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Ministry in a Post-Religious Society: Can we do it at All?

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Abstract

This paper considers some of the issues relating to Christian ministry in a cultural world that thinks of itself as post-religious. It builds upon some ideas of Simone Weil on forms of the implicit love of God (with particular attention to beauty and music), Karl Rahner's anthropology and the Christian doctrine of the creational relationship. It discusses the way Rousseau's bifurcation of religion into personal religiosity and a public civil religion is a template that the modern world seems to favour, making it difficult for Christian religion to find a place in liberal cultures of rights and tolerance. It ends by exploring Marilynne Robinson's suggestion that 'people live profound lives' and suggests that the virtues of hope and love might be signs of serious living in the absence of explicit religious belief.

Keywords

Rousseau, Post-religious, Karl Rahner, Simone Weil, implicit love of God

We need to think about two things with regard to Christian ministry towards non-believers in the contemporary world: first of all, the widespread uncertainty and ambivalence about what's really going on within the category of 'religion'. There is no agreed understanding of what religion is and the role it plays within the cultural world that is being formed around us. It is like the appendix in the body: a relic of an earlier stage of human development that fulfils no useful role in the present functioning of the body, but if it goes wrong, its toxins are devastating. Because of its roots in a mythical imagination superseded by modern instrumental rationality, its association with the exercise of repressive social power in European history (*Ecrasez l'infâme* said Voltaire and all those who hate the church), and because it is generally regarded as a source of social division and intolerance, it is widely regarded as a cultural form whose best days have gone, and we are better off embracing a consciously post-religious identity.

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The consensus among the young people whom I have taught in courses dealing with the tension between religious and secular identities is that formal religious practice is being replaced by a personally focused quasi-religiosity that never issues in social expression. Nor does this mutated form of religious identity take seriously the demands of justice and the rights of the poor. The emerging religious self resembles nothing so much as one of Leibnitz's monads.[1] A visiting American student wrote this in one of her essays:

> Perhaps in fifty years, there will be no more God left in the Western world. He may have to retreat to lands that the West deems barbaric and uncivilized until they, too, forget his existence and replace him with something else that we have created. For so long as the West remains dominated by media and artificial emotions and connections, religion has no place here. Instead, society will continue to obsess and worship normal people that it has decided should be extraordinary, regardless of the opinion and health of those individuals. Nietzsche once said that "God is dead and we have killed him", but it may be more accurate to say that God is dead and Queen Bey killed him.

'Queen Bey', of course is Beyoncé, the jewel of the African-American pop world. The divine is occluded; artificiality rules; celebrity worship pervades all forms of social communication and religion is banished to 'uncivilized' lands: a dark vision indeed, but not without its truths. William Cavanaugh makes the point that generally in our Anglophone cultures, 'religion' is indicted for various things, such as fostering violence, intolerance, bigotry, child abuse, delusions, psychological immaturity, regressive and rigid morality, and so on. And for this indictment to work, religion must be contrasted with something else that is less inclined to these things, such as 'a secular outlook' that is commended as better and more humane. 'In order for the indictment of religion to hold,' he says, 'religion must be contrasted with something else that is inherently *less* prone to violence: the secular'.[2] So in our modern context, the word 'religion' is a highly malleable term, generally freighted with negative meanings when compared with its rival, the secular. Religion is generally assumed by its critics to be 'absolutist, assertive, divisive and irrational', while secularity operates with opposite values: democratic, modest, tolerant reasonableness. A 'secularity' always wins out, even if that category in its own way is as problematic as the 'religion' that it is said to replace.[3]

[1] J. A. Cheyne, 'The Rise of the Nones and the Growth of Religious Indifference,' *Skeptic* 15 (4), pp. 56-60.

[2] W. T. Cavanaugh, 'Religious Violence as Modern Myth,' *Political Theology* 15/6 (2014), pp. 486-502; 487.

[3] José Casanova discusses the fluidity of 'the secular' in modern discussion: 'The Secular and Secularisms,' *Social Research* 76 (2009), pp. 1049-66.

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The second factor that requires attention is the difficulty people have in connecting to the metaphors at the heart of the Christian religion: they are either unmoved, repelled by them or disconnected from them as though they are a poetry that once made sense, but no longer does. The axiom 'God is missing but is not missed' encapsulates a whole cultural shift that has taken place in our lifetime. Alasdair MacIntyre remarks on the persistence of religious language after religious practice has gone: what we are left with, he says, is 'a religious language which survives even though we do not know what to say in it'.[4] It would be interesting to explore who the 'we' is in that remark: it may refer to those who have moved out of Christian faith and can no longer think 'in' that language, but it is no less applicable to those who remain within Christian faith but simply don't know how to think within that faith in authentic ways, i.e., in ways that do not involve self-deception, game-playing and delusion.

People no longer *think* about themselves in the world in explicitly religious ways, and they don't want to *feel* about themselves the way they think Christianity makes them feel. So if intellectual *sense* and personal *sensibility* discourage religious faith, what is there going for it? It is in the light of this cultural situation that Karl Rahner's pages on the continuing need for the word 'God' as an essential component in an anthropology should be studied:

> Man really exists as man only when he uses the word "God" at least as a question... The absolute death of the word "God", including even the eradication of its past, would be the signal, no longer heard by anyone, that man himself had died.[5]

The feasibility of the idea of God is tied, for Rahner, to the way human life is actually experienced and to how people actually live, and when these components are radically altered, the idea of God will also shift in a radical way, and may in practice simply disappear because the conditions that kept it alive have dissolved. Ideas are always embedded in contexts, in practices, in assumptions and frameworks that make them viable options for how we think and feel. Something of immense significance can be lost and slip into modern oblivion, and it will not necessarily be seen and felt by those who do the losing.

Who bothers to notice that the John Lennon airport in Liverpool promotes itself with the strap-line, 'Above us only sky' – a line from Lennon's anthem, 'Imagine' where it expresses the hoped-for

[4] A. MacIntyre, 'God and the Theologians,' in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 23.

[5] K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (DLT, 1978), pp. 46-50. It is well discussed in J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (CUP, 2005), pp. 77-8.

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disappearance of both God and the heaven that the church proclaims as our destiny? Lennon's is the default position on human life even in that most Catholic of English cities and nobody seems to think this atheistic subversion odd. If Rahner is right, we may be living through such a silent death of God consequent upon what he sees as a silent death of 'man': hence for him, the need to make his contemporaries aware of the features of the humanity that is theirs, as an inescapable condition of restoring meaning to the word 'God'.

It is another question for another time whether Rahner's Heideggerian and Transcendental Thomism is really able to resource the church's ministry in a world of fragmented meanings and purposes that is often called postmodern. Terry Eagleton is right, I suspect, when he says that postmodernism is the ultimate denial of God because it is the most resolute denial of truth. And if truth is not available to us, there can be no meaning and no value. Yet Rahner's question is surely the right one: without God, who are we? Cosmic dust on its way to the cosmic dustbin, and nobody seems to notice the nihilism implicit in this metaphysic. (Nietzsche did, and that's what makes his atheism so important.) Certainly, I don't detect much metaphysical anguish among the population of these islands: if people are lost in the cosmos, they don't seem to be reaching out towards a divine reality that bestows (infinite!) value on this cosmos. If there is a crisis, nobody seems much bothered by it and most people might not be able to feel the force of Rahner's claim that 'God' is a necessary feature of how we must think about ourselves.

A way out of this, and this is probably what Rahner intended, is surely to revisit the possibilities offered by a more developed doctrine of creation. We have inherited, and still promote, an account of Christian belief that gives disproportionate importance to issues of salvation, at the expense of the character of God's self-gift in the creaturely relationship that receives little attention. The mystery of God is that of God's self-giving, and the mystery of humanity is that we are constituted by this self-giving. 'God is more intimate to my reality than I am to myself' might be a way of expressing this. A simple comparison may be helpful: my father's relation to me is different from God's relation to me because my father's seed and his fatherly care contribute *features* of my personal identity; but God's relation to me is not a contingent feature of me that might or might not be there, it *is* me. In a wider perspective: God's relation to the world is not something in the world – it *is* the world. God's action in causing creaturely *esse* is not one of the events within the system of creaturely causes and relations that the world is; this causing action *is* the world.

If this is the core of everything, why do we give so little attention to it? St John Paul II used a threefold scheme to harmonise the different aspects of Catholic teaching on the world's relation to God:

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there is first of all, the *mystery of unity*, then the *mystery of salvation*, culminating in the *mystery of completion*. If he is right, then the first thing that the church needs to commend to those outside its boundaries is an understanding of the 'unity' that grounds everything – oneness with God and oneness with everything else in the world. A perception of this is already present in the culture, in the way people invoke respect for the natural order acts as a framework of transcendent meaning and purpose: for many people nature and the environment is the matrix of a natural religiosity that has displaced belief in the transcendent uncreated goodness that God is.

'God and the world': for Catholic Christian theology, the word 'and' in that phrase is a shorthand formula signalling dimensions of origination, dependence, participation, relatedness, divine self-gift and revelation that Christians see in a properly understood doctrine of creation: the world depends upon, participates in, is constituted by, and awaits the climactic self-gift of God. There is, therefore, a deep relatedness springing from God's communication of existence to the world, the world's receptive dependence on God and its dynamic movement towards beatitude in God.

If you know Aquinas, you can say that the causal relation that God exercises towards the non-divine order is *effective* (God makes it be), *exemplary* (the pattern of its flourishing is archetypally Christic in its receptivity and responsive self-definition) and *final* (the creatures of the world actively tend towards divine goodness). The relation constituted through this triple causality *is* the world itself. The blessings of creation have their *telos* in heaven, and it seems not unreasonable for a Christian to say that God creates the world so that God can give Godself to the world. Hence, the relation of God and the world includes an imprinting within free creatures of a dynamic orientation towards the goodness that God is. And this dynamic may express itself in categories drawn from God's action in Israel, the person of Jesus Christ and the life of the church – Christian faith, in other words, as a divinely enabled interpretation of divine and human relatedness. But even if these categories are not 'to hand' (in Heidegger's sense), the relatedness is still there, making humans be and evoking from them a self-realisation of the impulses in their nature. That is why in the end God matters: without God, humanity is unrealised.

By virtue of being a person, you are already in touch with God's self-gift: Rahner has surely taught us that with his axiom, 'Man is the event of God's self-communication.' And so, although people may be unable for various reasons to connect to the Christian language about God, they are still related to God in ways that convey the divine reality to them, in ways that fulfil their nature.

What can be drawn from this digression into the doctrine of creation that might be helpful in understanding the post-religious world in which we live? I will point to some ideas from Simone Weil who

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offers an original way of construing the divine presence in the lives of all. In her essay, 'Forms of the Implicit love of God,' she looks for indirect or implicit ways of loving God in which there is a real contact with God but not one characterised by knowledge and love of the divine. There are, she says, 'only three things here below in which God is really though secretly present. These are religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world and our neighbour'.[6] These are ways, she says, in which God is loved in a veiled form 'in the preparatory period,' after which they are taken up and completed in a full and explicit (direct) love of God.

But can we also say that for those who are never brought to an explicit love of God, these might be ways in which the reality of God becomes real to them, signs that convey something of the divine? She says: 'At the moment when it touches the soul, each of the forms which such love may take has the virtue of a sacrament'. She is prepared to extend the category of sacrament to cover the impact of these indirect or implicit connections with the divine on a person. So religious rituals, beauty and love of neighbour for her are sacramental mediations of the divine, signs that effectively convey the divine reality but which are not acknowledged as such.

For Simone Weil, these are secret and implicit ways in which people may and do love God. 'Beauty' is perhaps the category that needs more consideration. For her, it is 'the only finality here below' (p. 103). Beauty is an end in itself and in its perfection conveys to us an experience of the perfected actuality of God, and significantly, it is at the same time an experience in which the bodily senses are in touch with the real, the good and the true (for the neo-Platonic and Thomist tradition, this is what God is). And for many of our contemporaries, music is the principal medium in which the transcendent beauty that Weil is talking about is experienced. See her fine description of religion that 'Attention animated by desire is the whole foundation of religious practices. That is why no system of morality can take their place' (p. 128). Listening to music is for many people 'attention animated by desire', a quasi-religious feature of life and a 'finality', an end in itself.

When, courtesy of YouTube, you watch and listen to the winner of the TV programme 'Holland's Got Talent', Martin Hurkens, singing 'You raise me up' in the shopping district of Maastricht, and when you watch the people enchanted by the music and by their deep aspiration to know someone to whom they can say, 'You raise me up to more than I can be', you're seeing something both ordinary and remarkable. The people you watch in Maastricht are attentive

[6] S. Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', *Waiting on God* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), pp. 81-142; p. 81.

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to sounds that they find beautiful and in the middle of shopping, they have the experience of being drawn out of themselves in an engagement with beauty; they find themselves enchanted. The whole scene is of people finding ‘a finality here below’. Take it seriously as a little opening in the fabric of modern money-driven capitalism.

Music is particularly important as the only art form that does not aim at representing anything in the world: it does nothing but captivate us in ways that do not refer to any particular ‘thing’ in the world, but in some way expresses to us what the world is. It is the only non-representational mediation of reality that we have and it seems to have the capacity to gather our otherwise fragmented self into an experience of wholeness and attentiveness. Music is a universal sacrament that mediates the divine (the real) in a non-conceptual way and that evokes from us an attentiveness that is an anticipation of heaven. Music is prophecy in sound, a physical experience of completed meaning, offering, to quote Wallace Stevens,

> Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
> Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
> Beyond which it has no will to rise.[7]

Musical experience is the closest analogue to the effect of grace on a person, and it might well be an unnamed experience of grace. And in a post-religious, post-Christian society, for many people it is more effective than preached words in conveying an experience of ‘the real’, and I want to suggest that ‘contact with the real’ in ways that do not demand the language of religion, is a key feature of what ministry in this kind of world needs to consider. But we might think also of other ways because it is surely true that God has a way of acting within human beings in the ordinary circumstances of their nature. To stay in Holland a moment longer, we might take seriously Vincent van Gogh’s words:

> I cannot help thinking that the best way of knowing God is to love many things. Love this friend, this person, this thing, whatever you like, and you will be on the right road to understanding him better . . . [8]

There is an implicit theology of the Catholic sacramental imagination in van Gogh’s words. If Aquinas is right in saying that God is known only through his effects (what God brings about), then loving many things gives us a way of knowing God: that is how I read van Gogh’s insight here. Of course, it is not the kind of direct knowledge such as might take place when the Spirit of God takes a person into deep awareness of divine love, or when the Risen Christ acts to lead

[7] Wallace Stevens, ‘Of Modern Poetry,’ *Collected Poetry and Prose* (Library of America, 1997), p. 219.

[8] *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, ed. R. de Leeuw (Penguin, 1997), p. 72.

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people into radical discipleship, but in the loving acknowledgement of many 'things' (for van Gogh, chiefly persons but surely also the visible world) God is known when created things are loved. Van Gogh thinks that the divine is embedded in 'many things' in ways that lead us beyond those things: if this is to avoid being pantheistic, the category of sacrament to be extended to cover, extending to what gives meaning to our lives, is surely a major resource in thinking through a pastoral approach to a world that thinks it has bypassed God.

By moving towards what is true and good and valuable, through the powers or virtues that take shape in a mature personhood, you 'latch on to' God, and when you latch on to God, you are in the only place where you can *be*. If God is reality, what Aquinas calls *ipsum esse*, being itself, simply 'the real', then being in God is the only place where we can *be*. And van Gogh's remarks, like those of Simone Weil, point us towards ways in which the humanity of all of us is intrinsically suffused with divine self-giving. We need to conduct our ministry in the light of the truth that God is active in the lives of all in ways that are not acknowledged, but which are no less real because of that.

Some understanding is needed, however, of the shift in religiosity that has taken place. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch* there is an instructive moment that illuminates the shift from classical theism to what becomes a widespread modern perspective on post-religious selfhood. In Chapter 39 of the novel, Dorothea, married to a scholar of religious mythology named Casaubon, talks about religion with Will Ladislaw, a young man who is much more to her taste than her dried-up husband and she tells him that she has a belief of her own that comforts her. One can only suspect that Casaubon would never have been the confidant of this intimate confession:

> 'That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil – widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.'

There is no mention of God or church, and ideas that would have been used in an earlier age within classical theism now mutate into principles by which Dorothea lives. Casaubon, of course, could have listed the sources that feed Dorothea's statement: a Platonic orientation towards the Good and a proper acknowledgement that this is not an object to be grasped, but a horizon towards which we move; Paul's rhetoric of the divided self in Romans 7.19; participation in a metaphysical Zoroastrian struggle between good and evil. But Dorothea is not interested in the taxonomy of religion as an object of reflective study, and instead shares with Will an intimate articulation of what

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being a person means for her, using religious metaphors as a way of expressing the deepest dimensions of her post-religious identity.

When Will, thinking to please her for her eloquence, calls this 'a beautiful mysticism', Dorothea sees a Zoroastrian dualist riding towards her across the desert and she halts his progress, putting Will, and Casaubon, and indeed all students of human religion in their place, by insisting that religion is not something to be studied and categorised within cultural studies; instead it is the core of her 'life'. She has been living it (whatever *it* is) all her life:

> Please not to call it by any name... You will say it is Persian, or something else geographical. It is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it. I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl. I used to pray so much – now I hardly ever pray. I try not to have desires for myself, because they may not be good for others, and I have too much already.

Notice the flow from that wonderfully simple sentence, 'I have been finding out my religion since I was a little girl' to 'I used to pray so much – now I hardly ever pray'. 'Finding out her religion' is what she means by her 'life'. It is hard not to see in this confession George Eliot's own journey from evangelical Anglicanism to a religiously infused and seriously ethical identity in which 'God' has been decoded as a metaphor for 'the Good'. The idea of God,' she wrote, 'is really moral in its influence'.[9] From prayer to ethics: that's the journey that many people like Dorothea take, then as now as they 'find out their religion' and find that it does not involve prayer or worship. The central character of Georges Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest* writes in his diary:

> The expression "to lose one's faith," as one might a purse or a ring of keys, has always seemed to me rather foolish... Faith is not a thing one "loses", we merely cease to shape our lives by it.'

This is worth pondering, but when you come to George Eliot, the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans (1819-80), the Victorian novelist and thinker, some additional nuance is required: she moved away from Christianity as a religion, but that did not mean that she ceased to shape her life by it. She took 'God' to be a metaphor for 'the good', and took religion to be an imaginative way of being good to others, and so, when as a young woman she ceased to believe in God, she still shaped her life in the light of Christian moral teachings. In fact she seems to have had a moral objection to the Augustinian idea of God discriminating between the elect and the reprobate and this tips her over the edge into leaving the church. The moral priority for her is

[9] 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming' in George Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings* ed. R. Ashton (Oxford World Classics, 1992), p. 168.

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the bond of sympathy between people, the obligations of the second commandment that supersedes and, as she sees it, deconstructs the first.

Religion could be recast, she felt, in a purer, less dogmatic form with a diminution of its claims to speak truthfully of a transcendent reality but with an accompanying intensification of its significance for human relations. If there is no God, then there is more love to be directed towards other people: a specious argument, of course, but shared both by George Eliot and Feuerbach, whose *Essence of Christianity* Eliot translated in 1846. It was this moral seriousness replacing religious faith that John Stuart Mill said made the best of unbelievers 'more genuinely religious, in the best sense of the word religion, than those who exclusively arrogate to themselves the title'.[10] Then, as now, religious believers are 'out-narrated' by post-Christians whose encompassing grand narrative treats religious belief as only a stage within a bigger picture of a humanity come of age.

Now this is familiar territory in the study of Victorian religion, but the persistence of this shift into our contemporary world is still surprising. It is as though there continues to be a distillation of Christian religious themes into the culture that creates a post-religious ethos, still dependent on the great teachings, but dismissive of, or at least resistant to, committed belief. You will know the way in which Grace Davie has uncovered a pattern of 'believing without belonging' in British and European societies; and what I think is a more fruitful notion from her, that of 'vicarious religion' in which the bulk of the population is happy to have among them a minority of believers who vicariously believe on their behalf. The majority do not object to the presence of a religious minority, but they keep their distance from their spiritual pools and are happy to take a dip occasionally, but, goodness, not every day, not every week.

But the category of 'religion' is a shape-shifter, and we should not restrict it to one definition; there is plenty of religion around, but not of the kind that is easily identified. The modern world, strangely, is *diversely religious* rather than non-religious and any modern ministry needs to see this and to understand how there is a persistence of religion in socially effective forms. I turn to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) as a way of understanding how we got to where we are because he is the one who teaches Europe how to be effectively and cleverly post-Christian: he splits religion into a private religiosity within the self and a civil religion that is internalized as a means of social cohesion. Only a modern person, I used to tell my students, would think that religion is personal. And that is because the zone of

[10] J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*,quoted in G. Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1968), p. 303.

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the personal and the private is where a secularising world, following Rousseau, has decided that religion should be dumped.

In the eighteenth-century Rousseau taught Europe that while the church ought no longer to be a social force in European life – he was a modern Dubliner *avant la lettre* – there is no need to worry because a better form of religion can be maintained as a dimension of the inner self.[11] Rousseau picks up that dimension of Christian experience that looks to the action of God within the self and makes it the core of a natural, universally accessible contact with the divine, thereby inventing a religion or spirituality that bypasses Sinai, Calvary, the Jewish and Christian scriptures and the church itself, all of which are rendered redundant at a stroke. By alchemy, the particular genius of Jewish and Christian monotheistic faith mutates into a set of religiously infused sentiments, verging on the quest for 'natural religion', deism and marked by an interior self-communing within which 'God' is found.

The other side of this shift into interiority is that it is a subtle way of de-Christianising Europe by removing the Christian voice from public life. This is not a neutral programme of liberation, but an undermining of the project of Christendom, and of course, these days we're living through the final stages of this programme. We are all Rousseau's children now.

But this move inward is balanced by another move, this time strangely reinstating a different kind of religion within the public forum. Because, as Rousseau says, 'no State has ever been founded without religion serving at its base,' there must be what he calls a 'civil religion' that unifies people in their collective moral and social endeavour. Would Rousseau have agreed, I wonder, with Dwight D. Eisenhower that 'Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith – and I don't care what it is'? I think he would, and Rousseau is not flattered by the comparison.

So, having transferred a modified religiosity to the isolated self – the true self, for Rousseau, is always a self freed from the deformation caused by society – he realizes that the social order of a democratic republic requires a religious, transcendent grounding if society is to cohere, and so he provides a way in which modern secular identity can rest on a quasi-religious foundation. Religion will not have disappeared: it will simply have bifurcated into an individual private religiosity and a shared civil religion. Mark Cladis tell us that 'Rousseau was one of the first to recognize what may seem like a contradiction or paradox: a democratic nation that supports individual rights requires some form of public religion,

[11] J. Karant, 'Revisiting Rousseau's Civil Religion,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42/10 (2016), pp. 1028-58.

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that is, some shared beliefs and practices that generate moral community.'[12] Hence, Rousseau's conclusion:

> There is therefore a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it is up to the Sovereign to fix, not precisely as dogmas of Religion but as sentiments of sociability (*sentiments de sociabilité*) without which it is impossible to be either a good citizen or a loyal subject.'[13]

Notice that 'dogmas', traditionally characteristic of revealed religions, give way to the '*sentiments de sociabilité*' that inspire moral and social unity in a society that no longer locates authority in the will of a transcendent deity ('the divine right of kings'), but assigns it to 'the general will' of the people. But 'dogmas' still have their place in this civil religion, although much reduced in number:

> The dogmas of the civil Religion ought to be simple, few in number, stated with precision, without explanations or commentary. The existence of the powerful, intelligent, beneficent, prescient and provident Deity, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social Contract and the laws; these are the positive dogmas. As for the negative dogmas, I restrict them to a single one; namely intolerance: it is a feature of the cult we have rejected . . .
>
> Now that there no longer is and no longer can be an exclusive national Religion, one must tolerate all those which tolerate the others insofar as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of the Citizen. But whoever dares to say, *no salvation outside the Church*, has to be driven out of the State . . . [14]

It is a form of religion that fosters civic virtue, and how interesting it is that the religion that will not be tolerated by this civil religion is Christianity itself, on the grounds that Christianity is offensive to tolerance and rights. Rousseau was devising a civil religion that could be accepted by all citizens without serious scrutiny and that was to guide how people were to *live* rather than teach them what to *believe*. How strange it is that the elements of this civil religion are so redolent of fundamental themes in Christian theology, but, of course, Rousseau is offering us a distillation of teachings *from* Christianity that is meant to be more effective *than* Christianity in creating a good society. And here we might recall Grace Davie's characterization of the persistence of Christian themes that then inoculate people against thinking of themselves as Christian.

[12] M. S. Cladis, *Public Vision, Private Lives: Rousseau, Religion and 21st Century Democracy* (OUP, 2003), p. 189.

[13] Rousseau, *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, IV, 8, #32, ed. V. Gourevitch (CUP, 1997), p. 150.

[14] Rousseau, *ibid.*, 32, 35.

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How can Christianity free itself from the shackles of the prevalent civil religion? Clearly there is a version of civil religion in the public life of the United States which Robert Bellah has examined fruitfully – a form of 'ceremonial deism' – but Europe too has had a version of this, albeit in a more diverse and changing form than is found in America.[15] The civil religion of Western Europe has moved considerably from its original template of a unified, cohesive Catholic Church working hand in glove with an Emperor to bring about God's purposes for humanity. It was subsequently modified in the wake of the Reformation to accommodate the emergence of nation states fostering different state churches, all of which were designed to foster social cohesion. The narrative then unfolds from a recognition of confessional pluralism within Christianity to an acceptance of pluralism within 'religion', and finally to the affirmation of human rights and freedoms, irrespective of religious affiliation, within the liberal social order of the European Union.[16]

Europe's present civil religion has become explicitly post-religious in all its features, and in the process, it sends a message to all the populations of Europe that a religious identity based on revelation is damaging to the self and to the nations that compose modern Europe. Jean-Louis Schlegel says that the values today constantly emerging from studies of young people are "human rights, tolerance, respect for the convictions of others, liberty, friendship, love, solidarity, fraternity, justice, respect for nature, humanitarian intervention'.[17] We should attend to this analysis because it is precisely this mix of values and attitudes that is set up as more normative and of higher authenticity than practising a religion. They feed into what Charles Taylor calls the modern 'social imaginary':

> . . . the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life . . . how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice . . . . that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world become evident.'[18]

The point about the social imaginary is that it is not a theoretical, thought-out position, but a set of imaginative, felt construals of who we are and how we are to conduct ourselves: just like Rousseau's 'civil religion', which is about agreed 'sentiments' rather than

[15] R. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America,' Daedalus 134 (2005), pp. 40-55 (first published in 1967); R. Bellah, 'Religion and Legitimation in the American Republic,' *Society* 35/2 (1998), pp. 193-201.

[16] M. Ventura, 'The Changing Civil Religion of Secular Europe,' *George Washington International Law Review* 41/4 (2010), pp. 947-61; 952-3.

[17] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknapp Press, 2007), p. 824, n.23.

[18] Charles Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries,' *Public Culture* 14/1 (2002), pp. 91-124; 106-7.

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'beliefs'. And, referring to our topic of how to exercise a ministry in this context, the more Christianity focuses on putting across its 'beliefs' to an incredulous public, the less intelligible it becomes in the eyes of a population that has internalised, and seems content with, Rousseau's model of a dual personal and civil religion. The Christian vision is no longer a feature of the default social imaginary 'in which human beings no longer conceive of themselves as necessarily embedded within a holistic network of institutions and belief.'[19] This is why, even though bishops may huff and puff and wring their hands, the 'new evangelisation' will simply not work because it is predicated on an understanding of religion that cannot counter the personal and civil forms that religion already takes in modern society.

We have been out-narrated by Rousseau's children: if you want proof of that, simply notice that the language of rights, tolerance and respect trumps every other claim to speak truth. If you say that some ways of behaving are wrong, you will be accused of violating the rights of others, disrespecting them, fostering social discord and even engaging in 'hate-crime'. Transgressions of the dominant civil religion are punishable by expulsion from the community of right-thinking people, who have internalized its strictures. The Church of Twitter and its sister communion in Facebook have powerful ways of shaming heretics who breach the codes of civil religion and holding them up to public abuse. Within this social order, traditional revealed religions are under caution about what they can say and not say. The danger is that we become invisible, invisible even to ourselves, because we do not want to alienate those to whom we want to commend the gospel. Anyone concerned with how ministry in our culture might be effective will know this issue all too well.

I want to end with a remark by the American novelist Marilynne Robinson in *The Guardian* last year: 'People live profound lives'. Is she right, and if so, what significance do you draw from this? We would need surely to offer some account of being human that makes 'living profoundly' possible and even necessary, even if that profundity is non-theistic in shape. What if 'profound living' is a feature of all human beings insofar as they are in touch with the real and the demands of the real, without any explicit reference to a transcendent source that causes us, invests us with existence? The Thomist tradition views the triune God as the real, reality, existence, *esse,* 'being'.

What if we take seriously Aquinas' teaching that all humans are in touch with the invisible missions of Word and Spirit through their existential engagement with the demands of truth and love? This

[19] Peter E. Gordon, 'The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008), pp. 647-73; 660.

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gives them a form of profound living that is built into their nature, a form that is not illusory, but is grounded in the real, in God, in the modes of God's presence to them, even in a culture like ours that finds itself unable to express itself in Christian words. We have got into the habit of prioritising *faith*, understood as 'belief', as a condition of union with God; would it not be equally true to accord the same salvific power to *hope* and *love*. And the question to others need not be 'What do you believe?' but 'What do you hope for?' 'How deeply do you love?'[20]

Could those around us be engaged already in an implicit true monotheism, already on the way to the true God? What if most people are living 'profound lives' that are already a deep engagement with God? What if they are already living a demanding way of life that is their flourishing and the means of their fulfilment in God? What might Christians do that helps them? An effective ministry towards post-Christian non-believers might start from that recognition.

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[20] The question of the priority of belief for modern sensibility is explored in J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Elizabeth Costello*.

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