raise this old question that no one is asking any longer.

However, to deny the relevance or importance of “ultimate” meaning and purpose is not to deny the importance of meaning and purpose. Post-modern people live more effectively, successfully, and indeed ethically, if they have a purpose in their lives, and if they engage in activities and enjoy relationships that give meaning to their lives.

But these do not have to be “ultimate”, either recognized as such, or even in a theoretical sense, unless we mean by "ultimate", consistent with, or in harmony with the cosmos. That is to say, any particular person’s meaning and purpose will give direction and value to his or her life. But whether our lives have value for the cosmos, is a function of the ethical ecological choices we make, rather than a reasoned or scientific understanding of something that can be defined as “ultimate”.

Birch’s statement is right, however, but not in the sense he intends it. “Either we ... live for what transcends ourselves or....”. Of course, we must live for what transcends ourselves. But in our post-modern world that means the greatest good of all (See Birch. p,131), not some new understanding of God, whether that is a concept derived from science or philosophy or whatever. Attempts to base contemporary philosophical or theological systems or belief or meaning systems on current scientific understandings, or knowledge of our universe are, I believe, misplaced. Consider the problems that past attempts have caused us, such as the three-storied universe of the ancients, or the dogmas enshrined in terms of third century Greek philosophy or Newtonian physics. The assertion that we must continue this tradition sounds logical and reasonable, but it has always been a recipe for inappropriate and unhelpful outcomes, and there is no reason to believe that one based on process thought will serve us any better. It is frequently asserted that this is how every age has developed its religious or meaning categories and systems, and so we should do it.

On the contrary, as “men come of age”, that is precisely what we should stop doing. As post-modern men and women we find our meanings in a new knowledge of ourselves, our world and our universe. But because we now understand ourselves and our world more completely, rather than speculate about it, or make myths to explain it, we no longer need belief systems, however

expressed. Rather, we need a new ethic, based on our new knowledge, and we need communities committed to that ethic, i.e. responsible living, not because of any system of belief, new or old, but because of the intrinsic authority that we recognize in an ecological understanding of life on this planet. The new ethic is very simple. It calls on us to live responsibly, in harmony with all of nature, or die.

Appendix 6

Evolutionary Biology

This appendix is not intended as a definitive essay on evolution. I shall draw on the work of two outstanding scholars, widely acknowledged among their scientific colleagues. They are Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist, and Richard Leakey, one of the world's most famous palaeo-anthropologists. Many Christians, of course, know of Dawkins as an atheist opponent of Christianity, and will have been taught to fear him rather than read him. His appointment at Oxford University is for the public communication of science, and apart from his credentials in the field of evolutionary biology, he is an outstanding communicator. Anyone interested in the subject of evolution certainly ought to read him. His latest epic, *The Ancestor's Tale*, is described as one of the richest accounts of evolution ever written. James Grieve of the *Canberra Times* writes : "Amazing and brilliant ... (Dawkins is) the most temperate and invigorating of persuaders, one of the most cultured and humane ... a work of immense erudition ... "

In "The Selfish Gene" Dawkins sets out to describe the origins of life. He says that atoms join together to form larger entities called molecules. By accident, aeons ago, a molecule formed that could replicate itself. Attractions in biology are either by affinity (positive) or the opposite (negative). The genetic molecule (DNA) uses positive – negative replication. Once this "replicator" molecule was formed, a new kind of 'stability' came into the world. Its copies began to spread rapidly, in the process attracting smaller building blocks to themselves. However, the process of replication is not perfect, like much else in evolution. Mistakes occur, and it is these mistakes which make change and improvement possible.

The modern descendents of these early molecules are the DNA molecules, which normally are highly faithful in reproducing themselves. Occasionally they make mistakes, which as we have said make evolution possible. Some of these 'mistakes' or changes gave some molecules greater longevity or fecundity or copying –fidelity. These characteristics gave these 'favoured' molecules competitive advantage. Some developed chemical protective capacities, others carnivore capacities. The survivors also got bigger and more elaborate. The process was cumulative and progressive. And of course many of the others perished in large numbers. These replicator survivors (which we call genes) now swarm in huge colonies inside 'huge' living creatures they have created, which include animals, plants, bacteria and viruses. All these creatures are quite uniform in their fundamental chemistry, and the genes in all of them are basically the same kind of molecule – "from bacteria to elephants".

"The evolutionary importance of the fact that genes control embryonic development (of a body or 'survival machine' they have created) is this : it means that genes are at least partly responsible for their own survival in the future, because their survival (now) depends on the efficiency of the bodies in which they live and which they helped to build. Once upon a time, natural selection consisted of the differential survival of replicators floating free in the primeval soup. Now, natural selection favours replicators which are good at building survival machines. In this, the replicators are no more conscious or purposeful than they ever were. The same old

processes of automatic selection between rival molecules by reason of their longevity, fecundity and copying fidelity, still go on as blindly and as inevitably as they did in far-off days. Genes have no foresight. They do not plan ahead. Genes just are, some genes more so than others, and that is all there is to it. But the qualities which determine a gene's longevity and fecundity are not so simple as they were." (p.25).

If we were to respond that genes and molecules may not be purposeful, but God is, we are thereby insisting that God is a magician, that is, he intervenes in his own evolutionary process to cause accidents or chance outcomes that assist or direct survival outcomes for some genes. Dawkins argues that evolution shows that "selfish" type behaviours (including cheating, lying, deceiving, exploiting) in juvenile animals (basically to get more food, etc.) will tend to be favoured in natural selection, and that natural selection therefore perpetuates these (rather than other) genes. So, genes which tend to make children "cheat" "have an advantage in the gene pool."

As a consequence he draws this conclusion: "If there is a human moral to be drawn, it is that we must teach our children altruism, for we cannot expect it to be part of their biological nature." (p.150).

"Throughout this book" (says Dawkins, in 'The Selfish Gene'), "I have emphasized that we must not think of genes as conscious, purposeful agents. Blind natural selection, however, makes them behave rather as if they were purposeful, and it has been convenient, as a shorthand, to refer to genes in the language of purpose. . . .

We have even used words like 'selfish' and 'ruthless' of genes, knowing full well it is only a figure of speech. . . . what we really mean is 'those genes which behave in such a way as to increase their numbers in future gene pools tend to be the genes whose effects we see in the world. . . .

Selfish genes have no foresight. They are unconscious, blind, replicators." (pp.210,211,215.)

But when we come to talk about the human species, a new factor has entered the equation. Human capacity for self-consciousness, for thought and memory, enables us to develop culture, and to make judgments and decisions, and to take actions not only about our present but about our future. It is culture which distinguishes our species from all other living entities, and especially our capacity for language. And these distinguishing features are dependent on our evolutionary developed brain. And cultural ideas, to survive, says Dawkins, must have the same survival values as genes, that is, longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity.

"It is possible that yet another unique quality of man is a capacity for genuine, disinterested, true altruism. . . . even if we look on the dark side and assume that individual man is fundamentally selfish, our conscious foresight – our capacity to simulate the future in imagination – could save us from the worst selfish excesses of the blind replicators. We have at least the mental equipment to foster our long-term selfish interests rather than merely our short-term selfish interests. . . . We can even discuss ways of deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators." (p.215).

Dawkins' comment on population growth deserves our attention :

"Mankind is having too many children. . . . So long as the average number of children per couple is larger than two surviving to produce (not allowing for say wars, famines and epidemics) the number of babies born will tend to increase . . . at an ever- accelerating rate. . . . For instance, the present population of Latin America is around 300 million (1976), and already many of them are

undernourished. But if the population continued to increase at the present rate, it would take less than 500 years to reach the point where the people, packed in a standing position, formed a solid human carpet over the whole area of the continent. ... In 1000 years from now they would be standing on each other's shoulders more than a million deep. By 2000 years, the mountain of people, travelling outward at the speed of light, would have reached the edge of the known universe. ... It is hard to believe that this simple truth is not understood by those leaders who ... express a preference for 'natural' methods of population limitation, and a natural method is exactly what they are going to get. It is called starvation." (pp. 118-119).

So, a scientific understanding of the process of evolution, spelt out in terms of say how chromosomes and genes are, and are not, passed on from one generation to the next, really puts paid to theology's or religion's attempt to accommodate evolutionary theory. Christian faith originally refused to accept Darwinian theory. With growing scientific consensus on the theory, the church had either to learn to live with it or to lose all credibility. So the solution was formulated in terms of acknowledging the fact of the evolutionary process, but affirming that it made no difference to Christian dogma. Evolution was to be accepted simply as the chosen way that the Creator brought all of life, and especially human life into being. Currently, this 'solution' is reappearing in the guise of what is being called "intelligent design", driven by religious fundamentalism's failure to impose "creation science" upon school curriculums in the more enlightened secular states. This supposed 'solution' sounds rational and credible, but only to those (the majority of our species, and including many theologians), who have an inadequate understanding of the facts and complexities of the processes of evolution.

Dawkins reiterates that the predominant quality of a successful gene is 'ruthless selfishness'. That, he explains, is not a moral judgment, but a factual description. Such a methodology would surely be anathema to a God of love, who, in any case, would not agree that the end justifies the means.

Secondly, the whole process of evolution is not directed towards 'development' or 'maturity, or 'higher forms of life', but simply "survival probability". Development may be an outcome, but it cannot be said to be intentional. Seemingly altruistic behaviour may be an outcome, but neither is it intentional in the genetic process. What is intentional, and only that, is survival; and survival not of the individual or the group or the species, but of the gene.

Thirdly, evolution works by natural selection, and natural selection means the differential survival of the fittest.

Richard Leakey in his book "The Sixth Extinction", describes how 4.6 billion years ago "our planet condensed from the debris of the nascent solar system". It took about 0.6 billion years for the planet to cool down and for the conditions favourable to life to occur, that is for organic molecules to be able to stabilize and for water to persist instead of vaporizing. The geological record shows evidence of simple, single-celled organisms some 3.75 billion years ago. But instead of life continuing to progress on a steady path to more complex forms, this earliest life-form (the prokaryotes - cells without nuclei) persisted unchanged for some 2 billion years. It was not until 1.8 billion years ago that eukaryotic cells (organisms with genetic material packaged in nuclei) appeared. At last we had the potential for rapid development of multicellular organisms. But alas, more than another billion years were to elapse before this occurred. But again, the advent of complex multicellular organisms (modest marine invertebrates) only arrived some 530 million years ago, or after 85% of earth's history had

elapsed. However, when this did happen, in what is called the Cambrian period, there was a spectacular explosion of life of all the major life-forms on the planet today, and of many which have perished. This nevertheless was not a steady or gradual progression, but what Leakey describes as "boom and bust". This period was punctuated by 5 major extinctions (in addition to the normal "background" extinctions, a natural part of evolution) which destroyed huge numbers of life forms, many of which left no descendents.

This emergence of multi-cellular life appears to have been linked to massive changes in the earth's physical environment, especially a major increase in atmospheric oxygen. Such changes, external to the life forms and their "chance" development, also appear to lie behind the mass extinctions. These also include global temperature change, regression of sea levels, and giant asteroid or comet impact. So, in addition to "natural selection", these major external changes are a major force in determining the survival of species.

The huge explosion of life forms with the arrival of the Cambrian period was soon to be decimated to a fraction of them within a few million years. One of those life forms that survived by mere chance was the phylum chordata, the origin of vertebrates, and hence our ancestor. Had it not survived there would be no vertebrates, and no us. To quote Leakey : "A second such explosive production of life forms might fail to produce chordates. And, as we know, if a phylum does not appear in the first creative explosion, it would never do so." (p. 85).

He concludes then that because of mass extinctions the survival of any particular species has "as much to do with good luck as good genes", and that there was nothing inevitable about the existence or survival of Homo sapiens.

If one wants to continue to argue for a divine plan and an intentional and inevitable creative process, one must question the rationality of the supposed creator. Two billion years when practically nothing happened - single cells without nuclei and without the right conditions, going nowhere. Then fecundity after 85% of life on earth has passed. Then 5 massive extinctions, destroying most of what emerged. Then, as the title of Leakey's book indicates, this chance, intelligent, yet basically irrational and self-centred animal called Homo sapiens, himself and herself the sole cause of what is likely to be the 6th major extinction, including that of our own species, unless we quickly change our ways. Resource depletion, destruction of habitat, and global warming leading to climate change, fit exactly with those other great external factors that have brought life to the brink in the past.

Appendix 7

A History of God - Karen Armstrong

Karen Armstrong is widely recognized as an outstanding academic and something of an authority on the question of God. Her best known and groundbreaking books in this field are "A History of God", and "The Battle for God". The latter is an exhaustive study of religious fundamentalism in a number of the great world religions. It ought to be read by anyone interested in the idea of God, and especially how that concept can in fact become a justification for the worst kinds of evil. In the end, it is a powerful argument against the continuing use of a concept that has outlived its usefulness, and is increasingly becoming the catchcry and cover for ignorance, bigotry, hatred and evil, indeed the very opposite of what it enshrined in its highest manifestation. In a secular world where most thoughtful, intelligent people have left religion behind, God has mainly been left to those who are insecure, undereducated, authoritarian, bigoted and some indeed evil.

But, for this appendix I want to outline briefly her principal findings from "A History of God".

Armstrong has a wide grasp of both secular and religious history, and an extremely comprehensive knowledge of the literature of the great world religions. In addition to tracing the development and changing understandings and expressions of God throughout the history of each of the great world religions, she also treats the God of the philosophers and of the mystics, and of the key figures of the European Enlightenment.

What follows is a brief summary of the book's main conclusions.

Early concepts of God arise from human attempts to explain and respond to the mysteries and realities of life as experienced by people in the early stages of human history. These mysteries included the human species' lack of control over nature, the brutish and short nature of life itself, and human longings for some meaning and fulfilment.

Myths and rituals were developed to relate to these mysteries and threats, and these were understood as symbolic or metaphorical expressions of the inexpressible, rather than descriptions of objective realities.

Language and ideas about God have generally taken one of two forms:

- a) anthropomorphic descriptions suggesting a personal God, that God is like us, but outside and beyond us, and of another order of power,
- b) philosophical or mystical descriptions in which God is immanent or within us, but generally of an impersonal nature, the Ground of our being, Being itself, the Life-Force, the Love Force, or the Oneness or Unity beyond all our diversity.

Understandings of God, and how men and women should respond to that reality have been in constant flux over history, and within each religious tradition.

All of the major religious traditions see God as creator or in natural phenomena, and most see God also as concerned for our personal and social behaviour. (Hinduism, on the other hand, saw morality as linked to an impersonal force, karma, the notion that one's destiny is determined by one's own actions.)

The concept of God's omnipotence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is internally contradictory in that, by implication, God is thus responsible for everything, which means evil as well as good, and hence involves a kind of fatalism, removing responsibility from men and women.

With the coming of the Enlightenment in Europe in the 18th century, alongside the scientific revolution, the original determinants of religion begin to lose their force:

- science begins to find answers to the mysteries of the past,
- life is becoming less brutish and short,
- people begin to find meaning and fulfilment in their more comfortable lives, in material goods and pursuits, in the arts and culture, without looking for meaning and hope beyond this life,
- science gives us more control over nature, over the unknown, and the vicissitudes of life,
- atheism becomes an option for the first time in history,
- Christendom and state sponsored religion come to an end in advanced, democratic societies.

Surviving religion, under threat, retreats into fundamentalism of one kind or another. Its form is obscurantist, anti-intellectual, authoritarian, literal and intolerant.

Religion at its best has been characterized by a strong moral demand and the ideal of compassion. Justice, righteousness and love (compassion).

Karen Alexander's last chapter raises the question: "Does God have a future ?" She does not attempt an answer, except for herself. But to answer her question I have written this book.

She says that when she began this study she expected to find that God had "simply been a projection of human needs and desires; and that her predictions were not entirely unjustified," (p.xix).

A nun for seven years, and at the end of that time a graduate from Oxford University in English Language and Literature, she writes of that time :

"Eventually, with regret, I left the religious life, and, once freed of the burden of failure and inadequacy, I felt my belief in God slip quietly away . He had never really impinged upon my life, though I had done my best to enable him to do so." (p. xviii).

SOME DEFINITIONS

If readers are familiar with the following definitions it will help elucidate the ideas discussed in this book..

Modern. This term is used to refer to the historical period beginning with the Renaissance, and especially the Enlightenment, with the rise of science, technology, and the industrial revolution, and the capitalism that flowed from it. It marked the shift from religion and external authority to reason as the basis for truth, and the importance of the individual and of democracy. It believed in progress towards some idealized world and future, and hence was characterized by optimism.

Post-modern. The present age, in which there are no absolutes or final values or truths. Everything is relative, and truth is what is true for me. Belief in progress is replaced by uncertainty and anxiety, or either pessimism about the future or belief in technology to solve all our problems. It is characterized by a “me first” mentality, and a living for today rather than tomorrow. Consumerism becomes the dominant value; information the dominant technology. Our period is largely both a consequence of the modern period and at the same time a reaction to the failure of science and technology to bring utopia and happiness.

Religion. "The quest for the values of the ideal life." But, in practice, and as commonly understood, belief in a controlling superhuman power entitled to obedience and worship, and the practice of sacred rites and observances to that end. The latter definition is its commonly understood meaning, and the sense in which I use the word in this book.

Supernatural. Being above or beyond what is natural; not explicable in terms of natural laws or phenomena.

Sacred, holy, transcendent. These words are sometimes used to refer to the aspects of life that are to do with deity (God), religion, etc; to realities that are to be regarded with reverence. Their use suggests that some aspects of life are therefore more sacred than others; or that there is a special reality above life or within life that demands our worship.

Secular. That which is based and focused on this world, rather than on belief systems which posit, aspire to, and conform to the dictates of another non-worldly, or supernatural, or religious sphere. A secular world is a world set free from religious concepts and religious control; a world based on science knowledge rather than religious authority.

Philosophy. The study of the truths or principles behind all knowledge, based on reason alone. The search for understanding being, existence, truth, reality, ultimate reality.

Metaphysics. The branch of philosophy studying first principles or ultimate reality; concerned with existence, or being. It is about meaning and the realm of ideas beyond the physical. Abstract thought.

Linguistic philosophy / linguistic analysis. The theory that language shapes reality rather than describes it. We constitute our world through language. There is no objective world of meaning or ideas “out there” (Platonism), apart from the meanings we ascribe to things by our creation and use of language. The meaning of a word is to be found by how we use it.

Ethics / morality.

Ethics. The principles of moral behaviour. The study or system of moral principles governing human behaviour, by which we judge actions good or bad, right or wrong.

Morality. The practice of moral behaviour. Right or good behaviour.

Moral. What is right or good.

Christendom. The whole Christian world. The period of history in which (for nearly 2000 years) Christianity and the State were co-terminus, and Christian faith was universally assumed among the populations of so-called Christian countries or states.

Science. The study of humans and their environment, or of natural phenomena, based on observation, experiment, and testing.

Quantum mechanics. The dynamics of atomic and sub-atomic systems based on quantum theory of electromagnetic radiation and wave mechanics; or the energy of sub-atomic systems.

Evolutionary biology. The scientific theory, almost universally accepted by scientists, that living species have developed by “selection” (i.e. survival of those species whose chance development of superior survival characteristics enabled them to outcompete other species.)

Ecology. The branch of biology which deals with the inter-relationship of organisms and their environment.

Fundamentalism. Originally a movement in the early 20th century within American Protestantism which insisted on the literal truth and inerrancy of the Bible, and spelt out the non-negotiable beliefs or doctrines (fundamentals) of the Christian faith. It has subsequently emerged in the late 20th century in other major religions as a reaction and rebellion against modernism, scientific and secular society and culture, driven by a fear of the loss of religion and the values and culture of the past. It is commonly expressed as a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil; a battle to be fought on behalf of God.

Liberal theology. A description given to 19th century Protestant theology. Liberal theology was both a consequence of the new scientific secular or rational spirit of the age, and at the same time a reaction against a Christianity which was both dogmatic and authoritarian. It was characterized by openness to new thought, and sympathy and tolerance to differences as an expression of humility and love.

Its central affirmations were : the centrality and essential humanity of Jesus, (a sharp distinction was made between the gospel of Jesus and the gospel of Paul), the authority of Christian experience (i.e. the essentials of the Gospel were not the dogmas but the religious experiences which lay behind them), and hence an emphasis on the immanence rather than the transcendence of God; the uncompromisingly ethical character of the Gospel (its social and

political ramifications), and the "dignity of man" and the importance of life here and now, over against the hope of life after death.

The 20th century saw a reaction against liberal theology and a return to orthodoxy, and it is still fashionable today to dismiss it in H.R. Niebuhr's terms, which are more a caricature than a description, that liberalism taught that "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." (The Kingdom of God in America. p.185).

Liberalism's over-confidence in the natural goodness of humanity certainly underestimated our species' evolutionary tendency to self-interest, and the potential for and actuality of evil in the world. But that was perhaps inevitable in an age of confidence and belief in progress. As a consequence of world war and the failure of science to make people good (as if religion had once done so), the early part of the 20th century saw the theological pendulum swing back again in what came to be known as neo-orthodoxy, beginning with Karl Barth. Its main themes once again became the sovereignty and transcendence of God, the authority of Scripture, Jesus Christ as the divine Word and revelation of God, "man" as sinner, and salvation through the work (especially the Cross) of Christ. And while social action was necessary as an expression of the Gospel, the Kingdom of God could not be brought in by us, but was rather a future hope in God's hands, while all human structures and programs came under God's judgment.

In the latter half of the 20th century has come the recognition that the world has experienced the end of Christendom (the historic period of the authority of religious values and explanations), along with new historical, textual and archaeological scholarship, especially the study of the historical Jesus and the discovery of the earlier texts and traditions lying behind the New Testament writings. These studies in turn are seriously challenging the dogmas of neo-orthodoxy, and re-emphasizing the liberal insights, especially the humanity of Jesus and the ethical character of Christianity.

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