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Festschrift for Martin Prozesky



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**Festschrift for  
Martin Prozesky**

Editors

*Johannes A. Smit*

and

*Denzil Chetty*

ASRSA

2018

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# Editorial

**Johannes A. Smit**  
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In this Festschrift we want to both celebrate Professor Dr. Martin Prozesky's academic career as student and scholar in Religious Studies and Ethics, and his substantial impact on South Africans of all walks of life through his thought, publications, and practical ethics training in the academy, and in the corporate and public domains. This comes after nearly 50 years since he started teaching Comparative Religion in the then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1969, and also 40 years, since he started as Senior Lecturer in 1977, at the then University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus, teaching Philosophy of Religion in the Department of Divinity<sup>1</sup>. It is also nearly 40 years since he was introduced to Process Philosophy and wrote his review of *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, by John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin (1979). It is also now 10 years since he took early retirement from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2007, and the publication of his very significant *Conscience: Ethical Intelligence for Global Well-Being* (2007). This year, Prof. Dr. Prozesky will celebrate his seventy-fourth birthday, and we are celebrating his contributions to our discipline, and its sub-disciplines, at the 40<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa (ASRSA).

Also, of very important historical academic significance at archival

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<sup>1</sup> From 1977, Prozesky taught Philosophy of Religion and added some World Religions and Philosophies components to his courses. Under his leadership, the Department of Divinity, changed its name to the Department of Religious Studies in 1984, and introduced modules on The Historical Introduction to Religion, Basic Themes in Religion, Living Religions, Advanced Themes in Religion, and Religious Ethics.

discursive levels, for not only the study of Religion and related sub-disciplines, on the African sub-continent, but also the socio-political transformation in South Africa, is the founding of ASRSA, in 1978, including its journals. Prozesky was the Founding Editor of ASRSA's first journal, *Religion in Southern Africa*, which appeared twice a year from January 1980 till July 1987. Thereafter it was renamed the *Journal for the Study of Religion (in Southern Africa)*, and he continued as the Founding Editor, latterly with P.S. Maxwell as Executive Editor, until the end of 1998. So, for twenty years Prozesky was at the coalface of knowledge production on Religion in Southern Africa.

Together with his fellow collaborators, and with the publication of the journals, Prozesky ground-breakingly provided the requisite academic and scholarly leadership in both academic and socio-political matters, as these impacted the academy, and *vice versa*. Not only did they play a very significant role in many of the processes that dismantled the apartheid ideological edifice, and eventually brought it to a fall. They also laid the foundations for the critical scholarly research and knowledge production for Religious Studies, including Ethics Studies. Amongst others, Prozesky also played a profound role as he and his colleagues, accompanied our first democratic elections, the founding of our new Constitution (1996/ 1997), and our entry into the new millennium. With critical, scholarly deliberations, conceptualisations, reflections, and the requisite discursive knowledge production, they provided the intellectual groundwork that critically and transformatively impacted the birth of our new nation – “the rainbow nation”. These interventions had, and continue to have national, continental, and international reverberations in academia, and we believe, that this will continue to go from strength to strength.

The initiation of the process that lead to the production of this Festschrift in honour of Prof. Dr. Prozesky, has therefore been welcomed from many parts of the world. And, in this Editorial, we provide a brief overview, including the abstracts from the different articles.

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Professor Dr. Martin Prozesky was born on 23 October 1944 in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. After short periods of primary schooling in Johannesburg and Estcourt, he had most of his schooling in the junior division of Oudtshoorn Boys' High School and completed his high school years at the

same school. His university education took place at Rhodes University (BA 1966) and the University of Oxford (MA 1973), followed by graduate studies at Cambridge, Massachusetts and by a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Rhodesia (now University of Zimbabwe) in 1977. He first lectured at Rhodes University and the former University of Rhodesia, besides working in the publishing business from 1970 to 1971. He joined the staff of the former University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, in 1977 as a senior lecturer. In 1980 he became the founding editor of the journal of *Religion in Southern Africa*, the official journal of the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa, which appeared twice a year from January 1980 till July 1987. In 1988 it was renamed the *Journal for the Study of Religion*, and he continued as the founding editor, latterly with Patrick S. Maxwell as executive editor, until the end of 1998. He was also Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg campus, 1991 – 1995), and in 1997 became the founding Director of the University of Natal's Unilever Ethics Centre until his early retirement as Senior Professor of Comparative and Applied Ethics in 2007. Amongst others, Prozesky edited and co-authored *Ethics for Accountants and Auditors* (revised edition, Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 2009), and is also the founding director of Compass Ethics CC. This close corporation, provides training and other resources to the corporate and public sectors, in various areas of applied ethics. Prozesky remains a frequent speaker at conferences and seminars in various countries, and also often addresses schools, businesses and other audiences.

Amongst others, it was Prof. Dr. Prozesky's first book, *Religion and Ultimate Well Being: An Explanatory Theory* (London: Macmillan, and New York: St Martin's Press, 1984) that led to his present work in ethics. He is the author of four other books, a novel, and co-author or co-editor of four more, besides writing many academic papers and well over 150 press articles. His present work includes Accountancy and Ethics, Religion and Ethics, Sports Ethics and Professional Ethics. His latest book is *Conscience: Ethical Intelligence for Global Well-Being*, which appeared in 2007 from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press; and his novel, *Warring Souls: A Story of Clashing Faiths* (2017), was published and launched earlier this year. This was his first attempt at using fiction to explore the serious tensions between conservative and radical Christians in a fictitious, South African university setting. His latest book, *Honest to Goodness*, is forthcoming from from Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon, USA, in their Resource Publications



imprint. This book provides the author's semi-autobiographical account of the scholarly work and personal experiences that lead him to differentiate between the classical Christianity of traditional, orthodox faith and what he calls an alternative Christianity that has been emerging since the pioneering work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, and why he considers the latter to be closer to the work and words of the Jesus of history, than other modern historical portraits.

Finally, on the basis of his substantial research outputs throughout his career (cf. the complete list at the end of this volume), Prof. Dr. Prozesky was made a Fellow of the former University of Natal in the late 1990s, and was awarded the status of Emeritus Professor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, following his early retirement in 2007.

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The Festschrift, firstly, offers a brief overview of Prof. Dr. Prozesky's own ethico-spiritual journey and academic career, and then provides a variety of critical academic reflections on his work, either directly, or indirectly. As such, each contributor's thought both critically, and constructively reflects on significant aspects of the broader challenges the world faces with regard to the study of religion, theology, spirituality, and ethics, but also on Prozesky's own intellectual endeavours in this regard. Contributors provide academic insights from within their own very rich and very significant life-long individual scholarly productions, teaching and learning practices, as well as their broader community engagement impacts, whether at local or international levels. Their own careers and multiple scholarly works and publications provide ample outstanding and insightful towering counterpoints, and parallels to Prozesky's own life and work, both continentally and internationally. As such, the articles for the Festschrift come from former fellow students dating from the 1960s, intellectuals who had a formative influence on Prozesky's own intellectual journey, former colleagues who worked with him in the fields of Religious Studies, Theology, Ethics, Applied Ethics, and Applied Ethics training in corporate and public institutions, and some students.

For us, Denzil and I, it has been an honour and a pleasure, to prepare and edit this Festschrift. From the first, when we broached the idea with Prof. Dr. Prozesky, as well as contacting all his esteemed fellow travellers and intellectual friends in academia, all were very forthright in their support and

commitment to the project. We think it certainly marks a significant milestone in the discursive history of the study of religion, theology, spirituality and ethics in South, and Southern Africa. We think it also not only honours the substantial achievements of a very significant and special academic in the South African landscape, but also that of his colleagues, collaborators and students. All this make this volume a very significant and special one. Retrospectively, it provides the appreciation and celebration of some insights into past, and existing engaged scholarly work and achievements in the broader arena of the focus of the Festschrift, but also Christianity, more particularly. Prospectively, it outlines some of the challenges ahead, not only for the inter- and trans-disciplinary study of religion, and the diverse religious formations on the African continent, but also the academic pursuit of our joint global thinking about religion, and our work towards ethical well-being in the world. In this regard, we want to also thank Prof. Dr. Prozesky for allowing us to publish his post-retirement inaugural presentation as Professor Extraordinaire, University of the Free State, ‘Tomorrow’s Ethics in a Globalizing World’, delivered on 28 August 2013. Amongst his many achievements, was his reconfiguring of the study of Religion at the University of the Free State, under the Vice-Chancellorship of Prof. Dr. Jonathan Jansen, and in collaboration with Dr. Maniraj Sukdaven. Congratulations Martin.

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### **The Ethical and Spiritual Project of Martin Prozesky**

In his ‘The Ethical and Spiritual Project of Prof. Dr. Martin Prozesky: Influences and Interests’, *Maniraj Sukdaven* provides a cursory overview of the life and thought of Professor Dr. Prozesky, and his contributions to academia via his ethical and the spiritual project. There were many people of various personalities that influenced his life, including the path he chose in academia. Some of these were scholars, such as the internationally acclaimed Professors Alister Hardy, John Hick, Lloyd Geering, Ninian Smart, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, feminist professors Mary Daly, Ursula King and Rosemary Radford Ruether, and various process theologians. Others were spiritual leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, the Chief Rabbi of the orthodox United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (1991 – 2013), Jonathan Sacks, and the Dalai Lama.

From his base in Theology and Religious Studies to his move to Ethics and Spirituality it could be established that there are five main contributions in Prof. Dr. Prozesky's work which he had made to academia and of which cognizance should be taken. These are: (1) the religious philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher; (2) the development of a critical theology; (3) his values-based explanation of religion; (4) the debate about God; and (5) the need for a multi-cultural, even global, multi-disciplinary approach to Applied Ethics with special attention to African Ethics. These contributions among other works are discussed in this article. (Information for the article comes from an interview with Prof. Dr. Prozesky, that was recorded and transcribed.)

## **Religion and Theology from South Africa**

Following on Sukdaven's biographical essay on Prof. Dr. Prozesky's scholarly journey, we open the Festschrift, with *David Chidester's* contribution, 'World Religions in the World'. Interacting with some of the research that predates his own *Savage Systems* (1996), and continuing the discussion further following the landmark publications of Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), and his own, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (2014), amongst others, Chidester provides his latest insights on the latest, and future developments in the study of Religion. His main point is that the classification of 'world religions' is highly problematic because of its arbitrary construction, its exclusion of indigenous religions, and its easy availability for ideological manipulation. He points out that the imperial edifice of 'world religions' has been dismantled in recent scholarship in the study of religion. Yet, the notion of 'world religions' has been enthusiastically embraced by advocates of inclusive citizenship in democratic societies and by advocates of indigenous empowerment in postcolonial societies. His brief essay reviews the terms of engagement for critically reflecting on the various deployments of 'world religions' as a prelude to thinking about religion in the world.

The next contribution, 'Christian Humanism, Progressive Christianity, and Social Transformation', comes from *John W. de Gruchy*, a former collaborator of Prof. Dr. Prozesky, on the very significant, *A Southern African Guide to World Religions* (1991), and *Living Faiths in South Africa*. (1995), which are still being prescribed at some institutions, in part, or in full. De Gruchy explores his understanding of Christian humanism in conversation with Prozesky's notion of progressive Christianity as he understands it. He

does so, with an eye on social transformation as an essential outcome of doing Christian theology. Central to the conversation is how we understand the role of creeds and confessions in Christian faith, and the significance of the confession that Jesus the truly human one is the Christ of faith. This leads him to a discussion on the Incarnation as the foundation for Christian humanism, and Eucharistic community as the embodiment and agent of social transformation.

Contemporary religious and theological scholarship is acutely aware that different contexts result in different ways of thinking and speaking about God. *Rian Venter's* 'Thinking God and a Global Multi-religious Context: Trends, Challenges and Possibilities', situates God-talk intentionally in the present global and post-secular horizon and asks about the implications of this hermeneutical move. Mapping scholarly trends in this regard is a specific aim of the article, which is written from the perspective of Systematic Theology in conversation with the Study of Religion. The development of reflection on God in inter-religious theologies and in the so-called Trinitarian rediscovery is discussed. Two academic challenges are identified as part of a constructive proposal – a re-envisioning of the relationship between the Study of Religion on the one hand and Christian Theology and Systematic Theology respectively on the other at public universities. Possible future constructive avenues are suggested and the article proposes a minimalist way forward to engage the global and post-secular context, and highlighting an inter-subjective ethos, attention to discursive performances and the African context.

*Basil Moore's* contribution, 'Learning from Black Theology' is an edited version of his Doctor of Philosophy *honoris causa* presentation at Rhodes University in 2012. He argues that Black Theology had a profound effect on the religious, especially Christian scene in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. The traditional stance was that clergy should not get involved in politics. What Black Theology did – with Moore making a very substantial contribution in the late 1960s and early 1970s himself – was that it enabled clergy to understand that the Gospel was not primarily about the forgiveness of sins but about setting the oppressed free. Thus, politics was at the heart of the work of the clergy in South Africa. Black Theology also had a radical understanding of God. He argues that while the need for Black Theology may be less critical in post-Apartheid South Africa, there are major lessons to be learned from how it constructed the Gospel message in the then current context of oppression and exploitation of then, oppressed South African blacks.

## **Ethics and Spirituality in a Global Context**

Following her earlier collaboration with Prof. Dr. Prozesky, on *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and Politics* (1996), *Judith M. Brown's* title, is 'Gandhi: A Man for Our Times?'. Her essay links with three major concerns in Prozesky's work as he has engaged with a radical critique of religious traditions and structures in the South African context of the end of apartheid: the involvement of dominant religious traditions in sustaining power structures and inequality; the nexus between religious beliefs and organizations and violence; and the failure of many 'religions' to meet the needs of serious seekers after meaning and truth. She examines the life and thought of M.K. Gandhi in the light of these concerns, particularly the way he addressed the nature of India and its problems as British imperial rule ended. It also focuses on Gandhi's critique of Hindu tradition as a powerful buttress of profound social inequality particularly relating to caste and gender; his response to violence in the name of religion and community; and finally his underlying belief that true religion was the individual's search for the divine and that all religious traditions by contrast have very partial visions of truth. She suggests that Gandhi should be seen not just as an important historical figure but very much as a man for our times also.

*Louise Kretzschmar* focuses on 'Convergence and Divergence: A Christian Response to Prozesky's "Global Ethic" and Secular Spirituality'. The aim of her article is to identify areas of convergence and divergence in the value systems of secular ethics and Christian ethics and to address what is meant by the moral development of individual persons and communities. The article discusses the views of Martin Prozesky on religion, the creation of a global ethic and secular spirituality from the perspective of Christian ethics. The discussion draws on the 'Barthian-Thomism' of Nigel Biggar and the four key moral questions posed by Dallas Willard in order to identify elements of convergence and divergence related to worldviews, values, virtues and the moral development of persons and groups.

*Ursula King* focuses on 'Teilhard de Chardin's Vision of Science, Religion and Planetary Humanity: A Challenge to the Contemporary World'. Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a great thinker, scientist, and mystic – he was above all an extraordinary human being whose inspiring vision still remains far too little known. He visited South Africa twice, in 1951 and 1953, to undertake palaeontological research and collaborate with South African

colleagues. Throughout his life, but especially towards its end, he was much interested in the future of planetary humanity and he always stressed the importance of *seeing*, of having a vision that pulls us forward and upward. For him, life *is* vision. She examines how this vision – embracing science, religion and the future of humankind – presents a challenge to the contemporary world and an inspiration to create a better future for all.

## **Ethics from the African Context**

The main goal of *Munyaradzi Murove's* 'Indigenous Knowledge Systems Discourse and Inclusivity: An Afro-centric Quest for Recognition in a Globalised World' is to demonstrate that in a multicultural and globalised world the indigenisation of knowledge has to be pursued in a way that demonstrates an element of inclusivity. To achieve this goal this article has been given three foci as the thrust of its structure. *Firstly* it is argued that indigenisation of knowledge must be pursued under the presumption of a recognition that all knowledge is cultural or context specific. *Secondly*, the article goes on to show that the indigenisation of knowledge in Africa has gone hand-in-glove with the celebration of the knowledge that is usually regarded by Western scholarship as primitive and thus redundant in the face of modernity. *Finally*, drawing from the insights made in previous sections, the article advances the argument that the indigenisation of knowledge should be seen as a quest for inclusionary knowledge whereby all knowledge is understood as contributing to the generality of human existence by deliberately taking an ethical stance to the effect that in a globalised and multicultural world, no knowledge system should be privileged as superior to any other knowledge system. All knowledge has to be seen as contributing to the plurality of knowledge in a globalised and multicultural world.

In his 'Reflection in Practice as Source of Values: The Cross-Cultural Creation of a Health-care Ethics in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Augustine Shutte*, now late, takes as a starting-point, Alasdair MacIntyre's well-known definition of a 'practice' and argues that the 'reflection' involved is best engaged in as a dialogue between different partners, whether individuals or groups. Such reflection, aimed as it is, at the achievement of excellence in the practice concerned, can (if pursued with rigour and commitment) uncover values embedded in the practice which, however limited the practice (rugby, gardening), have a wider, even universal, scope. When the partners in dialogue

have general recognition (religions, countries, professional bodies, political parties) these values can provide materials for a Global Ethic (Parliament of the World's Religions) that is constructed from the bottom up (the Oregon Plan) rather than by some public authority (the United Nations). Shutte provides grounds for this approach, by examining the practice of health-care in post-apartheid South Africa, and the co-reflection of scientific health-care professionals and traditional healers that is part of constructing a new model for health-care that better serves the needs of all South Africans. This dialogue has uncovered values whose scope is wider than that of health-care presently, and which, he shows, could provide a really humane foundation for a society containing different cultures.

A former collaborator with Prof. Dr. Prozesky in Applied Ethics, *Larry Kaufmann*, asks: 'Can Ethics be Taught?' His article is a critical reflection on the years he spent in association with Prozesky developing and presenting ethics training modules to a broad cross-section of professional and other groups. Describing the component parts of the workshops, he also comments on the rationale behind them, taking a look at both strengths and weaknesses. In a sense this is a critique of the discipline of Applied Ethics, yet at the same time it offers a possible pedagogy for what Prozesky and he would call 'ethics at the coalface'.

## **Historical Perspectives on Theology**

For his 'Theology Before and After Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963), *Lloyd Geering* chooses to reflect on what he regards as a bombshell that blew the roof off the church – not because it introduced original thinking, but because it brought to unsuspecting people in the pews some knowledge of the developments that had been taking place for quite some time in academic theology. It initiated the turbulent sixties from which time onwards the slow decline in church allegiance in the Western Europe began to accelerate. The thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, which Robinson summarized in his book, were themselves simply the twentieth century version of the radical changes in theology made necessary by the advent of the post-Enlightenment world, and which had been set in motion in rather different ways at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and the theologian Friedrich

Schleiermacher. Since the Enlightenment brought to humans the freedom to think for themselves (Bonhoeffer labelled this phenomenon ‘Humanity’s coming of age’), so, the theological enterprise gradually changed from being the exposition of divinely revealed dogmas to the human exploration of religious experience. In retrospect, Robinson’s book is to be judged a significant marker in a process of ever-changing theological thought.

*Ron Nicolson’s* ‘“O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: let the whole earth tremble before him” (Psalm 96:9)’ asks the question: Is there a place and a future for persons who still hold to the centrality of Christ, or of Jesus of Nazareth, in their lives, but who are agnostic about what traditional Christianity would hold to be central points of dogma or even about the existence of what Cupitt and others have called an ‘objective God’? His view is that the liberal theology which dominated the 1950s and 1960s has given way to more conservative and indeed near fundamentalist views in both Protestant and Catholic theology. It is to be noted though, that within both evangelical and catholic circles, there is some evidence of a swing back to more liberal views. Most people in the Western world have however lost any link with the church or with institutional Christianity. Yet, according to polls, a surprising number still claim that they ‘pray’ and believe in a ‘higher power’. Movements such as the Sea of Faith, or Progressive Christianity attempt to hold on to Christian imagery and cultus while leaving open the question of whether the concept of God is any more than a human construction. Attendance at Cathedral-type worship where dignified ceremony and beautiful music leave the worshipper free to place his or her own interpretation on the words is steadily increasing. Given this state of affairs, a further question is: Does this signify a new form of religious belief, more fluid and less linked to institutional dogma? Following James Fowler, Nicolson is of the view that the direction for the most mature form of faith, is that which acknowledges ambiguity and unknowableness in religious belief. Robert Ellwood suggests that the Western post-Christian world is moving unto what he calls the ‘folk-religion’ stage where persons may follow many different religious beliefs and practices simultaneously in a syncretistic way without believing any of them in a literal sense or alternatively believing them all, despite difference and incongruity. Is this the future of religion? Is there a future for a type of Christianity which still reads the scriptures, practices the liturgies, tells the stories but does not necessarily believe that Jesus is God incarnate or indeed that there is any God?



## **Theology and God**

In this section, we provide two brief opinion pieces, by two of Prof. Dr. Prozesky's, peers, both reflecting on, and providing some perspectives on a few academic challenges in the broad arena of the study of theology, and how to reflect on God, in academe. With regard to his own publications, it implicitly links up with his *A New Guide to the Debate about God* (1992).

Quoting Richard Dawkins, *Trevor Williams* asks: 'What makes you think Theology is a subject?' He answers this question by pointing out that Theology is under attack from many quarters today, from the fearful believers who see it as a threat to their faith to the secularists who see it as a threat to truth. Foremost among the opponents is Richard Dawkins. Outraged by a donation to Cambridge for the study of theology, he contrasts the usefulness of science with the uselessness of Theology. The question though, is: What is Theology? In his article, Williams draws a distinction between Confessional Theology and Critical Theology. By Confessional Theology he means the affirmation of an exclusive point of reference by which all other claims to authority and knowledge are judged. Thus Christians theologise their confession that 'Jesus Christ is Lord', and Critical Theology is the rational articulation of the Christian Faith from within the circle of Faith – the convictions, experiences, and hopes grounded in the story of Jesus and characterized by commitment and involvement. He then explores how both theologians and scientists, as well as the two types of Theology can go wrong.

*John B. Cobb* reflects on 'God and Universities'. He argues that the exclusion of God from contemporary academia did not come about because of evidence or argument but because the scientific adherence to the treatment of the objective world as self-contained was increasingly applied to everything. Also, the limiting of acceptable thinking to topics falling within one academic discipline or another had no place for continuing a discussion of the topic. The self-assurance of academia is beginning to weaken. The exclusion of God as a causal factor is part of the exclusion of purpose including human purpose. This leads to implausible explanations that are assumed to be needed but rarely explicitly defended. If the evidence for the importance of not only objective data for spiritual realities and beliefs, as well as subjective human experience are allowed, the door will be opened to changes that eventually could reinstate God in the university.

## Towards the Future

With our contribution, ‘Martin Prozesky and “Well-being”: Retroactive and Proactive Perspectives on Religion and Ethics in Social Transformation’, and, *secondly*, with a contribution that Martin generously offered, ‘Tomorrow’s Ethics in a Globalizing World’, we conclude the Festschrift.

We primarily focus on outlining the discursive threads in Prozesky’s ‘Implications of Apartheid for Christianity in South Africa’, in the book he edited, *Christianity amidst Apartheid: Selected Perspectives on the Church in South Africa* ([1985] 1990); his first book, *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: An Explanatory Theory* (1984); and his latest book, *Conscience: Ethical Intelligence for Global Well-Being* (2007). This is under three headings: Apartheid as Heresy; Explaining Religion; and Conscience Ethics. We conclude with some appreciative and critical reflections, that we believe, can take Prozesky’s life-long project, further. This is positioned in the social transformation paradigm.

*Finally*, with his contribution, Prof. Dr. Prozesky reflects on the future of ethical practice, by arguing that it will go through five great transitions. They are: *firstly*, from the ethics of obedience to an ethic of creative commitment; *secondly*, from a primary concern with micro-ethics to an equal and even greater concern with macro-ethics; *thirdly*, from a cluster of regional value systems to a cooperatively created global ethic; in the *fourth place*, from a conceptual base in western philosophy and theology to an academic base in the social and natural sciences; and in the *fifth place*, from dependence on religion in important parts of the world, including ours, to what he calls a relationship with religion characterized by cooperative, critical and creative independence for ethics.

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# The Ethical and Spiritual Project of Martin Prozesky: Influences and Interests

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## Abstract

This article provides a cursory overview of the life and thought of Professor Martin Prozesky, and his contributions to academia via his ethical and spiritual project. There were many people of various personalities that influenced his life, including the path he chose in academia. Some of these were scholars, such as the internationally acclaimed Professors Alister Hardy, John Hick, Lloyd Geering, Ninian Smart, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, feminist Professors Mary Daly, Ursula King and Rosemary Radford Ruether, and various process theologians. Others were spiritual leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, the Chief Rabbi of the orthodox United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (1991 – 2013), Jonathan Sacks, and the Dalai Lama.

From his base in Theology and Religious Studies to his move to Ethics and Spirituality it could be established that there are five main contributions in Martin Prozesky's work which he had made to academia and of which cognizance should be taken. These are: (1) the religious philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher; (2) the development of a critical theology; (3) his values-based explanation of religion; (4) the debate about God; and (5) the need for a multi-cultural, even global, multi-disciplinary approach to applied ethics with special attention to African ethics. These contributions among other works are discussed in this article. (The article was made possible through an interview with Prof. Prozesky that was recorded and transcribed.)

**Keywords:** religious philosophy, Friedrich Schleiermacher, critical theology, values-based explanation of religion, debate about God, multi-cultural approach, applied ethics, African Ethics

## **Introduction**

In this celebratory Festschrift article I present the life and thought of Professor Martin Prozesky, to discuss his contribution to academia. I interviewed him in October 2013 that was recorded and transcribed. The transcription is available on request. Where necessary in-text-referencing to books and/or articles were made to enhance aspects of the interview and to confirm references made by Prozesky to authors in the interview. Encapsulated in this article are his main contributions as an academic to both the ethical and the spiritual project. Cognizance is taken of various personalities and their influence in his life and the path he chose in academia.

## **Martin Prozesky's Main Contributions as an Academic**

Martin Prozesky made five main contributions. These focus on religious philosophies, especially of Friedrich Schleiermacher amongst others, and the development of a critical theology, of which Schleiermacher in his values-based explanation of religion, the debate about God, and the need for a multi-cultural, even global, multi-disciplinary approach to applied ethics with special attention to African ethics, was influential. Before proceeding to these issues, it is illuminating to start with the sources of his outlook and interests in his home and boyhood, early church life and university experiences.

## **Early Influences**

Although born in Newcastle on the 23 October 1944, Martin Prozesky's boyhood home and Anglican parish were in Oudtshoorn. This had a lasting impact on his life and thinking. His parents and the local clergy shared a deep, religious conviction that apartheid was a grave evil. This fostered in the young Martin a perception that the most valuable aspect of Christianity was its ability to resist major evils like racism and to foster a just and caring kind of society, a perception that was much encouraged by reading Trevor Huddleston's stinging denunciation of apartheid as unchristian in his book *Naught for your Comfort* (Huddleston 1956), and later by Chief Albert Luthuli's impassioned call for liberation from apartheid in *Let my People Go* (Luthuli 1962). Based on these experiences Prozesky decided to offer himself as a candidate for the Anglican priesthood while still at school.

Developing a perception of the church as a powerful force for social justice in a town where most of the white, church-going people supported the apartheid government, was an important early exposure to a moral ambivalence in the churches that would figure strongly in Prozesky's later critique of Christianity and of traditional religion in general, as will be addressed later in this article.

A *second* youthful experience that also had a life-long effect came from friendships with Jewish classmates. Thus began a life- and belief-changing contact with people from other faiths, whose own strong moral values and deep faith led Prozesky to a belief in universal salvation and then to a rejection, on ethical grounds, of all exclusivist religious teachings.

A *third* early factor in the shaping of Prozesky's work and outlook was his introduction to philosophy by a school teacher at the former Boys' High School in Oudtshoorn, the late Samuel Bosman. In Martin's penultimate year at school Bosman spoke to the class about René Descartes and his famous dictum of *cogito ergo sum* – 'I think, therefore I am'. Martin was captivated and began to see the power of reason in philosophy as an essential way of approaching religious and ethical questions. Later experiences of philosophy would encourage this early approach, especially in connection with Process Philosophy.

## **University Studies**

Prozesky began his theological studies at Rhodes University in 1963 as a candidate for the Anglican priesthood and continued his studies at Trinity College, Oxford (1966-68) and at the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1968-69). It was at the latter, however, that he came to accept that the priesthood was not for him and that his future probably lay in the academic field. As he puts it, he had to face the reality that he was not a pastor but had a gift for teaching and public speaking. In the meantime, at Rhodes University, there was a lecturer who would strongly encourage Prozesky's belief that the heart of religion at its best was ethical and not doctrinal. He was Dr. Basil Moore who taught Systematic Theology and would later be a professor of Religion Studies at the University of South Australia in Adelaide.

Prozesky recalls Moore's impact as follows:

What stood out in Basil's theology for me was his interpretation of salvation. He saw it not as something in an afterlife in heaven. Although he didn't deny that, what he did, was to emphasize very strongly the reality of salvation as something that needed to start happening now. He defined it as 'a community-creating event' based on love as pioneered by Christ. I still remember him emphasizing that if God is love and love is God, then love is divine. That was very powerful for me and others and coupled to it, Basil was outspokenly active in spreading a Christian anti-apartheid message. He bravely lived out the prophetic, ethical theology he taught (cf. Moore 1973).

## **Schleiermacher Studies**

Prozesky's doctoral dissertation investigated the background and work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, with his well-known and pioneering appeal to religious experience (Prozesky 1976). Prozesky affirms that this was an important experience for him. He chose Schleiermacher for his doctorate because he had studied him in detail at Oxford and quickly found in him a very powerful, original thinker, and also an antidote to the Barthian theology he had encountered at Rhodes and elsewhere. Its longer term impact was to foreground religious experience in his own later work on the explanation of religion which led to his first book, *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: An Explanatory Theory* (Prozesky 1984).

In his doctoral research Prozesky explored the seeming contradiction of a very revolutionary new approach to religion and Christianity from someone who had been schooled in pietism, which is well-known for its doctrinally conservative and inward-looking character. While his doctorate focused on the pietistic element in Schleiermacher's work, inevitably it also gave Prozesky a detailed knowledge of the place of religious experience in the life and thought of his doctoral subject, which, as was mentioned above, became part of his own approach to religion in his first book and ever since. Looking back to his work on Schleiermacher, Prozesky mentions that this radical young religious thinker impressed him, giving him and others like John Hick an experiential method of understanding religion that has proved exceptionally fertile (Prozesky 1981a; 1981b).

### **Scholars who also Influenced Prozesky's Work**

A number of leading, contemporary scholars played a much-valued part in Prozesky's unfolding approach to religion and ethics. In the order of his contact with them, either in person or through their writings (or both), they are Alister Hardy, John Hick, Lloyd Geering, Ninian Smart, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, several process thinkers, and the feminist scholars Rosemary Radford Ruether and Ursula King.

**Alister Hardy.** The work of Sir Alister Hardy (Hardy 1979), who had called in the 1970s for public contributions to his investigation of religious experiences and had built up an archive of about 5 000 of these documents, added a fresh, empirical element to the focus on religious experience which became a permanent part of Prozesky's work. Off course Hardy (1979) did not use this data to support any religious doctrine or creed, but leant support for 'experiential faith'. In researching his first book Prozesky had access to a random sample of about 700 of these records. It showed repeatedly that if you want to understand religion look at first-hand evidence of religious experience (James 1902). Prozesky believes that this evidence shows that religion is fundamentally about finding the greatest of benefits, or blessings, to use religious terminology, understand by those concerned as some or other kind of deliverance, salvation or liberation.

**John Hick.** Encouraged by this emphasis on religious experience, Prozesky worked out the essentials of an understanding of the various religions which centralized the quest for the ultimate benefit of salvation, deliverance and liberation. It was at that time that his long and immensely valuable association with John Hick began. He met Hick when Hick was a visiting professor at the University of Natal in the early eighties. He already knew of Hick's work and continued to study all his later writings. Prozesky regarded it as a great privilege to have had personal contact and friendship with Hick until his death.

Prozesky identifies two ways in which Hick impacted him. First it was Hick's pioneering search for an answer to the question posed by the plurality of religions that culminated in his landmark book *An Interpretation of Religion* (Hick 1989; Prozesky 2012). Hick contended that there are no objective norms by which we can judge any of the world religions to be intellectually or morally superior to the others. All of them are effective paths to a transformation from



self-centeredness towards what Hick sometimes called reality-centeredness. This impacted on Prozesky's own, ethics-based approach to religious pluralism.

The second impact was the invitation by Hick, while visiting Pietermaritzburg, for Prozesky to develop his view of religion into a book for the series Hick was editing for The Macmillan Press in Britain, called the Library of Philosophy and Religion. This led to Prozesky's first book as mentioned above.

**Lloyd Geering.** Sir Lloyd Geering, became a very good friend to Prozesky. Geering was present at the first international conference in 1981 at which Prozesky spoke on the theme that there is morally bad religion and that South Africa offers a particularly disturbing example of it through the support of some of the biggest Christian churches for apartheid. According to Prozesky, Geering was very supportive of his presentation and they became friends.

Prozesky considers that the next great lesson he learnt from Geering was his ability to unfold an enormously sweeping view of the history of ethics and religion. He sees them as having developed through two great transitions (Geering 1980). Using Karl Jaspers' idea of an axial age of religion in the period just before and after about 500 BCE when many so-called world religions emerged, or in which they have foundations, Geering suggested a second such axis, or as he calls it, a second threshold or great turning point in the evolution of religion starting in about 1750 with developments like the rise of science and the enlightenment. Geering argued that this second great threshold is a movement towards the possibility of a secular, global period of faith and ethics (Geering 1991). According to Prozesky it was this way Geering encouraged him to seek the widest possible perspective on religion and ethics in his own work. Among other results was Prozesky's extension of his studies into the main secular philosophies; a development that is covered later in this article.

Geering's other main contribution to Prozesky's work concerns the critique of traditional Christianity and especially its traditional concept of God (Geering 1994; 2009). This began with his support for Prozesky's critique of traditional theistic religion at the international conference in 1981, already mentioned above, and continued down the years through the provision of supportive critical comments of Prozesky's own writings on this issue and others (Prozesky 1985a; 1985b).

**Ninian Smart.** At John Hick's instigation Prozesky took his first sabbatical in Claremont, California where Ninian Smart was a professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara. Prozesky made contact with him personally and again when he came to South Africa for a visit to the University of Cape Town. Smart strongly supported the key phrase in Prozesky's first book, which he was researching in that sabbatical in Claremont in 1982, wherein he describes the various religions as quests for ultimate well-being in the form of their various teachings about achieving heaven, paradise and release or Nirvana as the greatest good that could ever come one's way. Prozesky proposed the term about quests for ultimate well-being in a conference at the beginning of that sabbatical in Claremont. Prozesky recalls that Ninian Smart was in the audience and he said that it was a good phrase to use.

Well before this event, Smart had provided an earlier benefit to Prozesky's work in comparative religion while he was lecturing at the former University of Rhodesia from 1971 to 1976. This was Smart's model (later modified slightly) of religion as having six dimensions: the experiential, the doctrinal, the ritual, the ethical, the social and the mythological, in a book called revealingly *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Smart 1969; 1997). When Prozesky moved from religious studies to comparative ethics studies in 1997, he began to use this view in relation to the moral facet of human existence, presenting it in a so-far unpublished conference paper for the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa (Prozesky 2011).

**Wilfred Cantwell Smith.** John Hick and Lloyd Geering were both responsible for introducing Prozesky to the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the early 1980s. After reading his seminal books *The Meaning and End of Religion* and *Faith and Belief* (Smith 1978; 1979), Prozesky was able to meet Smith both at Harvard University, where he was the professor of world religions, and in New Zealand, at and after the 1983 international conference to mark Lloyd Geering's retirement. Before meeting Smith at Harvard University, Prozesky confirmed that he had sent him a paper he had written on Schleiermacher's first account of religion (Prozesky 1981a). Apparently Smith replied encouragingly. Thereafter it was really his work on the difference between faith and belief, which was also explained by Wainwright (1984:355), which Prozesky regards as the most important of the things he learnt from Smith, who regards faith as the core reality of religion, defining it as an orientation to transcendence which is essentially the same in all the traditions. According to Smith, faith thus

understood comes to expression in what he calls the cumulative traditions that grow from it, using whatever expressions and practices the cultures concerned, provide.

For example, in their contact with Jesus, his earliest followers had the life-changing experiences of transcendence which Smith calls faith. From these experiences, shaped by their cultural setting, there developed a growing, cumulative tradition of worship, doctrine, creed, institution and scripture. Prozesky understood that if faith is the heart of religion, then it judges and transforms the cumulative tradition and not the other way around (Prozesky: 1999b:103).

***Process Scholars.*** In 1978 Prozesky reviewed an introduction to process theology for the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (Cobb & Griffin 1977; Prozesky 1979). That was his first serious encounter with the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and with the theology that has sprung from it. Interacting with the leading process theologians John B. Cobb Jr. and David Griffin during his sabbatical at Claremont, California in 1982, deepened and extended Prozesky's knowledge of and appreciation for process thought, but he had at that time yet to make a thorough study of it, especially in connection with ethics. The change came after the appearance of Prozesky's book *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: An Explanatory Theory* in 1984, when the best responses to it came from process thinkers, chiefly Cobb and Schubert M. Ogden. Intrigued by this reaction, Prozesky made a much more thorough study of key process texts, focusing on ethics, from which two journal articles and two chapters in books emerged (Prozesky 1995; 1999a; 2000; 2009). It was quickly evident that the central role Prozesky discerned for human creativity in the rise and development of religion would go down well with process thinkers in view of the centrality of creativity in Whitehead's philosophy.

***Feminist Scholars.*** The radical critique of androcentricity and patriarchy in Christianity by Mary Daly helped Prozesky to see the importance of the feminist perspective on patriarchal religion and society that was emerging in the 1970s (Daly 1973). Contact with both Ursula King and Rosemary Radford Ruether and their work took this process further, especially when they were visiting professors at the former University of Natal. What it did was alert Prozesky to the need for a much deeper critical awareness of the way patriarchy

has affected, indeed infected, religion to the detriment of women and indeed also men. Thus it contributed in an important way to his critical theology and his still developing work on what he informally calls good and bad religion (cf. King 1998).

## **Spiritual Leaders**

Together with the Anglican clergy who influenced Prozesky during his boyhood in Oudtshoorn and several others whom he encountered later like the late Catholic Archbishop of Durban, Denis Hurley, he mentions four spiritual leaders who have enriched his life and work. They are Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, Jonathan Sacks and the Dalai Lama.

*Desmond Tutu.* Prozesky's recalls his first encounter with Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu was in 1969 during his year as a temporary lecturer at Rhodes University. Tutu had returned from his studies at King's College, London and was lecturing at the former Federal Theological Seminary, then located in the small town of Alice, not far from Rhodes University. Upon hearing that Desmond Tutu would be delivering an open lecturer at the seminary, a group from Rhodes travelled there to hear him. Prozesky was one of them and vividly recalls the lecture. It was about Rudolf Otto's famous view that spiritual experience is centered on what Otto called 'the Holy' (Otto 1923). For Prozesky it was clear that a highly significant new voice had entered South African church life. He was at that time unaware that Otto had drawn some of his inspiration from the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

It was several years later, when Prozesky was a lecturer in the Department of Theology at the former University of Rhodesia, that his friendship with Desmond Tutu began. Tutu was then working for the Theological Education Fund in London, which assisted departments like the one in Harare, as it is now called. Prozesky acted as his host, showing him around and explaining the work of the department. Their links resumed when Tutu returned to South Africa and continue to the present. Reflecting on the Archbishop's impact on him, Prozesky singles out his powerful, prophetic ethical example, his deep personal spirituality and his inclusive view of the religions, not to speak of his unfailing generosity of spirit and action. For example, amidst his very heavy load of engagements and work he has twice readily agreed to provide endorsements for Prozesky's books.

**Gandhi.** In Gandhi's project of a non-violent, ethical politics of liberation and in his pioneering openness to religions other than his own native Hinduism, Prozesky found both an ethical and spiritual inspiration. This led in 1993, the centenary of Gandhi's arrival in South Africa, to a prominent role in arranging a commemorative conference about the Mahatma at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. From its papers emerged the book he helped Judith Brown edit called *Gandhi in South Africa: Principles and Politics* (Brown & Prozesky 1996).

When confronted with the question of what Gandhi meant to him, Prozesky identifies Gandhi's encouragement to everyone who thinks, sometimes despairingly, that the task of making the world a better place is just too big. Prozesky suggests that if we ever feel that way we must remember that Gandhi's successful project of a spiritually-enriched, non-violent ethical politics, that liberated India from British domination, had a very small and lonely beginning. Here Prozesky has in mind the young Gandhi's moment of truth on Pietermaritzburg railway station in May 1893 when, having been thrown off the train from Durban because he was a dark-skinned man in an all-white, first class part of the train, he had the inspiration for the idea that there must be a non-violent way to overcome violence. But the crucial step was that Gandhi did not just keep the idea to himself. He shared it and that is the essence of ethical power. It was a very small beginning which grew into a non-violent liberation movement that defeated a powerful, armed opponent. Prozesky sees this as a living demonstration that small acts of shared goodness's can at times become world-changing.

**Jonathan Sacks.** While occupying the position of Chief Rabbi of Britain's Orthodox Jewish congregations, Jonathan Sacks, now Lord Sacks, produced writings of great ethical and spiritual power, especially about what he calls 'the dignity of difference' – about how to affirm diversity in the world of religion (Sacks 2002). Prozesky met Sacks only once while he was in England and asked to meet the Chief Rabbi. Sack's response, given a very full diary, was to invite Prozesky to his home in the evening for a conversation. Prozesky describes his experience with Sacks as follows:

He actually invited me to his home in London, a total stranger, and I had an hour with him in his study. It was deeply inspiring to experience at first hand this man's wisdom and spiritual depth. I remember

thinking as I left there that I have just been in the presence of a truly godly man.

This encounter and Sacks' books were a powerful support for Prozesky's conviction that beliefs and doctrines divide whereas ethical values are very much the same and can unite, at least at a practical level.

***The Dalai Lama.*** In connection with the Dalai Lama, Prozesky mentions that he had studied Buddhism for his lectures in comparative religion in some detail and also spent time at the Buddhist Retreat Centre near Ixopo in his home province. He values his contacts with Buddhists there and elsewhere and especially values the Buddhist meditation practice. Interestingly, Buddhism was the first non-theistic religion that Prozesky encountered in the person of a Buddhist fellow student at Rhodes University when he was a first year student.

These earlier experiences came to a climax when the Dalai Lama was in South Africa. There was a meeting with him in Durban to which Prozesky was invited. He had known about the Dalai Lama's famous sense of humour, his wisdom and his views on ethics. Given the non-theistic nature of Buddhism, the question Prozesky put at that meeting was about what the Dalai Lama felt about those in a strongly theistic culture like South Africa who think atheism is a bad thing. Prozesky recalls the response from the Dalai Lama in the words something like: 'It really shouldn't be a problem, after all we Buddhists are atheist'. Thus Prozesky remarks,

Here was an openly atheistic, deeply spiritual and saintly man with great ethical depth. It was moving to experience something of his spiritual vibrancy in person.

## **Religious Pluralism and Critical Theology**

The growing experience of contact with people from other faiths and philosophies that began in Prozesky's boyhood and has continued ever since has already been introduced. It is no surprise, then, that the ethical and theological implications of religious pluralism became a central scholarly and personal concern for him, forcing him to ask searchingly critical questions about traditional, orthodox Christian beliefs. Asked about this, he explains that the existence of other faiths and philosophies of great moral and intellectual

quality and followed by two-thirds of the world's people posed for him, insuperable problems with core, traditional Christian doctrines like exclusive revelation and especially salvation through belief in Christ and in no other way. So he came to reject, as unfair and logically incompatible with the nature of a perfect God, the idea that a single belief-system has a monopoly on truth, goodness and spiritual validity.

Two key realities emerged from Prozesky's personal encounters with and comparative studies of other religious traditions and of secularistic philosophies which are discussed below. Firstly, the various faiths and philosophies show remarkable convergence about core ethical values, but are divided by doctrinal teachings and creeds. He maintains that,

We believe some incompatible things. God is either a Trinity or not, reincarnation either happens or doesn't. And if you emphasize the doctrines you end up with division and at times alienation and conflict, and we have had lots of that. But if you emphasize moral quality you find that kindness, justice and truthfulness are present in people of any known belief-system, religious as well as secular.

Asked if these findings involving religious pluralism caused him to question his own Christian beliefs, he is unequivocal in saying that they did, adding that his work in the philosophy of religion in the 1970s and 1980s raised its own critical questions about Christian beliefs. What did not change was his commitment to Christianity's ethic of love and justice and his profound admiration for Christ, noting that this ethic was part of Christianity's inheritance from Judaism.

The first published expression of Prozesky's critical theology marked the end of his ability to accept Barth's theology. It was a paper titled, 'The Divine Absentee: Karl Barth and the "Death-of-God" Theologians' (Prozesky 1981c). In the philosophy of religion at the time central concern was with religious language. This led to Prozesky's work on cultural relativity in religion, which he applied to Christology in a paper in 1981 (Prozesky 1981d). In it he argued, among other things, that all religious beliefs are culturally relative. This was another facet of his growing rejection of absolutism about theological matters.

While Prozesky's concern with what he sees as logical problems in Christian doctrine was and remains a key problem for him, it was the ethical

criterion that increasingly dominated his critical theology from 1985 onwards. The ethical question that concerned him most was this:

What is it about a religion that claims to be uniquely the gift of a perfect God who was embodied exclusively in a perfect Saviour and is guided by a unique, divinely inspired scripture that none the less enabled it to give succor to apartheid and before that, to slavery and other terrible evils?

His answer is that whatever its source, such a religion as manifested in its teachings and practices and indeed also in its scriptures, must be just as fallible and flawed as anything else we human create, and is therefore permanently open to creative change for the better by its adherents.

This and other critical conclusions found expression in a set of essays and published conference papers in the mid-1980s, and afterwards, that together expressed Prozesky's critical theological writings, a concern to which he says he has returned to in his current work (Prozesky 1985a; 1985b; 1986a; 1988b; 1990; 1991; 1992). The same commitment to ethical and logical critical evaluation of core Christian beliefs led to his main work of this kind, his evaluation of Christian theism, discussed below.

Asked to elaborate on what led to this strongly ethical criticality, Prozesky's response was as follows:

What stood out for me even in my teens was what we would now call the ethical dimension of life: the idea that it is important to oppose injustice, it is important to live honourably, truthfully and lovingly, and so on. And then you see that across the road there is a church which is preaching that apartheid is God's will, and even in your own your hear that Jews and others who do not accept Christ as Saviour are all going to hell, things that were and remain morally unacceptable to me.

Prozesky continues to elaborate by saying that,

So while I was never greatly drawn by worship or creed or even scripture, I was and remain powerfully drawn by the practice of love and the project begun by Jesus of Nazareth. Thus began a gradual movement away from institutional religion. I never formally left the



church but I have certainly ceased active membership, partly because I would hear very little doctrinal there that I could really believe in or be passionate about, though I love traditional church music and architecture. I moved also because I got tired of hearing one strand of the great spiritual story of the earth, which I heard over and over and over again, but never some of the beautiful teachings in the *Qur'an*, the *Bhagavadgita* or the *Dharmapada.*, let alone the Humanist Manifesto, all of which I was discovering in my academic life as containing many wonderful resources. It became clear to me that the university and the library were better places for real truth-seeking than any church known to me, though that never diminished my admiration and gratitude for the love I experienced in the church.

## **The God Question**

Shortly before becoming a Dean of Humanities in 1991, Prozesky completed a book called *A New Guide to the Debate about God* (Prozesky 1992a). In it he set out and evaluated the case both for and against the belief that the Deity of traditional Christianity exists. He concluded that this was unlikely on logical, empirical and ethical grounds, but maintained that an alternative theism could be developed that would have at least adequate justification. Prozesky adds that his 1992 book was intended to be the predecessor to a second book in which he would set out that alternative approach to theism, but has so far not been able to write that book.

Asked, some twenty years later, whether God exists for him, Prozesky's reply reveals some of the results of his work on and experience of the different religions, both theistic and non-theistic, of his earlier critiques of traditional Christian theism (Prozesky 1985a; 1985b) and of his work in developing the critical theology reviewed above.

He starts his reply by saying that it depends on what one means by the term 'god'. For Prozesky, god as 'An all-powerful, authoritarian sovereign up in the heavens does not exist'. According to Prozesky what certainly is absolutely real is 'a great, wonderful, transforming power that far surpasses our own powers, which is real and available right now'. And that to him is what really matters. He then uses a distinction made by the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy Gottlob Frege who taught the distinction between the sense and the reference of nouns. The sense refers to the meaning of a word. The reference

means that to which it points. As an example he mentions the word dragon. Here the word means a horrific, fire-breathing beast. What it refers to is a fictitious creature in literature or perhaps, metaphorically, a very nasty human being.

He continues that the word god means various things. He mentions that, 'etymologically the roots are interesting to look at'. The word Deity for example links up with Deva in Sanskrit having to do with brightness and light. The English word God evidently derives from a Germanic word signifying awesome power and so on. According to Prozesky. 'Paul Tillich, half a century ago, taught us to understand the meaning of the word as the reality which ultimately concerns us' (Tillich 1951-63). He adds that,

I like this because it is true of everybody. We are all affected by whatever is the ultimate reality. When, next, you ask what the word God refers to, and you know that most people in our parts of the world say it refers to a Supreme Being, you must, if you respect all the evidence, accept the fact that the so-called eastern religions like Buddhism are non-theistic. They hold that the word god refers to a fiction, a mere belief that has no objectively existing referent, and such people are no less intelligent, educated, ethical and spiritual deep than our theists.

Therefore according to Prozesky, his understanding of the word god refers to the ultimate reality which is experienced as a supremely transforming but mysterious power. He suggests the use of poetry, metaphor and music in expressing what the word refers to, namely this 'wonderful, transcendent but available transforming power that uplifts and inspires us and brings us what religious people called blessings in all sorts of ways'.

Prozesky adds that he thinks one has to reject dogmatism and exclusivism about the way one speaks of the ultimate reality. In his own words, 'We name it *as humans*, and we humans are not gods and all too often we make a God out of our fallible human god-talk'. Earlier in his career he read some wonderful advice by the then leading British philosopher of religion, Ian Ramsey. Ramsey, in his book 'Religious language: An empirical placing of theological phrases' (1963), made the point that the idea of god is not like an excellent photograph of the Deity that is delivered to us the way diplomats send precise messages to their governments in the diplomatic bag. God-talk, he said,

is ‘significant stuttering’. How can you be caught up into the mysterious reality of something magnificently good, perfect and beautiful and not be speechless? To this Prozesky adds, ‘we go into our religious institutions and make gods out of the words we use to refer, always haltingly, to the ultimate reality’.

Therefore Prozesky concludes that the question really is whether there is an ultimate reality that is the greatest, richest reality we could ever encounter, one that draws us by its power and its availability. His response is that,

there certainly is such a reality. It is finitely and fallibly called God in some culture but not in others, with equal justification. In support of his view he adds that classical Christian theology has always spoken of God as ineffable, as that which is beyond word, too rich for words.

## **Secular Humanism and Marxism**

Prozesky denied the perception by some that he became a secular humanist. He explained that it was only an academic pursuit and never endorsed secular humanism personally. He pursued an academic research of secular humanism when the Department of Religious Studies at in the former University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg defined its task as the study of belief systems, secular as well as religious. The reason for that approach was the conviction that one cannot have an adequate understanding of the religious world if one has no understanding of those who criticize and reject it. So as well as studying and teaching students about the various religions, they specifically included Marxism and secular humanism.

Prozesky had previously done research on Marxism when he was teaching at the University of Rhodesia, a country that did not have South Africa’s erstwhile prohibition of access to Marxist literature. But he had not grappled with secular humanism until returning to South Africa in 1977. That was the extent of secular humanism for him, except for taking on board some of the secularist criticism of religion that he found convincing. As to why he had not embraced secular humanism as a personal philosophy, he explains that he rejects the wholesale dismissal of all religion by secular humanism, and by Marxism, which are very anti-religious. He does not object to the rejection of what he calls bad religion but to the dismissal of the many things in the world’s religions that are great and good, ethically, philosophically and spiritually. He adds that he finds a label reportedly proposed by Ninian Smart much more

accurate, namely transcendental humanism, provided transcendence is not understood dualistically.

‘Equally’, says Prozesky, ‘you quickly discover that the ethical values espoused by secular humanists, by example in work of Paul Kurtz, are essentially the same as those of the religions’ (Kurtz 1988).

So, you conclude that in the quest for a more humane world, a more environmentally safe world, what we call ethics evidently touches something in us that is more universal and deeper than the cumulative traditions of religion, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith called them.

Similarly, he maintains that you cannot study Marx without being moved and impressed by his sense of outrage at the exploitation of the poor, by the raw capitalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What stands out is someone with a rage against such injustice and exploitation, which reminds Prozesky of the great Hebrew prophetic denunciation of injustice we find in the Hebrew scriptures. The world-views of Marx and the Hebrew prophets could not be more different but their moral passion against injustice and oppression is identical.

## **Explaining Religion**

Probing the nature of religion has been a long-standing concern for Prozesky. What is his understanding of this phenomenon? He identifies five characteristics. Retaining the view of his first book (Prozesky 1984), he sees religion firstly as the human quest for ultimate well-being. Secondly, what answers this quest is the experience of a surpassing, uplifting but always mysterious power, experienced as that which makes us the happiest, most fulfilled, and morally best, which by its nature evokes commitment. Thirdly, religion in its cumulative traditional forms is an artifact; it is a human creation embedded in our various cultures in response to the experience of contact with that transforming power which some but not all traditions believe is a personal, Supreme Being. In the fourth place, while the ways in which humans think of and express that power are fallible and can be very imperfect, the mysterious power itself is no mere delusion as Sigmund Freud and others have maintained. Fifthly, religion is seen as the transforming enrichment of what Prozesky

would call true religion, which is available right now and not something postponed to an afterlife.

Looking back at his first book in 1984, Prozesky adds two comments. *Firstly*, it showed him that within the experiential approach to religion, what is fundamental is our valorizing, context-embedded human nature. How and why we come to value what we value most is the essential question to ask and answer. *Secondly*, he remains convinced of the essential correctness of his naturalistic explanation of why religion exists, deriving it from causes in our human nature and in the way the surrounding world affects us. While these are purely natural causes, they do not of themselves mean that there is no other reality than the natural universe, for the question can always be asked whether the natural universe points beyond itself to an anterior source (Prozesky 1986b; 1988).

## **From Theology and Religious Studies to Ethics and Spirituality**

In his academic work Martin Prozesky began as a lecturer in systematic theology in 1969, moved into religious studies, teaching comparative religion and the philosophy of religion, and from 1997 he has concentrated on comparative, applied ethics and on inclusive spirituality. The opportunity to move into ethics arose from his time as Dean of Humanities from 1991 to 1995, which coincided with the end of apartheid in 1994. Prozesky raised with others the question of the future of the humanities in a post-apartheid society and came to the conclusion that there was an acute need for a new approach to the gravely damaged state of morality in the country.

Given South Africa's multi-cultural character, Prozesky believed that it was time for a fresh approach to ethics both as an academic discipline and as ethical practice or morality because for him morality was largely defined by Christianity and by western philosophy. He therefore questioned whether that would suffice in a new, inclusive democracy with a diversity of faiths and philosophies and a large African majority. He strongly disagreed with the notion that, with important new insights into morality coming from the social and natural sciences, that one can still look to just western philosophy and theology for ethical wisdom. He did not think so, and therefore when his term as Dean was over, he proposed to Professor Brenda Gourley, the Vice-Chancellor at the time, that the university should set up a multi-cultural, multi-

disciplinary ethics centre with special attention to African ethics to drive this project, which Prozesky was willing to develop. She gave it her support and helped find generous external funding from the Unilever Foundation for Education and Development. Thus, Prozesky became the founding director of the Unilever Ethics Centre on the Pietermaritzburg campus, until he opted for early retirement in 2007 to concentrate on ethics training in the wider community and on thinking out a way of bringing together the main strands in his life and thought in connection with spirituality. This is evident in the chapters published on 'ethical spirituality' (Prozesky 2001) and on 'ethics, spirituality and the secular' (Prozesky 2006).

## **Exploring the Ethical Dimension of our Existence and the Global Ethics Project**

Prozesky does not think that humans are intrinsically good. Human evil is too real for him to accept that human beings are intrinsically good, but they are also not intrinsically bad. He holds that human beings are morally ambivalent and adds that, 'any traditional understanding of the idea of original sin clashes with the evidence'. 'One of the good things about secular humanism', says Prozesky 'is its argument that there is a far too negative interpretation of humanity in traditional Christianity'.

When asked who or what determines good and evil, Prozesky response is that, 'in practice, we humans do, but we don't do it arbitrarily'. He asks,

Why is there such widespread agreement about core values in every culture I have studied? It can't be cultural, because the cultures are so different. Could it something in human nature? That is partly why I became interested in the biology of ethics which is showing that we are made in such a way, biologically, that unless certain values are prioritized and practised we cannot thrive and will not even survive. For example, working together, co-operatively and helpfully, with others, is a condition of survival and yields the moral virtue of unselfishness. We humans cannot achieve the well-being we all want on our own so we have to learn how to work together, and that requires respect for others, truthfulness, supportiveness and mutual help, which are central to what we discern as right and good. Well-being requires teams rather than standout, self-concerned individuals, and so on.

For Prozesky there is very good scientific evidences that ‘there is a source for morality in our biological make-up, but only up to a point, for we also have to choose whether to live selfishly or caringly, and so on’. That of course opens the door to a great deal of wicked choosing as well as to noble choosing, but for him it is ‘our choices, together with our underlying biology that ground morality’. He believes that the idea that somebody out there tells us what is right and wrong and commands us to behave in certain ways merely creates moral dependency in us.

Not surprisingly, Prozesky has turned to human brain science for further insight into bioethics. He began to do some serious reading about it and consulted colleagues in neurobiology at his university’s medical faculty. As a result he was able to include this new information in his account of ethics in his book called *Conscience: Ethical Intelligence for Global Well-Being* (Prozesky 2007). He now uses it in all his ethics training, along with information about the various value-systems of society, not least African ones, treated with equal respect and openness. He believes that exclusivism about ethics is just as unacceptable as in religion.

## **Present and Future Research Projects**

As to the present and future projects, Prozesky identifies two themes. The first one is his work on global ethics, which is an ongoing project that was also part of his 2007 book. For a global ethic that is fully ethical, his use of brain science and comparative ethics is highly relevant. Using them as sources for ethical principles and practice is, according to him, ‘completely fair and inclusive because we all have exactly the same brain architecture, which has nothing to do with cultural differences. The biology of ethics therefore gives us an empirically verified and shared source’. As he says,

We don’t have to learn Sanskrit or Hebrew or Arabic or Greek or Latin or Zulu to do this, or believe this or that doctrine; we just have to learn from our own experience, and our experience is made possible by certain features of the brain, along with the cultures our powerful brains and some other features of our biology like opposable thumbs enable us to create and modify. A global ethics project cannot be truly global or truly ethical if it rests on sources that are not universally

available, or excludes important parts of the great range of value-systems in the world.

That, for Prozesky, is the problem with Hans Küng's otherwise admirable, pioneering work on global ethics (Küng 1997).

There is thus the real possibility now of a shared, co-operatively constructed global ethic. Related to this interest is another of Prozesky's current research interests, which is the Progressive Christianity movement, which understands itself and its loyalty to Jesus of Nazareth in strongly ethical terms (Brown 2008). While he has reservations about some of the connotations of the term 'progressive', he is drawn to the powerful ethical emphasis of the movement, for, as he explains, he 'is not primarily interested in doctrinal issues'. He fears that 'they are side-tracking us from the urgent business of addressing the great global problems of poverty, violence, gender injustice and the environment'. What also appeals to him about Progressive Christianity is that,

it tries to create a congenial space for people who are no longer at home in their churches, but who do not want to drift off into secularism. These are people at or just beyond the outer edges of church life but who are still drawn to the ethics they trace back to Christ and to the friendship of others who share that interest.

Having asked what this new movement can offer to the project of creating a global ethic and a global spirituality, Prozesky believes that,

It is very open-minded and science-friendly, fully open to the best of modern knowledge and to other spiritual traditions and could thus be on the path to what the world needs most, and that is a global conscience which is both spiritually rich and open to secular insights.

The topic of what Prozesky calls ethico-spirituality is also part of his present and future work. Troubled by the way religions so often and so deeply divide and even alienate people from one another, he ponders the question of whether there might be a way, through global ethics, to a new and inclusive spirituality that takes both the secular world and our religious heritage very seriously (Prozesky 2006). In this connection he notes approvingly the



important recent work of Lloyd Geering (Geering 2013). Among other contentions, the Geering writes that we are now being called upon to embark on a project of earth salvation because we are now endangering our planet and the whole human future (Geering 1999). Prozesky adds that for this to happen

we also need a new project to save religion itself, to rescue what is truest and best in it from what is harmful, divisive and in conflict with the evidence now available to us about the religious and ethical dimensions of human existence.

## **Conclusion**

This interaction with Martin Prozesky and the numerous valuable insights provided by him in the interview, his interactions with well known experts in the fields of religion and ethics and his numerous academic publications is an indication of a great scholar who is a deep thinker, yet practical and humble in many respects. His contribution towards the ethical well-being of society, as indicated in this article, is filled with a great concern for humanity. His scholarly works bears testimony to an unselfish human being steeped in the quest for a global ethical well-being. It was indeed a tremendous experience to listen to and understand his views on different aspects of issues pertaining to the well-being of humanity.

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# World Religions in the World

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## Abstract

The classification of ‘world religions’ is highly problematic because of its arbitrary construction, its exclusion of indigenous religions, and its easy availability for ideological manipulation. The imperial edifice of ‘world religions’ has been dismantled in recent scholarship in the study of religion. Yet, the notion of ‘world religions’ has been enthusiastically embraced by advocates of inclusive citizenship in democratic societies and by advocates of indigenous empowerment in postcolonial societies. This brief essay reviews the terms of engagement for critically reflecting on the various deployments of ‘world religions’ as a prelude to thinking about religion in the world.

**Keywords:** world religions, indigenous religions, ideology, inclusive citizenship, democracy, indigenous empowerment, postcolonial societies, religion in the world

I have been researching and teaching about religion and religions in South Africa since 1984. I confess that when I first arrived I thought that the study of religion in the country was underdeveloped, except for the work of Martin Prozesky, who besides leading a professional association and editing a peer-reviewed journal was developing research in explaining religion (Prozesky 1984), critically analyzing the entanglements of Christianity with apartheid (Prozesky 1990), profiling the emergent field in the region (Prozesky 1996), and providing textbook resources for the classroom (Prozesky & De Gruchy 1991). While his explanatory theory accounted for religions of the world as ways of maximizing human well-being, his teaching also focused on world

religions in South Africa. In this brief essay in tribute to Martin Prozesky, I want to reflect on the ongoing importance of the study of religion and religions – even the study of ‘world religions’ – against the background of what I have learned in South Africa.

Why is the study of religion important? If we were only interested in writing advertising copy or generating propaganda for the academic study of religion, we might advance this circular argument: Like politics, economics, music, or literature, religion is an important and pervasive human activity. Therefore, teaching and learning about such an activity must obviously be important if we want to know about human beings. This argument is circular because it assumes that the study of something is important because the thing is important. But it tells us nothing about the importance of the study, about its distinctive value proposition. What does this field of teaching and learning bring to the party?

As we know, there are many answers to this question, which is something I like about the academic study of religion. This field is resistant to any orthodoxy. Many voices can be heard. Many positions can contend. This multiplicity of perspectives and positions, I am convinced, is a strength rather than a weakness of the academic study of religion.

Nevertheless, positioning myself, I have found that our key terms – religion and religions – are not merely objects for study. They are occasions for critical and creative reflection on problems of interpretation, explanation, and analysis in the humanities and social sciences. The study of religion, as I understand it, is a critical and creative enterprise. While the criticism of religion, as Karl Marx proposed, is the beginning of all criticism, the creative enterprise of imagining religion as a human project opens new possibilities for understanding a diverse array of powerful discourses, practices, and social formations that are underwritten by claims on transcendence or the sacred.

In my teaching, I dwell in the ambiguity of the very word, ‘religion’. I focus on boundary situations. I concentrate on situations in which the designation has been denied to alternative religious movements in the United States (Chidester 1988a) or to indigenous religions in southern Africa (Chidester 1996). By contrast, I also focus on situations in which the term has been extended to include the ultimate commitments of modern nationalisms (Chidester 1998b) or the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture (Chidester 2005). Accordingly, I find that the term, ‘religion’, is an

enabling term, because it allows for critical and creative reflection on crucial problems of inclusion and exclusion that have both intellectual and social consequences.

The term ‘religions’ poses a related set of problems. How many are there? In principle, their number might be indeterminate and innumerable, but their classification bears traces of particular kinds of social projects. In trying to conceptualize, contain, and perhaps even manage this diversity, European and Euro-American scholars during the nineteenth century came up with the notion of ‘world religions’. We live with that legacy. What do we do about it?

In teaching and learning about religions, we must critically interrogate the historical conditions that have produced the classification of ‘world religions’. This critical reflection, however, cannot be an end in itself. Against this background, we still need to find ways of creatively engaging, understanding, and explaining the discourses and forces that move and motivate people, personally and collectively, religiously.

Although the classification of ‘world religions’, as I will suggest, is highly problematic because of its arbitrary construction, its exclusion of indigenous religions, and its easy availability for being manipulated by agents of various imperial projects, we must also recognize that the notion of ‘world religions’ has also been enthusiastically embraced by advocates of inclusive citizenship in democratic societies and by advocates of indigenous empowerment in postcolonial societies.

Briefly, I review this history of the notion of ‘world religions’, not as if recounting this history were an end in itself, but in the interest of advancing efforts to clear ground and open space for teaching and learning about religion, religions, and religious diversity.

In his series of lectures delivered in 1870 on the science of religion, Friedrich Max Müller, who is often regarded as the founder of the academic study of religion, saw his primary task as classification. Taking as his motto the aphorism, *divide et impera*, which he rendered ‘classify and conquer’, Max Müller proceeded to classify the major religions of the world into three language groups, the Semitic (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the Aryan (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism), and the Turanian (Confucianism and Taoism). Although he did not use the phrase, ‘world religions’, Max Müller nevertheless argued that these eight religions comprised the ‘library of the sacred books of the world’. These textual traditions, with their sacred books and interpretive communities, could be regarded as a library, a religious



archive that could be organized, like any library, according to a general system of classification.

Any modern library, however, whatever system of classification it employs, whether Dewey Decimal, Library of Congress, or some other system, must be all-inclusive. Anything and everything must fit somewhere. But Friedrich Max Müller's 'library of sacred books of the world' was organized by a system of classification, as he quickly admitted, which left out most of the religious life of the world. In his library of eight religions, Müller observed,

The largest portion of mankind, – ay, and some of the most valiant champions in the religious and intellectual struggles of the world, would be unrepresented in our theological library (1873: 116).

F. Max Müller's classification of religions, therefore, was based on a very peculiar system that left out many – if not most – of the religious struggles of the world.

Although the phrase has become conventional, the notion of 'world religions' is actually a very strange construction. As deep background, it arose out of medieval Christian reflections on the variety of religious laws or sects (Biller 1984; Bossy 1982), medieval Christian travel accounts of strange beliefs and customs (for example, Mandeville 1900; see Chidester 2000: 335-340), the early modern Christian 'wars of religion' that made religion a highly charged marker of political difference in Europe (Holt 1995), and the commercial expansion into the Atlantic and Pacific worlds that made religion a highly charged marker of human value outside of Europe (Chidester 1996; 2000:353-490). But European scholars in the late nineteenth century transformed these reflections on difference and encounters with diversity into a science of religion. Raising basic questions, which might have arisen from intellectual curiosity, about human identity and difference, the notion of separate and distinct religions of the world was integrated into European political projects in forging identities based on race, language, and territory (Masuzawa 2005). This construction of 'world religions' capitalized on the ambiguity inherent in the ancient Latin term, *religio*, which could refer to either personal faith or public ritual. Within the classificatory system of 'world religions', personal subjectivity could be defined as symptomatic of adherence to a religious collectivity. Accordingly, people all over the world could be

classified as if their identity, subjectivity, and agency were determined by their religions.

However, as even Max Müller recognized, this system of classification was not adequate, although its inadequacy was not merely its inherent bias towards textual traditions. More seriously and substantially, I would argue, the very notion of ‘world religions’ failed to account for religion, religions, and religious diversity in the world because it was arbitrary, exclusionary, and immediately available for ideological manipulation.

*First*, the framework of ‘world religions’ is completely arbitrary. How many religions, we might ask, are there in the world? In the 1590s, when the word, ‘religions’, first appeared in the English language, there were two, Protestant and Catholic (Harrison 1990: 39). During the eighteenth century, there were four, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Paganism (Pailin 1984). Following Max Müller’s identification of eight religions in 1870, as the study of religion developed in the twentieth century the list of major ‘world religions’ was altered on account of contingent historical factors to remove Zoroastrianism and add Shintoism. Although a recent survey has identified thirty-three principal ‘world religions’ (Eliade *et al.* 2000), common usage of the framework has generally settled on a kind of G8 of major religions in the world.

The gradual increase in the number of recognized religions in the world might suggest an expanding scope of human recognition. But all of these accountings have been based on arbitrary definitions of indeterminate diversity. The arbitrary construction of ‘world religions’ is immediately revealed by considering global demographics. Indigenous African religion, in all of its variety, is a powerful and pervasive religious force in the world. According to statistics compiled by Adherents.com, African traditional and diasporic religions account for the religious affiliation of 100 million people, ranking eighth in this website’s profile of the ‘major religions of the world’ (Adherents.com 2005). Yet African religion never appears on any conventional list of world religions (see Baum 2005; Lewis 1990).

*Second*, as the example of African indigenous and diasporic religion suggests, the framework of ‘world religions’ is exclusionary. By privileging the religions that emerged from urban, agricultural civilizations of the Middle East, India, and the Far East, the model of ‘world religions’ implicitly excludes all forms of indigenous religious life. Max Müller’s library of religions, as he recognized, could only be secured by first factoring out the ‘religious struggles’ of indigenous people all over the world. When not ignored entirely, as they

often are, indigenous religions are incorporated in introductory textbooks to 'world religions' as traces of origins and absences. They might no longer register as 'savage' or 'primitive', but indigenous religions have been classified as 'primal religions' (Smart 1996; Smith 1994; Richards 1997) or 'basic religions' (Hopfe & Woodward 2007), suggesting that they represent the earliest, simplest point of origin transcended by major world religions, an impression reinforced by including them in a consideration of 'primal and bygone religions' (Noss 2003). A similar exclusion of indigenous religions is suggested by classifying them as 'religions of nature' or 'nature religions' (Elwood & McGraw 2005; Kung & Kuschel 1995), which risks suggesting that they belong in the natural rather than cultural world, or by classifying them as 'tribal religions' (Carmody & Brink 2006; Matthews 2003) that implicitly have no place within a world comprising civilizations, nations, and especially modern states. Sometimes introductory texts have defined indigenous religions simply as an absence, as in the category, 'non-literate religions' (Coogan 1998), as if an entire category could be defined by what it lacks, or by a mix of natural origin and cultural absence, as in the category, 'nonscriptural nature religions' (Toropov & Buckles 1997), but the model of 'world religions' has struggled with finding terminology for indigenous religions because it is premised on their exclusion.

Although we might assume that the phrase, 'world religions', stands in contrast to either non-religion or religions from other planets, it actually seems to operate in opposition to the indigenous religions of colonized people all over the world. In general surveys of 'world religions', indigenous religions are rarely referred to as 'indigenous' (although see Chidester 2002; Fisher 2006; Ludwig 2006). As William Pietz has observed, that term would imply 'the right to land, territories, and place' associated with the kind of indigenous national autonomy asserted by the International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations (Pietz 1999: 7-8; Martin & Stahnke 1998: 133-37). By rendering indigenous religions a residual category, the framework of 'world religions' excludes any consideration of such claims to indigenous identity and place in the world. Accordingly, it might be argued that the very notion of 'world religions' emerged as part of a larger project to exclude such indigenous claims.

*Third*, the framework of 'world religions' is readily available for the ideological work of asserting conceptual control over the entire world. In the case of Friedrich Max Müller, following from his guiding aphorism, 'classify

and conquer', the division of the world into 'world religions' promised conceptual control over religious diversity in the service of the British imperial project (Chidester 2004; see Chidester 2014). Arguably, recent systems of classification, such as Samuel Huntington's nine 'world civilizations', which can be easily mapped as 'world religions', continues this ideological work of asserting global conceptual control (Huntington 1993; 1998). Organized within the framework of 'world religions', clashing civilizations can be not only understood but also managed from the imperial center.

Certainly, we can find evidence of such imperial use of the idea of 'world religions'. In the middle of the nineteenth century, as Great Britain was expanding its empire, the British theologian F. D. Maurice undertook a study of world religions, which he justified on the grounds that knowledge about religions would be useful for a nation that was 'engaged in trading with other countries, or in conquering them, or in keeping possession of them' (Maurice 1847: 255; see Chidester 1996: 131-32). In the middle of the twentieth century, as the United States was assuming an imperial role in the wake of the collapse of European empires, American scholar of religion Huston Smith undertook a study of world religions, which he justified in 1958, based on his experience of lecturing to officers of the U.S. Air Force, as providing useful knowledge for military personnel because 'someday they were likely to be dealing with the peoples they were studying as allies, antagonists, or subjects of military occupation' (Smith 1958: 7-8; see McCutcheon 1997: 180-81).

These recommendations for the study of religion suggest a remarkable continuity from British imperialism to American neo-imperialism in justifying the field of study as an intellectual instrument of international trade, military conquest, and political administration of alien subjects. Such strategic justifications for the study of religion and religions persist, as we find in the introductory course, 'Religious Factors in Special Operations', offered by Chaplain Ken Stice at the United States Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. In the syllabus for this course, Chaplain Stice identified the 'terminal learning objective' as enabling a Special Operations soldiers to brief their commanders on the impact of religion and religions on a mission and its forces. 'Why do Special Operations soldiers need to study religion at all?' Chaplain Stice asked. 'Primarily, because of the truth of Special Operations Imperative #1: Understand the Operational Environment!' As an adjunct to military strategy and tactics, therefore, the study of religion and religions can be useful in gaining the cooperation or submission of

adherents of foreign, unfamiliar religions that Chaplain Stice could characterize as ‘different from our own’ (Stice 1997).

But military strategy cannot provide the only rationale for the study of religion, religions, and religious diversity. As an alternative, we can consider the rationale provided in a popular text, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to the World’s Religions*, which argues that understanding religions is important for dealing not with foreign aliens but with fellow citizens in a diverse society. ‘In an earlier era’, the authors suggest, ‘unfamiliar religious systems could be dismissed as ‘foreign’ and left for the scholars to explore’. In a rapidly changing world of increasing local diversity and expanding global connectivity, however, learning about religion and religions has become necessary for everyone, ‘even if you don’t have an advanced degree in comparative religion’, the authors of the *Idiot’s Guide* urge, adding the tantalizing question: ‘Why leave all the excitement to academics?’ (Toporov & Buckles 1997: 7).

By contrast to the imperial strategy, the *Idiot’s Guide* announces a different rationale for studying religion and religions that has emerged under conditions of increased religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity within urban centers of the West. Increasingly, people encounter adherents of other religions not only in international business, military operations, or foreign missions but also at home. As the *Idiot’s Guide* explains, ‘At one point or another, just about everyone has felt some form of anxiety about encountering an unfamiliar religious tradition’ (Toporov & Buckles 1997: *frontis*). Therefore, everyone needs to learn how to deal with personal feelings of anxiety about the unfamiliar; to avoid personal embarrassment in dealing with others; and to live knowledgably, comfortably, and confidently in a multicultural, multireligious world. Ultimately, the *Idiot’s Guide* recommends the study of religion and religions as an antidote to fear of the unknown. ‘Perhaps the most important reason to study faiths beyond one’s own’, the authors advise, ‘is that it is a marvelous way to replace fear with experience and insight. It’s hard to be frightened of something you really understand’ (Toporov & Buckles 1997: 8). The study of religion and religions, therefore, emerges as a kind of therapy for fear. ‘The more you know about other faiths’, the authors promise, ‘the less fear will be a factor in your dealings with people who practice those faiths’ (Toporov & Buckles 1997: 10).

By treating adherents of different religions as local citizens rather than

as foreign subjects, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the World's Religions* represents a significant alternative to the imperial study of religion, suggesting that the very notion of 'world religions' can be interpreted against the grain of its imperial origin. Recent research on religion in public education in Europe and Africa has shown that 'world religions' can signify different things – an alienating framework to be rejected, an inclusive framework to be embraced – depending upon the aims and objectives of specific national projects. Researchers in Britain or Germany, for example, have found the notion of 'world religions' to be an obstacle that has to be overcome through local ethnography (Jackson 1997) or dialogue (Weisse 1999). By contrast, researchers in southern Africa, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, who have been subjected to specific regimes of Christian establishment, have found the notion of 'world religions' to be an inclusive, empowering avenue for opening the study of religion, religions, and religious diversity (Chidester 2003). The inclusion of African indigenous religion, in particular, has been advocated as a liberating initiative (Mndende 1998; 1999). Therefore, if the notion of 'world religions' has enduring political import, its educational politics is currently being engaged differently all over the world.

The intellectual construction of 'world religions' bears a complex political history, with its origin in imperial conquest, its mobilization within pluralistic modern states for liberal tolerance and co-existence, and its more recent redeployment within various colonized regions of the world for the local liberation of suppressed communities from oppressive religious discrimination. In the world, therefore, the framework of 'world religions' is a contested terrain. Fortunately, the academic study of religious discourses and practices, religious subjectivities and collectivities, religious traditions and interactions does not depend upon any notion of 'world religions'. However, as long as traces of this notion arise, whether in pedagogical practice or national policy, critical reflection on the historical emergence and various deployments of the notion of 'world religions' will be useful in clearing the ground for thinking about religion in the world.

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# Christian Humanism, Progressive Christianity, and Social Transformation

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## Abstract

This article explores my understanding of Christian humanism in conversation with Martin Prozesky's notion of progressive Christianity and their relevance for social transformation. Central to the conversation is how we understand the role of creeds and confessions in Christian faith, and the significance of the confession that Jesus, the truly human one, is the Christ of faith. This leads me into a discussion on the Incarnation as the foundation for Christian humanism, and Eucharistic community as the embodiment and agent of social transformation.

**Keywords:** Christian humanism, Progressive Christianity, Christian Theology, creeds, confessions, Christian faith, incarnation, eucharist, Social Transformation

Martin Prozesky and I trained as theologians in preparation for ordination to the ministry of the church, but both of us eventually taught in university Departments of Religion. During that period we co-edited two volumes: *A Southern African Guide to World Religions* (1991), and *Living Faiths in South Africa* (1995), which continue to be used as textbooks. Since those days, now so much in the past, we have each journeyed along intellectual and personal paths that have intersected and diverged. I have always respected Martin's

scholarship and the integrity of his convictions, and am delighted that I can now contribute to this *Festschrift* in his honour. What follows, picks up on an all too brief a conversation we had about Christian humanism some years ago, taking it further in pursuit of an understanding of Christian faith that can be affirmed with integrity for the sake of a more humane world.

Martin and I have much in common, not least the conviction that progressive religion has a critical role to play in the struggle for a more just society in South Africa. I have no doubt that Martin and I also share the conviction that being Christian in any meaningful sense requires a commitment to the integrity of life and human flourishing expressed through love, justice and beauty. We may differ on how this is theologically justified and we may use a different vocabulary in doing so, not least because of the sources we draw on and the mentors that have influenced our theological development. But this does not set us apart in vision and practice, on the contrary it requires that we both show an openness to and a solidarity with people of other faiths, or none at all, who share our concern for the well-being of humanity and the planet. So I think that we are probably closer to each other than apart, and perhaps more so now as time moves on. Yet, I suspect that we are still not *theologically entirely* on the same page. For that reason the focus of my essay is on my understanding of the theological basis for Christian humanism and how this might relate to Martin's 'progressive Christianity' and the task at hand.

My understanding of Christian humanism has been enriched by the work of two friends and colleagues: William Schweiker, Distinguished Service Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Chicago<sup>1</sup>, and Jens Zimmermann, Canada Research Chair of Interpretation, Religion and Culture and Professor of English and modern languages at Trinity Western University in British Columbia<sup>2</sup>. The influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on my thinking will also be apparent in what follows<sup>3</sup>. My own foray into the subject can be found chiefly in my books *Being Human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist*; *Led into Mystery*; and *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* (de Gruchy 2006; 2011b; and 2011c).

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<sup>1</sup> See Klemm and Schweiker (2008); Schweiker (2010); and Schweiker (2008: 100-115).

<sup>2</sup> See Zimmermann (2012a); and Zimmermann (2012b).

<sup>3</sup> See especially the two sections on 'History and the Good' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, *Ethics* (2005: 219-298. See also de Gruchy (2011a).

## I Christian Humanism, Progressive Christianity and Christology

Christian humanism is, for some, an oxymoron for the simple reason that humanism today generally refers to its secular variety, and Christianity has long been regarded as its antagonist. There is truth in that assessment, but it does not take into account the varieties of Christianity, sometimes represented by different denominations but often transcending institutional boundaries, hence such appellations as liberal, conservative or progressive. So to use the terms ‘Christian’ or ‘Christianity’ meaningfully requires clarification. The same is true of ‘humanism’ given its complex genealogy in the West from classical culture through the development of Christianity until it morphed into post-Enlightenment secular humanism and a variety of contemporary neo-humanisms. Today, some historic forms of humanism smack of an anthropocentrism that is problematic given our current understanding of ourselves in relation to the biosphere and cosmos.

Martin describes himself as a progressive Christian, a description to which I immediately warm even though I do not know precisely what he means and, in a sense, must make certain assumptions that may not be entirely accurate. I assume, for example, that by progressive he is saying that his understanding of Christianity is socially and politically transformative, not reactionary. But what, then, about his *theological* understanding of Christianity? About this, I assume that a clue can be gleaned from recent correspondence in which he said that he did not regard central Christian doctrines as literally true or doing justice to what Jesus was primarily about, and described himself not as post-Christian, but as ‘post-credal and post-ecclesiastical’. He also mentioned that he was attracted to Ninian Smart’s term ‘transcendental humanism’, but not understood in a dualistic conventional, literal, theistic way<sup>4</sup>. These comments must suffice to get my conversation with him going, though what they convey to me may not be precisely what they mean for Martin. After all, the prefix ‘post’ seldom signifies a simple shift from one position to another as is evident when we speak of ‘post-modernism’ or ‘post-modernity’. Paradigm shifts are a critical suspension and transformative

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<sup>4</sup> See Prozesky’s forthcoming book *Honest to Goodness*, and ‘Ethics, Spirituality and the Secular’ in *Secular Spirituality as a Contextual Critique of Religion*, edited by du Toit and Mayson (2006: 127-138).

retrieval of tradition. So what do ‘post-credal’, ‘post-ecclesiastical’ and ‘transcendental humanism’ convey to me, and would I describe my Christian humanism in similar terms?

During the struggle against apartheid, Martin and I were constantly aware that our concern for justice, too often denied by fellow white Christians, was shared by people of other faiths as well as by secular humanists even though they did not share the same Christian beliefs and commitments. We were united in our affirmation of human dignity and, at the same time, divided from many of our co-religionists who remained silent or gave their support to apartheid. This alliance with others in the struggle irrespective of faith commitment was strategic, yet it was also, at least from a Christian perspective, one that was theologically derived. As Bonhoeffer indicates in his *Ethics*, the dividing line established by Jesus was not primarily between his disciples and others, but between those who, whether in his name or not, struggled against dehumanizing and idolatrous powers in solidarity with the oppressed, alienated and downtrodden. For Bonhoeffer this gave decisive substance to the faith-claim that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (Bonhoeffer 2005: 82), which, I suggest, is fundamental to Christianity, a matter to which I will shortly return.

Long before 9/11 and the stark lines drawn by the exponents of the badly conceived and described culture war between the Christian West and Islam, Martin and I had transgressed such boundaries of exclusion. Since those tragic and terrifying events and their consequences, which characterize much of our current global reality, our common dislike of imperial and triumphalist Christianity has been reinforced. As I understand Martin’s position, this is part of what is implied by his choice of the term ‘progressive’ to qualify his Christianity. In my own case I chose to distance myself from these idolatries by calling myself a Christian humanist. But neither of us identify with those forms of Christianity (or any religion for that matter) that are reactionary and right-wing in orientation. I think I can also safely say that we reject all forms of fundamentalism including scientism and secularism, any humanism that is a closed anthropocentric system incapable of criticism and transformation, all forms of ecclesiastical and religious triumphalism, and denominational sectarianism, and rejoice whenever we experience the church as an inclusive and progressive community of concerned and compassionate fellow-believers. In short, for us, being Christian means to be truly human rather than being religious in any narrow sense of that word; it also means striving to become

more fully human in solidarity with the rest of humankind in the struggle for a more humane, just and peaceable world that respects human dignity and freedom, as well as the integrity of creation. I am a humanist because I am a Christian, and as a Christian I seek to be the best humanist I can be, and I know that Martin would agree.

But what about Martin's use of the terms 'post-credal', 'post-ecclesiastical', and 'transcendental humanism?' Let me begin with 'post-credal'. Does this mean that we hold to no beliefs, that there is nothing of substance to which we can append our 'credo'? Put so crassly, that is surely not what Martin means. But if, as I think most likely, it means moving beyond the classical Christian creeds, does it mean a rejection of *everything* they generally affirm, not just their form and structure, but also their substance? I don't actually know how Martin would respond to that, but I assume, once again, that he would be more nuanced than his words superficially suggest. However, instead of second-guessing him, I would like to clarify my own position in order to take our conversation further.

In my own ecclesial tradition (Congregational) creeds are not normally part of the liturgy, and forced subscription to them has always been strenuously resisted. We have not been called 'Nonconformists' for nothing! Maybe that means that already, since the seventeenth century, my own tradition was post-credal. This does not mean we were creedless, for we affirmed various Reformed confessions of faith, and continue to acknowledge the historical, theological and ecumenical importance of the historic creeds even though they do not normally feature in our liturgies. They are important because they keep us in conversation with historical Christianity. But we insist that their contextual character does not bind us to past understandings of Christian faith. I am sure that many Christians in other traditions where the creeds are more central would agree with that position.

There are, after all, faithful church members, ministers and priests who dutifully say the creeds, but who have serious reservations about some of their assertions taken literally even though they may appear to affirm them as though they do. This means that a degree of dishonesty can intrude the liturgy undermining the doxological character of the creeds and the integrity of the worshippers. I fear this often results from the ineptitude of priests and ministers in helping people understand the Bible hermeneutically, long before they get round to explaining the creeds and the reasons why they are embedded in the liturgy. Apart from any lack of training in this regard, this failure often arises

from a fear of being censured, or by an unwillingness to upset those who do take the creeds literally. But the fact that people in the pews who recite the creeds week by week assume that it is all meant to be understood literally, while many theologians and clergy understand them differently, seems to me a sad, dishonest and counterproductive state of affairs.

The classical creeds emerged in the Patristic struggle against what was perceived to be heresy. Those who drafted them sought to draw boundaries between true and false belief in the contest between contending interpretations of the significance of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and ‘incarnate Son of God’. Irrespective of how they were understood then or the purposes to which they were sometimes put, they became doxological expressions that encapsulated the mysteries of Christian faith in the language of both history and myth. If myth is properly understood, I have no problem with the formulation ‘the myth of God Incarnate’ made infamous by John Hick, though the term is as James Dunn suggests, inappropriate in early Christology (Dunn 1980: 262). What is appropriate is C.S. Lewis’ assertion that in the Jesus narrative myth became fact without losing its mythical character, something that Bonhoeffer also said<sup>5</sup>. Christianity expresses itself in the language of myth as much as it does in the language of history, and the two merge in the creeds which encapsulate the Christian *mythos* as understood in its early genesis.

The original meaning of *mythos* as narrative or story is the product of human imagination. So we can speak of the Christian *mythos* in the same way as we might talk about an historical novel, though the analogy is not perfect (Jennings 1976:9). The Christian *mythos* is that in Jesus of Nazareth, God became truly human in order that we might become fully human in the image of God. This is the theological basis for Christian humanism, as Zimmermann has thoroughly articulated in his *Incarnational Humanism*. But as he tells us, something that I too affirm, we are not seeking ‘to invent something new but rather to retrieve an ancient Christian humanism for our time in response to the general demand for a common humanity beyond religious, denominational, and secular divides’. Yet, both he and I also assert, that ‘orthodox Christology provides the most promising source for a common vision of a truly human society’ (Zimmermann 2012b: 10). This does not mean that what is often taken for ‘orthodoxy’ has always got it right when it comes to a praxis that is faithful to its Christological source. But if not, what can it mean?

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<sup>5</sup> See my discussion in *Led into Mystery* (de Gruchy 2011b: 76-81).



As someone who spoke and wrote about the theological justification of apartheid as a heresy, I obviously recognize that there come moments in history when the boundaries that define what it means to be Christian and the church of Jesus Christ have to be drawn. My understanding of the church as an inclusive community is contingent precisely on the rejection of false boundaries determined by ethnicity, gender, class or sexual orientation. I am not suggesting that this is *the* ‘orthodox’ way to understand the classical creeds, but I am saying that there are boundaries that determine the character of the church even if there is disagreement as to where and when those boundaries are to be drawn. This was the problem which confronted Bonhoeffer in responding to the German Christians who supported Hitler and promoted the Nazification of the Protestant Church. Both sides in the *Kirchenkampf* recited the creeds and affirmed the Lutheran confessions, but Bonhoeffer understood them hermeneutically not literally, christologically and not ideologically. There may have been consensus on, for example, the ‘two natures of Christ’ but there was clearly disagreement on *who* Jesus Christ was for them at that historical juncture<sup>6</sup>. The Barmen Declaration was a confessional response to that question within that historical context and, as such, assumed credal significance if not status.

Although Bonhoeffer’s own response to his question ‘who is Jesus Christ for us today’ was hermeneutically located within that context, it was undoubtedly in continuity with the ancient creeds, despite the influence of his great liberal teacher Adolf von Harnack, for whom they were highly problematic. For Harnack, following Jesus rather than believing in the ‘Christ of the creeds’ was the essence of Christianity (von Harnack 1986: 146-149). In taking this position, Harnack rightly maintained that discipleship is not the same as believing in a doctrine about Jesus as the Christ. Yet contrasting discipleship and believing in a doctrine in this way is surely a category mistake. Discipleship and *faith as commitment* to Jesus as Lord belong together, as Bonhoeffer expressed so powerfully in *Discipleship* (Bonhoeffer 2001: 63). Harnack’s problem, as Rudolf Bultmann said, was that he did ‘not clearly see the difference between the *kerygmatic* character of the Gospel and an ‘Enlightenment doctrine or an ethical appeal’ (von Harnack 1986: xv). Jesus became the timeless truth about God and eternity, about the human soul and

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<sup>6</sup> See the notes on Bonhoeffer’s lectures on Christology in Berlin in 1933, in Bonhoeffer (2009: 299-360).

the good life, rather than the witness to God's coming kingdom amidst the historical and political realities of his day.

It is true that many seek to follow Jesus without accepting the claim that he is the Christ of Christian faith, but it seems to me that faith in Jesus as 'the Christ' is fundamental to being Christian. I am *not* saying that there is no 'Jesus before Christianity', as Albert Nolan portrayed in his book of that title, nor am I saying that Jesus only has significance within Christianity, for Jesus was not a Christian; nor am I saying that you have to be a Christian to follow Jesus, or that many who follow Jesus do not do so much better than many Christians. What I am saying is that Christianity as it evolved already in the apostolic period was Christological not Jesu-logical, and that the doctrine of the Incarnation was already implicit. To my mind, no one has explored this development more fully than Dunn whose conclusion is that while we 'cannot claim that Jesus believed himself to be the incarnate Son of God', we can say that this conviction was 'an appropriate reflection on and elaboration of Jesus' own sense of sonship and eschatological mission' (Dunn 1980: 254).

In sum, we cannot delete the doctrine of the Incarnation from Christianity without destroying its integrity as Christian faith. Having said that, I would equally say that to believe that 'God was in Christ' is not the same as believing in the doctrine *as doctrine*. It is, rather, as Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Ethics* (in continuity with what he said in *Discipleship* but put differently), becoming 'conformed to the Incarnate One'. And this is fundamental to Christian humanism. 'To be conformed to the one who has become human – that is what being human really means' (Bonhoeffer 2005: 94). In fact, nowhere to my knowledge have the *humanist* ethical implications of the Incarnation been so well expressed as in this section of the *Ethics* where, *inter alia*, Bonhoeffer writes: 'The message of God's becoming human attacks at the heart of an era when contempt for humanity or idolization of humanity is the height of wisdom, among bad people as well as good' (Bonhoeffer 2005: 85). To stress the point, I am not talking about believing in a doctrine, but about life being shaped by the reality to which that doctrine points. For Bonhoeffer this was fundamental to following Jesus and therefore to the Christian *mythos*. And, of course, the same applied to being conformed to the 'crucified One' and the 'risen One', that is, living in solidarity with the suffering and struggles of the world, and living and acting in hope of new life and the just transformation of present reality.

Christian humanism, as I understand it, then, is founded on a 'high

Christology' shaped by a reading of the gospel *mythos*, but kenotic, not triumphalist in character. By this I mean that when we confess Jesus Christ as 'truly God' we are saying that the God in whom we believe has been revealed in *history* as the one who, *for us*, is most truly human. Too often Christians turn this around so that their definitions of God (all-powerful, all-knowing, etc.) are applied to Jesus and lead to triumphalist claims on the part of the church. Of course, to say Jesus is the 'truly human One' is a confession of faith that arises out of a reading of the Christian tradition, even though it begs many questions. For example, in what *sense* is Jesus to be regarded as such? Is Jesus the *only* truly human One? Are the rest of us humans not truly human and, if not, are we less than human? How then are we to define being human, and being more truly so? Discussion of these requires another lengthy conversation which is beyond the scope of this essay, but some hints as to how that may develop must be given here.

What I have said thus far is about the basis for *Christian* humanism, something premised on a faith claim. As such it is alien to people of other faiths and secular humanists even though there may be agreement on the importance of its outcomes and acceptance of the need for such a theological strategy. But it is precisely at this point that Schweiker focuses his critique and challenge to my approach. Without denying the importance of historical traditions or Christian confession, he rightly wants *theological* humanism to be 'tested in the unending work of interpretation and rumination aimed at understanding'. This is necessary if we are to avoid a triumphalism – even in the name of humanity – that reduces 'the other' to the status of junior partner in the humanist endeavour. In fact it requires a theological humanism fashioned in dialogue and solidarity with those who come to similar conclusions yet from a different perspective. And that, in turn, may require of us a new, liberating language in which to express our faith in Christ, as Bonhoeffer anticipated. I agree. This does not mean ditching the fundamental premise of Christianity, otherwise there is no specifically Christian contribution to the discussion. But if my confessional Christian humanism is, at one level, affirmed by Schweiker, at another he prompts me to go further for the sake of a broader theological humanism in which the integrity of life becomes the key affirmation.

What, then, needs to be considered as we take the Christian humanist or theological neo-humanist project further? A priority must surely be to engage with humanists of other traditions in clarifying both areas of agreement and disagreement and thus, together with them, set an agenda for further

discussion and engagement as we did in the New Humanist project at STIAS (Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies) in which Schweiker participated (de Gruchy 2011c). This requires those of us who are Christians to explore in greater depth the theological foundations of our own faith claims and perspectives. But it will also help us understand better what resources we bring to the table as Christians who seek to be humanists, and as humanists who seek to be Christian. So now, within the parameters of this essay, I want to explore further, with Zimmermann, the genealogy of a genuinely Christian humanism, and its potential for the renewal of culture and the common good, and in doing so reflect a little on the significance of the church. Apart from sharing in a common task, what do we bring to the dialogue table?

## **II Christian Humanism, the New Humanity & Social Transformation**

Zimmermann's premise is that Western secularism is exhausted, having lost its roots in the religious tradition that gave birth to secularity and modernity. The resultant vacuum has been filled by the resurgence of religion, chiefly in fundamentalist forms. The consequences are serious and potentially disastrous, especially given the fact that the West is increasingly culturally plural in character due to the influx of many immigrants for whom secularism is alien, humanism threatening and Christianity problematic. At the same time, for many secularists, religion has not only lost whatever significance it might have had and become the prime target of rebuttal, the enemy of humanism, and the cause of social conflict. This is undoubtedly true of some forms of religion, but not true of all religion. On the contrary, religion, including Christianity, is historically and remains potentially a source of humanism. Examining the Christian humanist tradition is, therefore, an 'essential hermeneutical task' in making possible the renewal of Western culture and 'integrating other religiously formed cultures into Western societies' (Zimmermann 2012b: 3). Zimmermann's agenda is focused specifically on the West; Prozesky and I are more global in interest and specifically concerned about South Africa. But we all share the same concern for the recovery and building of humane values that enable the flourishing of life in building societies and nations, and the role of Christianity as one significant agent in doing so.

A preliminary question which must be brought to the fore is whether and to what extent Zimmermann's analysis and prognosis relates meaningfully

to our South African context. This was part of the rationale for my initiation of and participation in the project at STIAS in 2009-2010 which eventually led to the publication of *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* to which I previously referred. Two factors suggest that there is a connection between this project and Zimmermann's. The *first* is that South African culture has been profoundly influenced by the West as a result of colonization, and by Christianity as a result of Christian missionary endeavour, not least the education of those cohorts of African leaders who established the African National Congress. In many respects they were Christian humanists in the sense described by Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and embodied in the likes of Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela. Their imprint on the Freedom Charter and our present Constitution is part of that humanist legacy, as is our Constitution. The *second* has to do with the extent to which Christianity in our context has lost its humanist thrust implicit, if not necessarily explicit, in Christology. The reasons are not unlike those in other contemporary societies dominated by fundamentalism and more susceptible to secularism than previously. So Zimmermann's contribution to the debate, while centered on the West, resonates with the issues as I understand them in our own situation in important respects.

Heeding Heidegger's injunction to critically retrieve tradition in order to transform the world, Zimmermann's aim is neither to return to Christendom, within which Christianity attempts to reign supreme over culture, nor to resuscitate previous forms of Christian humanism. Instead, he goes behind modernity to explore the theological origins of humanism in the West with its foundations already laid in classical culture. Western humanism, he reminds us, is deeply rooted in the biblical assertion that humanity bears the 'image of God'. The Patristic faith-claim that God becomes fully human in Christ in order that humans may become truly like God, and therefore truly human is foundational. So too, is the correlation of faith and reason, with faith being necessary for rationality and self-understanding. The result is 'a profound sense of human dignity, solidarity, and freedom based on a reasonable faith' (Zimmermann 2012a:87).

Scholastic humanism in the Middle Ages, Zimmermann observes going further, was built on and developed Patristic humanism in a way that some regard as 'the most important kind of humanism Europe has ever produced' (Zimmermann 2012b: 101), giving rise to modern science and then secular humanism. Unfortunately scholastic theology was incapable of keeping

pace with these developments, and not only became rigid but also fractured. It thereby undermined the synthesis of faith and reason which Renaissance humanism sought to affirm. That humanism, articulated in the work of Erasmus, the pre-eminent Christian humanist of his day, was more than the forerunner of a post-Enlightenment secular humanism; it was an attempt to recover the Christian humanism of the Patristic period which laid the foundation for Western culture as expressed in education, art and science. But already in the Renaissance the ontology which provided the basis for Christian humanism was being eroded from within until the synthesis between faith and reason, theology, philosophy and science, collapsed.

In a way that is reminiscent of some of Bonhoeffer's key insights in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Bonhoeffer 2010: 475f), Zimmermann critically traces the development of post-Renaissance humanism from Vico through Schleiermacher to Dilthey, a gradual transition from 'metaphysical to post-metaphysical humanism' which leads to a rejection of humanism's 'spiritual-theological foundations' (Zimmermann 2012b: 150). This movement away from the Patristic tradition radically altered the basis on which Western cultural humanism has to be sustained, not just philosophically but in a world radically changed by historical developments and the dominance of empirical science. The inevitable result was the birth not just of secular humanism but also anti-humanism typified by Nietzsche and his nihilistic heirs which eventually found devastating expression in the Holocaust.

The hermeneutical task confronting us, then, is to re-articulate a religious humanist ethos and praxis based on the conviction that 'this can renew Western identity and its zeal for knowledge subservient to the common good of a full humanity' (Zimmermann 2012b: 317). This corresponds with Schweiker's position and leads Zimmermann to a discussion of dominant strands in contemporary Islam which firmly reject Western secularism but seem unable to retrieve their own humanist tradition and avoid the dangers of fundamentalism. For Zimmermann, this needs to begin specifically with 'the Judeo-Christian roots of values such as human dignity, freedom, hope and social responsibility', in a way that enables both secular and other religious world views to 'unite towards the common goal of becoming most fully human' (Zimmermann 2012b: 318). But he is also aware of the need to engage Muslim scholars as well. This leads him to a discussion of contemporary Islam which firmly rejects Western secularism but is largely unable to retrieve its own humanist tradition and avoid the dangers of fundamentalism. Muslim and

Christian scholars, as well as those of other faith traditions, need to engage each other around these issues in order to generate a general humanist ethos capable of tackling the crisis in Western (and global) culture.

Critical towards this end is the reintegrating of faith and reason which takes us beyond the deconstruction of fideism and secularism to a widening of the concept of reason, an avoidance of fundamentalism, and a deepening of the meaning of faith. Three axioms should guide such mutual reflection. *First*, that self-knowledge or truth requires ethical transcendence; *second*, that such self-knowledge is hermeneutical; and *third*, that it requires aesthetics. Certainly, without the recovery of some sense of transcendence the future of the humanities is unlikely, humanism itself beyond recovery, and the crisis in Western culture irresolvable (Schweiker 2010).

In response to this challenge, Zimmermann engages the work of key Western philosophers of recent times. Amongst them are Derrida, Lyotard, Kristeva, Kearney and Vattimo who provide insight though none is able to recover the synthesis between faith and reason of past tradition and therefore provide the philosophical basis for the recovery of Incarnational humanism today. More promising is Gadamer's 'hermeneutic humanism', which recognizes religious dialogue as essential for the future of humanity, and of the renewal of the humanities as key to the renewal of culture, and Levinas' 'humanism of the Other' which provides the 'most striking example of the need of incarnational theology' (Zimmermann 2012b:216). What is needed, Zimmermann insists, is not just a 'transcendental humanism', but one which is incarnational, beyond dualism and rooted in historical experience. This brings Zimmermann to the theologians who are his chief interlocutors, Maurice Blondel and especially Bonhoeffer. What unites the Catholic philosopher and the Lutheran theologian is their affirmation of the Incarnation as the basis for correlating faith and reason, philosophy and theology, and therefore the unity of knowledge in the service of humanity. But it is Bonhoeffer's Christological humanism that finally becomes the major resource for the recovery of Christian humanism for today for both Zimmermann and myself.

The recognition of Bonhoeffer as a Christian humanist is of seminal importance in my own work, though Zimmermann has examined his legacy more thoroughly within the broader narrative of Patristic humanism<sup>7</sup>. Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism, Zimmermann writes:

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<sup>7</sup> See essays in Zimmermann and Gregor (2010).

points in the right direction: given that so much of our political and social problems are connected to the question of identity and religion, his emphasis on Christology and a new humanity provides arguably the best example of a religious humanism intrinsically able to open itself to reason, and to labour for the common good (Zimmermann 2012b: 315).

The ground is now prepared for me to re-engage Prozesky's term 'post-ecclesiastical', for Bonhoeffer's Christology is ecclesiological at its core.

In his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer boldly declared that 'Christ exists as the church-community' (Bonhoeffer 1998: 189ff). By this he was not referring to a particular ecclesiastical institution, but to that vicarious representative community in which Christ is present in the world as the beginning of a new humanity, or humanity restored. This was a constant theme throughout his theological development, until finally in his prison letters he spoke of 'Jesus's 'being for others' 'as the experience of transcendence', and as consequence, 'the church is only the church when it is there for others' (Bonhoeffer 2010: 499, 501). In other words, the character of the *ecclesia* is determined by the way it answers the question: 'who is Jesus Christ for us today?' How the church embodies that answer determines whether or not the church is faithful to the Jesus of history and the Christ it confesses in the creed. The birth of the new humanity in Christ crucified and risen is already a given. But the church as a sociological empirical reality only becomes the church as it conforms to his life, death and resurrection. This, for Bonhoeffer, radically changes the meaning of transcendence and of what 'transcendental humanism' (not that he used that term) should mean, namely 'participating in this being of Jesus' in 'being there for others' (Bonhoeffer 2010: 501).

If appropriated, incarnational humanism fundamentally reshapes the life of the church in the world today as a Eucharistic community in solidarity with the whole of humanity. To be the church can be nothing less. 'Our current intellectual and cultural crisis', Zimmermann writes, demands a sense of solidarity and common humanity that is *intrinsic* to the Christian faith', and for this reason the church needs to recover 'the early church's spirit of passionate engagement with culture based on the mystery of the incarnation' (Zimmermann 2012a: 324).

The ongoing struggle to establish communities in which the common good and the good of each is achieved, lies at the heart of what is meant by the



church as an agent of a new humanity. Understood in this way (though much in Christian practice contradicts it), the church is not a closed conglomerate of like-minded individuals or an institution in which individuals forfeit their personal being. Rather it is meant to be a community always in the process of formation in which human beings relate to each other beyond the divisions of race, class, culture, gender or sexual orientation, yet in ways that respect difference. As such the church should provide a model of reconciliation for the broader human community as well as a basis for solidarity in the struggle for a more just world. For the Christian humanist such a community is not closed or exclusive in character, but exists for and in solidarity with others. Only then is it faithful to the Jesus of history and the *mythos* that energizes those who believe he is the Christ.

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# Thinking God in a Global Multi-religious Context: Trends, Challenges and Possibilities

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## Abstract

Contemporary religious and theological scholarship is acutely aware that different contexts result in different ways of thinking and speaking about God. This article situates God-talk intentionally in the present global and post-secular horizon and asks about the implications of this hermeneutical move. Mapping scholarly trends in this regard is a specific aim of the article, which is written from the perspective of Systematic Theology in conversation with the Study of Religion. The development of reflection on God in inter-religious theologies and in the so-called Trinitarian rediscovery is discussed. Two academic challenges are identified as part of a constructive proposal – a re-envisioning of the relationship between the Study of Religion on the one hand and Christian Theology and Systematic Theology respectively on the other at public universities. Possible future constructive avenues are suggested and the article proposes a minimalist way forward to engage the global and post-secular context, and highlighting an inter-subjective ethos, attention to discursive performances and the African context.

**Keywords:** globalised world, post-secular world, God, Trinity, Systematic Theology

## **Introduction**

The return of God in scholarly reflection in the late twentieth century has come as a surprise to those awaiting the triumph of secularisation. Even more astonishing have been the innovative re-imaginings of the divine which crystallised in theologies of those who have been marginalised from dominant discourse – women, Black people, those who suffer, those who are from non-Western cultures, or even those who take science and new philosophies seriously. What has transpired is that the *context* of experience and of thinking about the divine eventually determines the grammar of such speech. One such context which is becoming increasingly important and which this article will address is the horizon of the world as globalised and post-secular. A great deal of energy has been consumed to come to terms with the processes of globalisation and the so-called de-secularisation of the world, but hardly any energy on what this might imply for God-talk as such.

In this reflection, the context of a globalised and post-secular world will be explicitly raised as a generative horizon for speech about the Ultimate. As an exploration, it will focus on what could be considered meta-questions, those issues that should be addressed first – the trends, the challenges and the future possibilities. It is important, as will become clear in the discussion, to be explicit about one's own theoretical orientation. I write from a Christian perspective and as a systematic theologian, and not as a scholar of religion.

The article is a modest attempt to honour the contribution Prof. Martin Prozesky has made to the world of academic reflection. The specific choice of theme will underline, in a small way, the intuitions which guided his quest: a search for intellectual openness, a sense of transcendence, an expression of the religious experience of mankind in the widest possible manner, and an acute awareness of the moral nature of the universe.

## **Two Descriptive Labels**

The task of naming the present, discerning social and cultural changes with corresponding shifts in human consciousness remains a perennial intellectual responsibility of the theologian and scholar of religion. That our time has witnessed seismic transformations has become general knowledge, and numerous observers in various academic fields have employed different labels to capture the nature of these changes. 'Postmodern' and 'post-colonial' are

some of the well-known ones that endeavour to signal the reaction to the particular kind of (modernist) rationality and the myriad abuses of power. In this article, the interest lies in two other attempts at ‘naming the present’ – those which highlight the *globalised* and the *post-secular* character of our world. Both have been treated exhaustively in many publications, and the implications for religions, in general, have been intimated. Whether the ramifications for approaching God, the Divine, the Ultimate have been addressed satisfactorily is an open question. This could be identified as the ‘knowledge gap’ in existing scholarship.

### ***A Globalised World***

It is widely accepted that ‘globalisation’ is a contested concept; the nature, causes and implications are not uniformly viewed. Minimally, it could be understood as a set of social processes; it is about shifting forms of human contact and the reconfiguration of social space, according to Steger (2003:8f). His definition is worth quoting in full:

Globalization refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependence and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant.

It is obvious that religion cannot escape from this and that the basic dynamics which crystallises is an increased awareness of *religious plurality*. It has become a truism to refer to the religiously ‘other’ in neighbourhoods. However, a deeper reality is being negotiated – religious *identities* cannot remain immunised and are also in flux (see Schreier 1997: 73-81). What has not yet adequately been examined is how this has affected understandings of God.

### ***A Post-secular World***

One of the surprising developments of recent times is the new visibility of religion and the return of religion to the scholarly agenda (see Gorski *et al.*

2012). That our time can rightly be described as ‘post-secular’ is widely acknowledged, and renowned thinkers such as Peter Berger and Jürgen Habermas have registered this in their work. Traditional secularisation theories had to be re-visited; religion is not in the process of decline and it is not only a private matter. The interface with globalisation is an obvious avenue to suggest; most often, the new resurgence is simply a resistance strategy to all the changes. Basic to this trend is the conviction ‘that it is impossible to make sense of the world without taking into account religion’ (Gorski *et al.* 2012: 5). This new interest takes on diverse forms, and an observer such as Graham Ward (2009: 135-154) identifies three forms: fundamentalism, a return of religion to civil society, and a ‘commodification of religion’ in cultural life. Nowhere is an express attention to God or Ultimacy mentioned. The intention of this article is to raise the question about a scholarly response to these developments by referring explicitly to the Divine.

## **Two Scholarly Trends**

An impression should not be created that the many social changes and their potential impact on religion have not yet been subjected to reflective scrutiny. Excellent examples of such endeavours are available and should be addressed. Two of these will be described.

### ***God in Interreligious and Cross-cultural Theologies***

Two specific recent projects deserve some attention. The Lund project, with papers published in the volume *The Concepts of God in Global Dialogue* (see Jeanrond & Lande 2005), explores contemporary models and paradigms of interreligious dialogue, developments in the Christian concept of God, and then various reflections on the notion of the divine in Japanese Buddhism. Worth mentioning in this volume are the contributions by Kuschel on the need for a ‘theology of the other’, and by Tracy on the notion of ‘fragment’ and the hiddenness and incomprehensibility of God. The second project – the so-called European Intensive Programmes – has been more comprehensive, and resulted in three volumes of essays, namely *Naming and Thinking God in Europe Today* (Hintersteiner 2007), *Postcolonial Europe in the Crucible of Cultures* (Haers, Hintersteiner & Schrijver 2007), and *Thinking the Divine in Interreligious*

*encounter* (Hintersteiner 2012). This informative and wide-reaching project by twenty departments of theology and religion at universities across Europe is an intentional shift away from a traditional confessional concept of theology towards one which is open to interreligious encounter and engagement. It is not possible to summarise the large number of contributions and the rich scope of ideas generated; only a few references can be made.

Robert Schreiter (2012: 304), who participated in both projects, points out that the interreligious dialogue is often also an intercultural one. His proposal of the central place that *intercultural hermeneutics* should assume in the interreligious dialogue must be carefully heeded. Culture is a layered reality and in constant flux, especially with the advent of globalising forces. The dynamics of the impact of globalisation – homogenisation, hyperdifferentiation, deterritorialisation and hybridisation – form the cultural conditions under which the discourse on God takes place (Schreiter 2012: 306-314). Because of these complex processes, concepts of God are mutated; they can be narrowed as a resistance strategy or even expanded due to external influences. Interesting in the contribution by Schreiter (2012: 315-318) is the identification of four kinds of discourses about God in intercultural and interreligious dialogue: God of the horizon, God of life, God of the ancestors, and God of the religions. These refer, respectively, to recognition of limitations to understanding the religiously other, the resistance to resilience in suffering, senses of belonging, and mediation through tradition. These all come into play when considering the divine in a new global situation.

That the very idea of ‘God’ in religious traditions is problematic is discussed in Keith Ward’s (2007) contribution. For him, who has made significant contributions to the field of global theology in various publications, this refers to the study of ultimate realities and values, and to the ways of relating to these realities. The notion of a personal God is just one idea of ultimate reality, of which he identifies at least four such possible models: an idealist, dualist, monist or theistic one (Ward 2007: 380f). This approach gives expression to the relationship between the ultimate and the cosmos, whether it is identical, quite distinct or includes creation as part of itself, or is even personal as such. For Ward (2007: 382), the various religions cannot be reduced to a fundamental sameness, but ‘all religions are concerned with a supreme spiritual reality’. He is especially concerned with articulating simultaneously what is common and what is different in the religions. They share an ascription of wisdom, compassion and bliss to what they consider

‘ultimate’, but differ as to what this ultimacy could be and how we come to know and relate to it. The notion of a ‘God’ is the result of transposing personal relationship and a sense of otherness to the understanding of the divine. In his contribution, Robert Neville (2007) highlights similar sentiments as Ward. The enthusiasm for the category of ‘God’ is a typical Western scholarly reflex. He also prefers the notion of ‘ultimate’ and at stake for him is the referent of this or, in other words, in what respect do they interpret reality. He makes the useful observation that religions could be compared ‘only where they are found to have concepts interpreting the same object in the same respect’ (Neville 2007: 518). His working hypothesis for the dialogue between religions is formulated as ‘that in reality in respect of which human life is to be considered as having ultimate significance’ (Neville 2007: 523). A comparative project will then proceed by asking about what orients ultimate human significance. Neville is aware of how complex this task is, and of how radically religions do actually differ in this regard, especially when one moves beyond monotheistic beliefs, with, for example, Buddhism as typical point in case.

### ***Trinitarian Approaches to Religious Plurality***

The so-called ‘rediscovery’ of the Trinitarian confession is one of the most significant developments in Christian theology. Not only has the Trinity been re-affirmed as the distinctive marker of Christian identity, but it has been re-interpreted with relational categories and been employed as the key to address a variety of practical problems. Not only has the being of God been appreciated as communal, but this very identification has been understood, for example, as ‘model’ to solve the dilemmas of unity and diversity in society. One of the surprising applications of this doctrine has been to religious plurality. Whereas, in the past, the Trinity was viewed as an obstacle to interreligious dialogue, it has been re-appreciated as exceptional resource to open new avenues for approaching this difficult reality. Well-known scholars such as Panikkar, Dupuis, D’Costa and Heim have suggested creative and extensive Trinitarian proposals in this regard. Comprehensive and good overviews are available (see, e.g., Kärkkäinen 2004). These projects are by no means uniform; they are expressive of creative rhetorical attempts to explore the mystery of a God whose own being reveals plurality and whose engagement with the world manifests a corresponding richness.



One example of this significant trend can be described in greater detail, that by Mark Heim. His innovative work amounts to a corrective to older pluralist approaches which, according to him, do not recognise adequately the differences among religions. In two main works – *Salvations* (1995) and *The depth of the riches* (2001) – he argues for different religious ends, hence the plural form of salvation, and for a Trinitarian basis to this conviction. The underlying assumption of former pluralist models is a singular final end; a truly pluralist hypothesis should suggest an alternative, that is, a diversity of religious ends. The critical question for Heim (1995: 160) is: ‘What accounts as salvation?’. According to him, this refers to being in communion with the divine – ‘salvation is a relation of communion with God’ (Heim 2001: 59). The next move in the argument incorporates the Trinity: the diversity of religions is rooted in the diversity of the divine life itself – ‘The Trinity is a map that finds room for, indeed, requires concrete truth in other religions’ (Heim 2005: 198). Basic in his proposal is the notion of Trinitarian ‘plenitude’ as expressing the fullness of divine love; it refers explicitly to the range of fulfilments available to creation (Heim 1995: 165). Critical to understanding his proposal is the emphasis that distinctive religious ends are not based in the separate persons of the Trinity, ‘but in the various dimensions of the communion (of oneness) among the persons’ (Heim 2014: 123). The plenitude of relationality allows for a diversity of religious ends as communion in their distinctiveness. It is worth noting that, despite this express pluralist orientation, Heim (2014: 132) still maintains some ‘superiority’ for the Christian faith, as faith which ‘more truly’ posits an integrative vision.

## **Two Academic Challenges**

Obviously, a responsible response to the drastic changes being experienced in our time requires a comprehensive one. An academic engagement, however, is a necessary, valid and appropriate one. In this instance, two possible responses will be briefly intimated.

### ***Theology and Religious Studies at a Public University***

The changes in the cultural horizon require an institutional response. This should be clearly appreciated. Idea and form-giving can never be separated;

this was persuasively argued by the French philosopher Foucault in his entire oeuvre. Two specific challenges can be identified, in this instance: how the study of religion is institutionalised at public universities and how it is addressed in terms of the various traditional theological disciplines, specifically Systematic Theology. In post-apartheid South Africa, with the numerous changes to undo the past and its myriad adverse effects, higher education itself has been in a process of drastic transformation. Often, the concern is voiced that the changes, for example enrolments statistics, avoid the deeper challenges of interrogating the nature of knowledge transmitted and generated. This insistence is usually captured in the notion of ‘epistemological transformation’. The validity of this critique is obvious from the present practice of the academic study of religion. Despite the wide range of approaches at universities, and with some commendable exceptions, several trends can be discerned<sup>1</sup>. There is an unquestionable dominance of this study by Christian theology, and most often by a Reformed confessional orientation. Where Religious Studies is present, it is usually separated from Theology in terms of departmental configuration, and there is relatively little mutual interaction. This situation is particularly fertile ground for new thinking and reconceptualisation.

A great deal can be learned from practices in the UK and the emergence of a so-called ‘new paradigm’. *Two recent examples* can be briefly conveyed. In the volume of studies contributed in honour of Nicolas Lash – *Fields of faith* (Ford, Quash & Soskice 2005) – a general relative *new ethos* emerges (see, especially, the conclusion by Adams, Davies & Quash 2005: 207-221). The conversation with other religions is central in thinking about Christian identity, and a fine antenna exists to avoid hegemonic thinking and attitudes. The point of departure is the recognition of ‘pluralistic particularity’. Both Theology and Religious Studies are considered necessary with an own task, but mutual engagement is advocated. Key notions crystallising in the discourse are ‘hospitality’ and ‘conviviality’. Openness to one another and a willingness to enter into conversation and to learn from one another are part of this new paradigm. Two particular emphases highlighted in the volume of essays are worth mentioning: an awareness of the ‘sociality of thought’ and the

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<sup>1</sup> In South Africa a great diversity is to be found and each academic institution has its own ‘ecology’. Generally one can claim that there is greater appreciation for the Study of Religion, and for a closer dialogue with Christian Theology.

importance of values (see Adams, Davies & Quash 2005: 219f). In distinction of the study of Humanities, in general, Theology and Religious Studies cannot escape the character of religious communities; these communities are constituted by values, and both these dynamics – communality and values – should be reflected in the academic study.

The second example commenting on this ‘new paradigm’ is by the Cambridge scholar David Ford (2011: 150ff) who played a major role in delineating a different approach in the UK which he labels ‘New Theology and Religious Studies’. The ‘newness’ is to be found in the combination of the two fields of study to form ‘one ecosystem’. There is still a sense of distinction – the one being descriptive, analytical and explanatory, and the other normative and practical – but the overwhelming thrust is one of complementarity. Both Theology and Religious Studies need each other. Ford is convinced that the new conceptualisation allows not only for better service to the university, society and religious communities, but also for a much more promising ability to address questions of meaning, truth, practice and beauty.

A great deal can be learned from this discourse, not only in terms of institutional arrangement, but also especially about the implications for thinking about the divine in a globalised world. The insistence on conversation could only result in stimulation of new thinking on the sacred.

### ***Systematic Theology and Religious Studies***

In the traditional theological encyclopaedia, the study of religion has been assigned to the ministerial disciplines such as Missiology. This was motivated by pragmatic reasons, and cannot escape the charge of some implicit imperialistic aim: What must be converted should be known. The question can be raised as to whether a discipline, which intentionally addresses the truth of the Christian faith – Systematic Theology – should not engage non-Christian religions and their expressions of meaning and truth. Conventionally, Systematic Theology has been marked by a narrow confessional orientation, but times are changing. Already two decades ago, a scholar such as D’Costa (see 1992) voiced the opinion that the task of this discipline must be re-envisioned, emphasising the demographical prominence of people from various religions. He explicitly advocates that the form and contents of Systematic Theology need to change; especially the Christian doctrine of God ‘comes under severe questioning in contact with the world religions’ (D’Costa

1992: 331). The pioneering work by Smart and Konstantine – *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (1991) – should also be mentioned. Although the study has been criticised for its a-historical approach to religion, their intuition that theology be situated in a global context and in the study of religion should be acknowledged.

One impressive project which is in process deserves careful attention – that of the Finnish scholar *Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen* who is teaching in the USA at Fuller Theological Seminary. His earlier textbook approach to various doctrines such as God, the Trinity, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church, which pursued a global approach honouring the diversity of Christian voices worldwide, has now come to fruition in his five-volume project titled *A constructive Christian theology for the pluralistic world* (2013-2017). No comparable project is currently available with such an openness to traditional theology, the diverse voices within Christianity and to non-Christian religions. Epistemologically, the project is placed in a postfoundationalist paradigm, acknowledging that human knowledge is provisional, historical, limited and perspectival, but asserting simultaneously that truth transcends one's own ghetto (Kärkkäinen 2013: 10f). This ambitious undertaking is marked by four features – theology should pursue *a coherent, inclusive, dialogical and hospitable vision*. A coherent approach to truth implies that Christian doctrine should also be related to external claims to meaning, that is, the claims of other religions to truth (Kärkkäinen 2013: 22, 24). The other three orientations are closely related; at stake is not only the traditionally marginalised voices of Christians, especially in the global South, but refers explicitly also to non-Christian religions. This vision is clearly given shape in his study on the Trinity (2014). In addition to the typical Christian systematic engagement with issues such as atheism, panentheism, and divine attributes, Kärkkäinen explores the notion of divine 'hospitality' and then proceeds to discuss at length a Trinitarian theology of religious plurality and enters into detailed conversation with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, and their understanding of Allah, Brahman and Sunyata. This project is beyond doubt significant and should be carefully studied. But most crucial – this should inform the doing of Systematic Theology in future.

## **Two Future Possibilities**

Against the background of the changing times, the trends in discourses on God,

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and the academic institutionalised challenges, one cannot evade the question about the way forward. In this concluding section, a few remarks will be given about this. The promising project of Comparative Theology will be introduced and a personal constructive proposal will be made.

### ***Comparative Theology***

In recent years, the proposal for a *Comparative Theology* has received increasing attention, especially as advocated by Francis Clooney, the Harvard scholar of Hindu-Christian Studies, although one can also mention scholars such as Keith Ward, Robert Neville and James Fredericks. This should be appreciated as a response to 21<sup>st</sup>-century religious diversity (Clooney 2010: 8). The term itself has been used since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the orientations expressed in contemporary discourse are of fairly recent origin, rendering the discipline not yet settled. Clooney (2007: 654) defines it as ‘the practice of rethinking aspects of one’s own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another faith tradition’. A number of dimensions characterise this form of theological exchange: it is interreligious, dialogical and confessional. The overriding conviction is about the interreligious nature of theologising as such. Although the notion of ‘theology’ is applicable to religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, there is an acknowledgement that it has a specific genealogy and connotations which resonate with Christianity. However, this still does not undo the reality of intellectual practices in religions. Central to Comparative Theology is a ‘dialogical accountability’ (Clooney 2007: 661) – mutual learning and attentiveness to particularities of other religious traditions should take place. Clooney (2010: 58ff) highlights the role of ‘religious reading’ of texts. In no way is a confessional stance bracketed off, that is, a neutral stance required. Most often, the encounter results in intensifying religious commitments. The possibility of new communities emerging should also not be excluded (Clooney 2010: 160f). Clooney is frank about the ramifications of such a project: as sophisticated knowledge emerges in the dialogue, answering the big questions becomes increasingly difficult, leading to a postponement of the resolutions.

### ***A Minimalist Proposal***

Before actual interreligious encounter can place (and this was not the focus of

this article), some critical *meta-issues* should be clarified. It is obvious that older paradigms cannot merely continue. Changes in terms of attitude have materialised; but also quite crucial – some new sensibilities have come to the fore. Situating such conversation in the context of the processes of globalisation and post-secularisation, prioritises new perspectives, for example, the public nature of God or the Ultimate, impacts of such beliefs on the ability to adjust, and to respect otherness. Precisely this insight – that a new set of questions confront the researcher – renders the endeavour relatively new. Intentional thinking takes place from the dynamics of a specific – globalised and post-secular – context. A minimalist proposal might entail a number of emphases.

A deliberate and explicit *intersubjective ethos* should direct the conversation. The twin sentiment – appreciation of one’s own tradition with respect and openness to the other – marks rightly, as Clayton (2014: 25) comments, ‘a new form of theological reflection’. Farewell has been bid to older mentalities which still harbour inclinations towards exclusion, superiority and the possible conversion of the other.

Without some form of *episteme* (in the Foucaultian sense), or some cognitive map, the journey would be without direction. Central concerns, especially under the conditions of the present horizon, should be identified. Doing so heightens the awareness of how one is conditioned by one’s own cultural, religious and academic background. However, the very interreligious episteme could be the focus of the conversation. Minimally four avenues, *four questions* could form the direction of the engagement: How to identify *intellectual practices* and traditions? How to *name the Ultimate*? How to map trajectories of change and *internal plurality* relative to the Ultimate? How to account for *performances*, in terms of sense-making of the world, ethical orientation, and personal transformation? These obviously call for some explanation. Without some clarity of the intellectual traditions of religions, serious encounter, especially in an institutional context, is hardly possible. Meaningful conversation is not possible without some identification of what is considered Ultimate. In this instance, the role of language, of human ability to name metaphorically, comes into play. To avoid a static and even a-historical understanding of the divine without particulars, some description of shifts and changes is required. This also creates possibilities for mutations in new social conditions. The crucial question is the final one about performances. Fruitful interreligious conversation should highlight how religious traditions and their

notions of the Ultimate assist human beings to make sense of the world, how they motivate them to honour alterity, and how they promise hope amidst a sea of affliction. How these have been formulated betrays an antenna for the challenges of a globalised world. In a recent study Volf (2015) discusses religion in a globalised world and explicitly highlights *flourishing* as central category. The element of contestation cannot be avoided. What connotations of truth, good and beauty do religions assign to their specific faiths in the Ultimate?

Although the focus is on the global context, a preference for *context* cannot be ignored. All thinking, also about the divine, display a definite contextuality, and in this case the reality of Africa should be attended to. Much has been written on the encounter between missionary Christianity and African Traditional Religion, and about the ‘threat of Islam’. A new discourse is needed; a discourse which accounts for the complex reality of religion in Africa and its multiple faces (see e.g. Bongmba 2012), and for the imperative to consider decolonisation (see e.g. Adamo 2011). The impact of globalisation on African religions is underestimated (see the correction by Van Binsbergen 2004:87ff). A new interreligious discourse on God in Africa should consider precisely the elements mentioned in the previous paragraph on episteme. Much of reflection on God in Africa is trapped in a missionary mode of thinking, and is clearly dated in terms of scholarship. A new mode of reflection should be undertaken in conversation among religions, with a recognition of global changes and impacts, and with an antenna for human flourishing.

The present historical moment with all its changes, threats and opportunities calls for discernment. The greater connection between human beings, with final religious convictions, opens the context for a new moment to think and speak about God, the Ultimate. Some encouraging projects can already be found, but academically a great deal of work needs to be done in reconfiguring how we study religions and do theology. Distilling a productive set of concerns may guide this conversation. And maybe, in this new context, new discoveries could be made about life, our life together, in the presence of the Ultimate.

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*Thinking God in a Global Multi-religious Context*

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# Learning from Black Theology

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## **Abstract**

Black Theology had a profound effect on the religious, especially Christian scene in South Africa in the late 1960, 1970s and 1980s. The traditional stance was that clergy should not get involved in politics. What Black Theology in fact enabled clergy to understand, was that the Gospel was not primarily about the forgiveness of sins but about setting the oppressed free. Thus, politics was at the heart of the work of the clergy in South Africa. Black Theology also had a radical understanding of God. While the need for Black Theology may be less critical in post-Apartheid South Africa, there are major lessons to be learned from how it constructed the Gospel message in the then current context of the oppression and exploitation of the oppressed South African blacks. (This article is an edited version of my honorary doctorate presentation at Rhodes University in 2012.)

**Keywords:** Black Theology, politics, oppressed, freedom, radical understanding of God, post-apartheid South Africa, Gospel message

This presentation reflects on Black Theology, over 40 years from its emergence as an overt, self-conscious and radically new theology in South Africa. I choose to do this because I was intimately involved with the emergence of Black Theology in South Africa and secondly because of its link to Saleem Badat's passionate recognition of the part played by black students in the struggle for liberation in his recent history of SASO, the South Africa Students' Organi-

zation. Here I recount the story of a different group of black students and the ideas that informed their struggle.

Black Theology is now a spent force but nevertheless it has lessons for us all. I offer now my story which I have entitled, *Learning from Black Theology*.

Black Theology will forever be associated with the University Christian Movement (UCM) which formed in 1967 in opposition to the long established Student Christian Association (SCA).

I remind you that in Apartheid South Africa the SCA was for white English-speaking Protestant students. There was a separate organisation for white Afrikaans-speaking students and also distinct associations for those labelled 'non white' – black, coloured and Indian students. When the World Student Christian Federation demanded an end to this racist structuring, the SCA refused and disaffiliated from the world body. At this time I was Methodist chaplain to Rhodes University and in concert with Fr. Colin Collins, the national catholic Chaplain and Fr. John Davies, the national Anglican chaplain, we proposed a new student Christian body which would be both non-racial and radically ecumenical by including both Catholics and Protestants. We submitted our idea to our parent church bodies in 1966 who agreed to sponsor the new body which we called the University Christian Movement (UCM). Its inaugural conference was held in July 1967 at the Anglican-run teacher training college in Grahamstown. The nuns who formed part of the staff of that college courageously agreed to accommodate both black and white students attending the conference. About 90 students attended. Over the next 2 years 30 branches were established in universities and seminaries and training colleges. The government at this time banned the student wings of the ANC and the PAC, so black students joined up with UCM as virtually the only place they could meet, making it almost overnight a black majority body.

At this time on the other side of the world it also happened that a student Christian body, also called the University Christian Movement had been formed in the USA. They invited our fledgling UCM to send three members to their conference in Cleveland Ohio in December of 1967. I was chosen as one of the three to attend. One of the others was, as we were to discover later, an undercover security branch policeman. The third member, Bob Kgwere, was murdered (by driving a bicycle spoke through his heart) by unknown assailants (but presumably security police) very shortly after our return.

While in America we met black Americans who were deeply involved in the Black Power Movement and who were subjecting the Civil Rights Movement and its political strategies to powerful criticism. Here we were also able to get hold of some of the early writings of the influential American black theologian, James Cone, notably *Black Theology and Black Power* and later to meet Cone himself. These encounters had a lasting impact on me and I was persuaded of the validity of Cone's theology.

Back in South Africa the second national conference of the UCM was held at Stutterheim in 1968. One of the historically most important events was the holding of a black caucus initiated by Steve Biko. From this came the decision to form a body where black students could meet to discuss issues directly relevant to their personal lives and lived experiences. This led to the formation of the South African Students organisation (SASO) shortly after.

While this piece of historical curiosity locates the birth of Black Theology within the institutional context of the UCM, it doesn't answer the question of how and why it emerged there in 1970 since SASO, the parent body of the Black Consciousness Movement with which Black Theology was indisputably associated in its beginnings had been up and running vigorously since late 1968. The formation and rapid growth of SASO raised difficult questions about the relations between it and the UCM. Many of the founding members of SASO like Steve Biko (also an executive member of UCM) and Barney Pityana were Christians who wanted to maintain their involvement with the UCM. They recognised that SASO was not and could not become a Christian organisation. So SASO, committed as it was to the development of Black Consciousness ideology was recognised as the coordinating agency for black students' politics. What the Christian members demanded of the UCM was the development of a theological counter-point to Black Consciousness which would address the issue of black liberation. The demand became more strident in 1970 as black students became increasingly scornful of UCM's engagement in humanistic 'encounter groups' and the like, which reflected a liberal reconciliation mind-set.

As a trained theologian now under the influence of James Cone I wrote an exploratory study paper called *Towards a Black theology* in 1970. This paper was distributed to all members, affiliates and the sponsoring churches. The immediate and tangible effect was that the UCM established a Black Theology project and appointed Sabelo Ntwasa as its full-time organiser. Out of this came a sequence of conferences on Black Theology across the country

during 1971, with the publication at the end of the year of a selection of conference papers. This publication was immediately banned by the South African government. In the following year, however, the collection was published by the London publisher, Christopher Hurst, under the title *Black Theology the South African Voice*, which, of course, was also banned in South Africa.

Black Theology took its understanding of 'black' from the Black Consciousness Movement, which used 'black' as a positive identifier opposed to the negative term 'non-white'. Thus 'black' referred to all the victims of racism collectively (that is, it included 'Coloureds' and 'Indians'). But 'black' had a strong political meaning as well. It was not simply about pigmentation but more importantly an attitude of mind. So 'black' referred specifically to those victims of racism who were engaged personally and directly in the liberation struggle. 'Black', if you like, referred exclusively to black liberation activists. With this understanding of 'black' Black Theology had to grow out of and be part of the liberation struggle.

What was most distinctive about Black Theology was its theological method. In essence this was grounded in the conviction that in a racist society, racism not only structures the experiences of the oppressors and their victims differently, it also makes them interpret things differently. As such the nature and meaning of the Gospel is understood differently when it is approached within the experiential context of white oppressors from what it is when black experiences and aspirations inform the interpretation. Thus whites are likely to see the heart of the Gospel as being about the salvation of the soul. Whereas for blacks the primary message is that Jesus came to set the oppressed free. It is about liberation. Thus Black Theology is about black people interpreting the Gospel in the light of black experiences as well as interpreting black experiences in the light of the Gospel. What was central to black experience in South Africa was their systematic racist oppression, and interpreting the Gospel called for an answer to how the Scriptures address this reality of oppression. The answer of Black Theology was that the Gospel was a message of liberation of the oppressed. This had to be understood as an authentic Christian response to oppression.

It is useful to reflect on some of the core issues addressed by Black Theology as were reported in the banned collection of papers which I had edited and then published as *Black Theology, the South African Voice*.

One was an attack on authoritarianism in all its social formations inclu-

ding religion. The essence of the argument by Mokgethi Motlabi was that to allow others to rule over us and make decisions for us compromises our dignity and authenticity as human beings. This argument was carried over into an attack on the authoritarian images of God (omnipotent, King, ruler, Lord, etc.). We are supposed to obey the will of these authoritarian figures. Authoritarian images of God were seen as locking human beings into a permanent childhood and legitimising the social manifestations of authoritarianism in both church and state. Throughout the UCM and thus early Black Theology there was a relentless quest to find ways, especially theological ways, of affirming human beings as adults. It was argued by Sabelo Ntwasa that we need to explore relational images of God rather than remain locked in the traditional person images. In scriptures there are, he argued, two sets of images of God. One is a set of 'person' images, like King, Lord, father, etc. the other is a set of relational images of God – that God is love, peace, and justice. So that in Ntwasa's thinking, as he said 'where I see justice at work in the world, there I see God. That act of justice is itself what I mean by God. God is not something extra over and above the real-world manifestations of love and justice'. If we persist in giving priority to the 'person' images we end up with authoritarian ideas about God, such as King, Lord, and others and thus we legitimate authoritarianism in church and state. We also end up subjecting God to the Race Classification Act according to which God is indisputably 'White'.

The second major issue arose from the character of the UCM as a radically ecumenical movement including Protestants and Catholics. Having Protestants and Catholics together at conferences and in local branches raised serious practical questions about how they could worship together. The response of the UCM was to develop occasion-specific liturgies. These liturgies had a number of fairly consistent characteristics. They were modelled on relational images of God and human beings. They used dance and drama extensively. They drew for their music and songs on the protest traditions of Europe, the USA, South African black workers and black townships. There was thus an unmistakable political thrust to these occasions of worship, which carried over into the infant Black Theology movement. In the liturgies and papers of the Black Theology conferences the felt need was to translate into forms of worship the understanding of 'black' as those involved in the liberation struggle. Thus there was experimentation with liturgies which set worship in the context of the black liberation struggle to promote that struggle by celebrating it, by firing the will to resistance, by supporting people in the

struggle and by exploring resistance strategies. Specifically they used traditional African 'praise songs' to celebrate leaders in the struggle, like Nelson Mandela. During the 1971 Black Theology conferences it was these acts of struggle-based worship which were most consistently broken up by the security police. I know of no copies of those liturgies which survived the police raids.

A third major issue was feminism. Feminist issues had become dominant across most of the white women members among branches on white campuses and in regional seminars. This emergence of feminism led to the emergence of a woman's caucus at the 1968 conference in Stutterheim, out of which grew a national women's project, which focussed on exploring the issue of the oppression of women. This development had two important effects. One effect was the presence of a lively women's project which attracted a significant number of radical women into the UCM, many of whom argued that Christianity had always played a significant role in the marginalisation and oppression of women. The attacks on Christianity as inalienably sexist led many sponsoring churches to have doubts about the Christian character of the UCM and to withdraw sponsorship and funding. This put pressure on the UCM to search for the possibility of a feminist theology, which resulted in the dissemination of my study paper *Towards a Theology of Sexual Politics* In late 1970. This paper even more urgently attacked the 'Person' and 'Person in Authority' images of God in traditional theology and argued the need for inclusive relational images. This was because if you insist on using 'person' images you will inevitably end up giving God a gender, inevitably a male gender and thus legitimising the subordination of women. Thus strong theological links were forged between this emerging feminist theology and Black Theology. The links, however, went deeper than this.

As is well known, and as already mentioned, the 1968 UCM conference at Stutterheim also saw the emergence of a black caucus out of which SASO was born. This placed black women students in a practical dilemma of whether to participate in the women's or the black caucus. This generated heated debate between the women's and the black caucuses. The women argued that black liberation would be no liberation if it left sexism intact. Those in the black caucus argued that this was divisive and would weaken the black struggle. As the women's and the black caucuses and the Women's and Black Theology projects became permanent features of the UCM, these arguments became ongoing throughout the UCM's life.



This feminist strand within the UCM and the challenges it posed for black women had significant consequences for the emergent Black Theology movement. All but one of the Black Theology conferences had papers addressing this issue by such significant black woman speakers as Winifred Kgwere, mother of the murdered Bob Kgwere, and Ellen Kuzwayo. Sadly none of these women would consent to the publication of their insightful papers, which brought together the feminist and black liberation struggles. They refused to consent to the publication of their work because they saw that sexism in the church had ensured that they had no formal training in theology and believed that their insights would be dismissed because of it. However, for as long as Black Theology remained in the context of the UCM, the issue of feminism remained on the theological agenda.

When the UCM disbanded in 1974 it handed the Black Theology Project over to SASO.

In 1992, on a visit to South Africa, I undertook a small research project interviewing over 60 people who had been engaged in the Black Theology movement to gauge its significance for the liberation struggle and for their own work. Transcripts of the recordings were published as an occasional paper by the University of South Australia under the title *Lord, help Thou our Outrage: Black Theology Revisited*. I quote from only two of them, whose words I think have direct relevance to us today.

I begin with Frank Chikane, then Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. He had this to say,

*I see myself as a black theologian. You can't have learned your theology and your practical politics together like I have and not be a black theologian at heart. Black Theology has always provided me with the tools to reflect on and to direct my practical struggles. And these struggles have always been with other black people for liberation. That, for me, is the most fundamental characteristic of Black Theology. The black theologians are political activists who reflect on their praxis. If you theologise without involvement, the people will see through you. The struggle of black people against oppression and for freedom; that is what Black Theology is about.*

Frank Chikane again argued that Black Theology is a theology which advances the struggle by empowering people. In his words,

*The yardstick by which I judge any theology and thus Black Theology, is whether it advances the struggle of the people. And it does this by empowering the people; by providing them with the spiritual and emotional resources to engage in the struggle. For me black consciousness and Black Theology was a conversion experience. It unleashed in me energies and commitments I never knew were there. It enabled me to engage in political action as a Christian in a way that I would never have believed possible with my conservative Pentecostal background. It brought me into the struggle.*

It can be seen that what Black Theology did at that historical point in time was to enable black clergy and black Christians to engage in the political struggle for liberation as Christians. This as we know Frank Chikane likened to a conversion experience. Traditionally black Christians had seen their faith lying outside the political arena. Black Theology located their faith in the very heart of the struggle for liberation. What Black Theology did was engage black Christian students in the liberation struggle.

Black Theology was intimately associated with the Black Consciousness movement. But even as leading Christians ceased to call themselves black theologians, Mcebisi Xundu could claim that:

*Every black Christian who today is directly engaged in the struggle as a Christian is a product of Black Theology. Of course, there were black Christians who did engage in the struggle before Black Theology. They did so, however, without being able to hold their political activism and their Christian commitment together. And they were roundly condemned by their churches for being political activists. Today we act as Christian political activists holding it all together and even our church leaders are out there on the streets with us. I don't think that the young people of today who have not had to live in a South Africa without Black Theology will ever appreciate how draining that schizophrenia was for us. As we moved to engage the system we always had to do battle with our churches who told us this was against the will of God.*

It is time to reflect in closing on the timeless and lasting significance of Black Theology and to ask what can be learned from it by a new generation of young intellectuals. Firstly I want to reflect on its significance for the business of

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doing theology. As we have seen, Frank Chikane could claim that ‘the yardstick by which I judge any theology is whether it advances the struggle of the people. And it does this by empowering people by providing them with the spiritual and emotional resources to engage in the struggle. Even though I no longer see myself as a theologian, I have the temerity to say that I heartily concur with that analysis of what constitutes authentic theology. In today’s South Africa, ‘race’ is no longer the primary social and political cleavage. As Saleem Badat has said in his conclusion to his study of SASO:

*During the past 15 years of democracy there have been important economic and social gains. Yet the reality is South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The cleavages of ‘race’, class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger, disease, poverty, and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival.*

Today’s struggle in South Africa is no longer liberation from the systematic structures of racist oppression. The arena has shifted to those who suffer the ravages of poverty. The struggle has to be for social justice and thus a more equal society. For me, this means that authentic theology has to listen to the experiences and aspirations of those suffering human beings and, like the black theologians of 45 years ago, today’s theologians have to be engaged with these victims of oppression in their struggle for liberation and give voice to their cries. They have to empower them spiritually and emotionally to engage in their struggle. The authentic theologian is still one engaged in that struggle as a political activist.

Our task as intellectuals is still to engage with the victims of injustice, to analyse their plight, to give voice to their distress and their hopes. But it is not to do this standing aloof from their struggle. It needs to be done from the very heart of that struggle. It is to devise and implement strategies that will restore to people their dignity and humanity. Each of us is called upon to become liberation activists for social justice. This is a tough commission requiring courage, great skill and determination.

### **Acknowledgement**

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# Gandhi: A Man for our Times?

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## **Abstract**

Following my earlier collaboration with Martin Prozesky, my essay links with three major concerns in Prozesky's work as he has engaged with a radical critique of religious traditions and structures in the South African context of the end of apartheid: the involvement of dominant religious traditions in sustaining power structures and inequality; the nexus between religious beliefs and organizations and violence; and the failure of many 'religions' to meet the needs of serious seekers after meaning and truth. In this context, I examine the life and thought of M.K. Gandhi, particularly the way he addressed the nature of India and its problems as British imperial rule ended. It also focuses on Gandhi's critique of Hindu tradition as a powerful buttress of profound social inequality particularly relating to caste and gender; his response to violence in the name of religion and community; and finally his underlying belief that true religion was the individual's search for the divine and that all religious traditions by contrast have very partial visions of truth. Finally, in my view, Gandhi should be seen not just as an important historical figure but very much as a man for our times also.

**Keywords:** Religious tradition, religious structures, apartheid, inequality, violence, truth, M.K. Gandhi, Hindu tradition, caste, gender

It is a privilege to be invited to contribute an essay in this volume honouring the work of Professor Martin Prozesky, who has been to me a friend and colleague, although I work on another continent, and in a different academic

discipline. One of the pleasures as well as the strengths of contemporary academia is its global nature: scholars are no longer locked in their own national worlds, and their concerns and experiences can be shared across the world in truly global interactions.

Martin's work lies broadly in the field of religious studies; but not in the narrow sense of examining the internal beliefs and dynamics of religious traditions and the communities they give rise to. He has worked at the 'edges' of the discipline, where it interacts with politics and history, for example. Studying, teaching and communicating to a broader thoughtful public, in the particular context of South Africa and its turbulent but creative recent history, he has examined and critiqued at least three aspects of established religious traditions and structures as they interact with the society around them. These three themes reappear in his work – the involvement of dominant religious traditions in sustaining power structures and inequality, the nexus between religious beliefs and organizations and violence, and the failure of many 'religions' to meet the needs of serious seekers after meaning and truth.

These concerns bring to mind M.K. Gandhi, who came to maturity as a thinker, and as a political activist during his two decades working in South Africa, before he became notable in India as a 'great soul' or *Mahatma*, and as someone who had the courage to challenge political, social and religious authorities in India under British imperial rule. Gandhi came to wrestle with the three great issues which have undergirded much of Martin's work. His years championing the Indian community in South Africa from 1894, when he first came to the country on a temporary contract as a lawyer, were years of seeking and experimentation, of self-examination and reflection. They came to fruition back in India from 1914 until his assassination in 1948 – in his voluminous speeches and writings, in the simple religious communities, *ashrams*, he founded and made his home, in his increasingly spartan lifestyle, and of course in his refinement of peaceful resistance to wrongs both social and political, in the form of *satyagraha*<sup>1</sup>. It is appropriate to examine Gandhi's

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<sup>1</sup> The major published source for Gandhi's life, his speeches and writings is the 100 volume *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1958-). A convenient collection of Gandhi's writings on key issues is J. Brown (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (New Edition, 2008). On Gandhi's time in South Africa there is also his autobiography which covers his life to the 1920s, and his account of his practice of non-violence, *An Autobiography: The Story*

thinking and work in relation to these three issues, not just because of their relation to Martin's own work, but because, in a happy coincidence, I first met Martin at a conference in Pietermaritzburg in 1993 to honour the work of Gandhi in South Africa<sup>2</sup>.

The background to Gandhi's work in India were the final decades of British imperial rule. Political power was at stake in a diverse and plural society, first through a series of constitutional reforms, and second with the prospect of independence. People were increasingly forced to ask themselves in both hope and fear crucial questions about the nature of Indian identity, and what a new Indian nation state would look like. Would the new India, emerging from the end of British rule, be plural and inclusive of the Hindu majority and significant minorities such as Muslims, and Sikhs, or would it be built on an uncompromisingly Hindu vision of Indian-ness? Would the new state represent and care for the weak and less valued members of society, particularly those considered to be 'untouchable' in Hindu ritual hierarchy, or of course the vast majority of Indian women who had far lower status than men and virtually no political voice. Gandhi's work encompassed far more than 'politics' as commonly understood. Certainly he involved himself in the campaign for national freedom from imperial rule, and was a crucial figure in the politics of the Indian National Congress, which was the main nationalist organization and voice. But far more important to him was grass roots work to make Indians self-reliant, and to generate an inclusive sense of nationhood beyond religious and regional differences, and beyond social divisions and gross inequalities of wealth and status. This was what he called *swaraj* or true self-rule. His original manifesto proclaiming his vision of what a new India might look like was *Hind Swaraj*, a pamphlet written in 1909<sup>3</sup>. He never retracted it. He went on to argue that the work of social reconstruction was far more important for India's future than political campaigning or even movements of non-violent resistance to

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*of My Experiments with Truth* (1927); and *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1928). While in South Africa Gandhi also wrote his key book on the meaning of self-rule (*swaraj*) for India, *Hind Swaraj* (1909). It is available in CWMG, X: 6-68. The best modern edition is Parel's *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (1997).

<sup>2</sup> This conference gave rise to the volume co-edited by us, *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and Politics* (1996).

<sup>3</sup> See reference to Parel's edition in note 1.

British rule<sup>4</sup>.

Given the religious complexity of Indian society and the way religious traditions were interwoven with social practice and political organization, Gandhi could not have avoided serious engagement with the nature of religion on the subcontinent. Nor would he have wanted to. A Hindu by birth, he was on his own admission unimpressed by its practice and teaching as a young man, and knew little of its scriptures. It was the experiences of his student days in England and then his life in South Africa which drew him to reconsider his own religious inheritance and also to investigate the insights of other traditions. As he wrote in his autobiography, 'I had gone to South Africa for travel ... and for gaining my own livelihood. But ... I found myself in search of God and striving for self-realization'<sup>5</sup>. Although Gandhi remained a Hindu all his life, and counselled that all people should remain within their own traditions rather converting to another one, his own understanding of religion was deeper and broader than a commitment to a particular tradition or a particular way of seeing or searching for the divine. He came to believe that Truth was God, and that the authentic human life was to engage in a search for that Truth. Truth undergirded and lay deep within all living things, and so service of all life, and particularly of the poorest and least regarded of humanity, was the surest way to understanding something of Truth. As he wrote in a letter in 1932<sup>6</sup>,

The purpose of life is undoubtedly to know oneself. We cannot do it unless we learn to identify ourselves with all that lives. The sum total of that life is God. Hence the necessity of realizing God living within

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<sup>4</sup> See the sources gathered in section IV of J. Brown (ed.), *Gandhi: The Essential Writings*. Particularly significant was a pamphlet he wrote in December 1941, 'Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place' (in Brown 2008:164-184).

<sup>5</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, II, Chapter XXII. The autobiography provides a good introduction to Gandhi's religious thinking. As he wrote in the introduction his purpose was not to write an autobiography as commonly understood but to tell the story of his 'experiments with truth' – hence the subtitle of the work. See also the documents chosen in section II of Brown's *Gandhi: The Essential Writings*.

<sup>6</sup> J. Brown (ed.): *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008:41).



every one of us. The instrument of this knowledge is boundless selfless service.

This belief in service as the route to knowledge of the divine drew him into many aspects of work for the poor and despised, the underprivileged, the sick and the very poor. Perhaps the most notable among his many ostensibly ‘social’ campaigns were those for the abolition of the status of Untouchability, and for the reform of many customs relating to women which prevented them from reaching their potential as human beings and contributing to the life of their country. But his understanding of the meaning of true religion also drew him into what his contemporaries understood as politics. As he concluded his autobiography he stated this clearly.

To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means<sup>7</sup>.

Obviously, Gandhi’s priorities and practices marked him out as very different from most of those who were politically active in India at the time of his return to his homeland in 1915. Many thought him a very strange person indeed, commenting on his refusal to wear European dress as many Indian professional men among his contemporaries did, his extraordinarily restricted vegetarian diet, as well as more widely on his ideas and his *ashram* homes. Although he soon became known by the title of Mahatma after his return to India, he began to engage in a highly critical manner with the practice of religion and its impact on private and public life. Some of his fiercest criticism and most radical critiques focussed on the first of the great themes outlined at the start of this essay – the involvement of dominant religious traditions in sustaining power structures and inequality. Gandhi had comparatively little to say about the link between Christianity and British imperialism. (His major critique of British imperialism, as shown in *Hind Swaraj*, rested on his belief

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gandhi’s ‘Farewell’, in *An Autobiography*.

that it was the herald of a so-called civilization bereft of God, which was corrupting Indians and their society.) Given that Gandhi's goal was to transform Indian society from within, and to create a new form of polity, he concentrated on the traditions of the majority of Indians – namely the cluster of traditions and practices which were increasingly known as 'Hinduism'<sup>8</sup>. His own understanding of true religion was far broader than that of many Hindus at the time, and his personal practice far more eclectic<sup>9</sup>. He therefore had no hesitation in pointing out the ways in which cultural practices of dominance and discrimination were rooted in Hindu thinking and practice, and arguing that these must be rooted out if India was to flourish as a truly self-regulating polity. In his view such practices were morally wrong and also deeply dysfunctional in the context of creating *swaraj*.

As already noted, he spent considerable time and energy on issues of caste and gender. On questions relating to caste he was always in adult life totally opposed to treating some people as ritually polluting and therefore untouchable. He called untouchability 'the greatest blot on Hinduism'<sup>10</sup>. This had been clear even in South Africa, when he welcomed into his home those whom high caste Hindus would have considered polluting. (This caused considerable tension between Gandhi and his wife.) It nearly wrecked his first *ashram* home in India when he admitted an 'Untouchable' family and caste Hindus withdrew their charitable funding. It became one of the cornerstones of

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<sup>8</sup> 'Hinduism' is a very recent word and concept. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century a 'Hindu' was the name given to someone from India. It was a term of geographical origin as in the description of British people holidaying from India in the Cape who were known as 'Hindus'. It became a term of religious identification in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century as many Indian religious reforms sought to present their traditions to a wider world as 'a religion' as understood in western thought and language.

<sup>9</sup> In his personal practice and in his *ashram* communities, Gandhi had no hesitation in using the forms of worship and prayer practised by Christians, for example. He would often use Christian hymns, among his favourites being John Henry Newman's 'Lead Kindly Light'. Sometimes visiting English people would, much to their embarrassment, be asked to lead the singing of such hymns.

<sup>10</sup> Speech in Ahmedabad, 1921, in J. Brown (ed.): *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008: 210-212).

his constructive work for a new India. As the years passed in India itself he became increasingly radical on the far wider issue of caste as a system of social and often economic hierarchy, buttressed by practices of social separation which allocated ritual status to individuals at birth, and prevented people from different ritual groups from eating together or intermarrying. Similarly he began to campaign on gender practices and attitudes which drew on Hindu tradition to sustain the dominance of men in society and to reduce women to a permanent state of inequality both in the household and in the public sphere. His criticisms ranged from the wearing of heavy jewellery by women, their seclusion in the home in many parts of society<sup>11</sup>, their lack of education, and the traditions of child marriage and hostility to widow remarriage, even when the widow was still very young. He also rounded on prevailing ideas of ‘masculinity’, which did not value women as highly as men, and often led to profound public discourtesy to or harassment of women, so buttressing the notion that women of good moral and social standing should not be seen about in public space, participating in public life or in the political campaigns of the nascent nation. He challenged contemporary understanding of manliness in his own life style and in his insistence that true courage lay not in aggressive or violent behaviour, but in the ability to suffer for the sake of right. Moral probity and spiritual strength were in his eyes the desirable marks of a new Indian manliness.

Beneath Gandhi’s critique of particular attitudes and customs, through which Hinduism buttressed social and economic inequalities, lay a far deeper concern – namely the reform of Hindu ‘tradition’ itself. In challenging tradition he was addressing the very bedrock of religious belief and observance. To do this he drew on his own understanding of what true religion meant. Given that for him true religion was the individual’s search for Truth, he placed a lower value on scripture and tradition as authority in religious matters than did most orthodox Hindu contemporaries. The Hindu scriptures were important to him, and he had a particular devotion to the Bhagavad Gita. Tradition also had its place but needed to be weighed and sometimes challenged, primarily by the exercise of conscience and reason. Indeed conscience was probably his own greatest authority in religious and moral issues. He experienced this as a voice deep within himself. In 1932 he wrote in a private letter,

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<sup>11</sup> Purdah, or the veiling of women and their seclusion in the home, was not just a Muslim practice. It was often a mark of high caste status, too.

For me the reasoned course of action is held in check subject to the sanction of the inner voice. I do not know if others would call it the mysterious power .... I have never deliberated upon this nor analysed it, I have felt no need of doing so either. I have faith, and knowledge, too, that a Power exists beyond reason. This suffices for me<sup>12</sup>.

Writing publicly in one of his papers the next year about a fast he was intending to undertake he described how a terrible inner struggle was resolved by hearing this inner voice.

It was as unmistakable as some human voice definitely speaking to me, and irresistible .... Suddenly the Voice came upon me. I listened, made certain it was the Voice and the struggle ceased<sup>13</sup>.

He was experienced and wise enough to recognise that there is great scope for self-deception in religious matters, and particularly in a sense of divine guidance. Much preparatory work of self-discipline was needed to fit anyone to listen to the divine voice within. As he said in 1939, 'This listening ... presupposes fitness to listen, and the fitness is acquired after constant and patient striving and waiting on God'<sup>14</sup>.

However, Gandhi did not only engage with the way Hindu traditions sustained inequality and threatened to undermine the project of true *swaraj*. He was also deeply distressed by the way in which religious affiliation even more broadly was increasingly giving rise to violence in Indian public life, tearing apart the fabric of society and ultimately rending the subcontinent into two in 1947 when the British left. The sources of this conflict in the name of religion, often known as 'communalism', are among the most studied and least understood of the many issues contributing to the processes of independence and partition. This essay is not the place to rehearse contemporary scholarship. It is enough to say that even before Gandhi returned finally to India in 1915 he was disturbed at the growing rhetoric which identified Indian identity as being

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<sup>12</sup> 25 May 1932, in J. Brown (ed.): *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008:48).

<sup>13</sup> *Harijan*, 8 July 1933, in J. Brown (ed.): *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008:48f).

<sup>14</sup> *Harijan*, 7 October 1939, in J. Brown (ed.): *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008:50).

Hindu (as opposed to Muslim or Christian for example). He devoted much attention to this in *Hind Swaraj*. Once back in India he made communal unity one of the cornerstones of his definition of true *swaraj*, and threw himself, often at great personal cost, into work to unite Hindus and Muslim in the common cause of a united, independent India.

Gandhi addressed the issue of escalating division and violence in the name of religion at different levels of his public and private life. As we have noted, he believed that the essence of true religion was the individual's search for truth, manifested in service of others. He argued that no one religious tradition had a monopoly of truth, but that all had some glimpses of truth. Using the metaphor of truth as a diamond, loved by the Jains in his native Gujarat, he said that each individual and tradition has some sense of different facets of truth but that no one and no 'religion' can grasp the radiant totality of truth. So every person and every religious community should honour others and their grasp of truth and their ongoing search for it. Late in life, looking back on his long association with non-Hindus from his childhood and his days as a student in London, he wrote in a private letter,

I have realised that every religion contains both truth and untruth. The root of all religions is one and it is pure and all of them have sprung from the same source<sup>15</sup>.

He put this belief into practice as well as into words, maintaining close friendships with Hindus and Christians, among others, and drawing on their traditions in his *ashram* worship.

Building on this understanding he deployed a rhetoric of fraternity among religious groups as part of the creation of a new India. All those who wished to belong to India were welcome within it, all had contributions to make to its new identity, and India had for many centuries been home to numerous faith traditions and communities. In particular he argued that there could be no identification of Indian identity with Hindu identity. Muslims and Hindus, as the two major religious communities in India, needed to realise that they were like brothers, or like two eyes in one face. Without this unity which lay deeper than religious affiliation there could be no real *swaraj*. He had argued this even

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<sup>15</sup> 1 November 1945, in J. Brown (ed.): *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008:50f).

before he returned to India finally, when writing his pamphlet, *Hind Swaraj*, in 1909<sup>16</sup>. When confronted with the reality of communal mistrust and violence in India itself he threw himself into combatting it. In 1924 he wrote a lengthy article on the subject in his paper, *Young India*, entitled ‘Hindu-Muslim Tension: Its Cause and its Cure’, which was later reprinted as a pamphlet<sup>17</sup>. In its conclusion he wrote,

The reader of *Young India* will pardon me for devoting practically the whole of *Young India* to the question of Hindu-Muslim unity. He will readily do so if he holds with me that there is no question more important and more pressing than this. In my opinion, it blocks all progress.

Despite all his efforts in public persuasion and his support for Muslim concerns, Gandhi was by the mid-1920s acknowledging that none of his work seemed to be making any difference. He had thought he was an expert in solving the problem, but discovered to his sorrow that he was not, and could not offer any solution to his countrymen<sup>18</sup>. In retrospect the historian can see that communal tension and violence was far more complex than Gandhi understood it to be; and that the drivers of this corrosive disunity among Indians had comparatively little to do with religious belief, and were compounded by demography, economic status and aspiration. In particular division and hostility were reinforced by the circumstances of imperial rule and its likely ending, as the British devolved political power to Indians through mechanisms which recognised religious groups as one of many different status groups needing special representation and protection.

By the end of 1927 Gandhi was writing publicly that the only contribution he could make to the problem of communal disunity was ‘prayer and such individual acts of friendship as are possible’<sup>19</sup>. However, he had one

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<sup>16</sup> *Hind Swaraj*, Chapter X.

<sup>17</sup> For considerable quotation from this, see J. Brown (ed.): *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008:195-204).

<sup>18</sup> Speech in Madras, *The Hindu*, 9 March 1925, in J. Brown (ed.): *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008:207).

<sup>19</sup> *Young India*, 1 December 1927, in J. Brown (ed.), *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008: 50f).

more ‘weapon’ in his armoury which he deployed in the dark days of 1946-1947 when it became clear that not only was a free India to be partitioned in the name of religion, but that the preparation for independence would be scarred by wide-scale and atrocious violence<sup>20</sup>. Gandhi came to an understanding of the possibility of peaceful resistance to wrongs of many kinds while he was in South Africa. It came to be far more than a tactic for him, and was embedded in his understanding of the nature of Truth. If no individual or group had a monopoly of understanding Truth, then each must respect the beliefs and wishes of the other. In any situation of conflict the truth-seeker must in conscience follow his or her sense of truth, but must also respect that of the opponent, and must therefore seek for peaceful change and a growth in understanding among all parties. Violence was a denial of the nature and power of Truth. This in practice gave rise to what he named as *satyagraha*, or truth force. Throughout his life he was continually experimenting with different forms of *satyagraha*, of putting into practice this way of achieving lasting change. He believed that peaceful resistance to wrong was very different from what was commonly known as ‘passive resistance’, and that it required great courage and careful planning and thought. He remained convinced of its potential and efficacy right to the end of his life, despite its apparent ‘failure’ in India<sup>21</sup>. In the context of escalating communal violence Gandhi personally threw himself into areas of conflict at great personal danger to himself in an attempt to protect minority communities and to bring majority groups to some sense of what they were doing. Perhaps the greatest examples of his personal practice of *satyagraha* were his presence in a Bengali village in the wake of anti-Hindu violence, a subsequent walking tour on foot in riot-torn villages, and then further work of reconciliation in neighbouring Bihar where Muslims

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<sup>20</sup> There is a considerable literature on the violence which accompanied independence and partition. Broad accounts are in Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, *The Partition of India* (2009); and Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (2007).

<sup>21</sup> On the far wider issue of the circumstances in which peaceful resistance could achieve tangible results, see Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (2009). In particular see Brown, ‘Gandhi and Civil Resistance in India, 1917-1947: Key Issues’, in Roberts and Garton (2009:44 - 57).

had been the victims and Hindus the aggressors. At partition he returned to Calcutta, the capital of Bengal, to try to stem violence by his personal presence and then a fast for unity. The results were such that Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, noted that Gandhi had achieved by moral persuasion what four Divisions of the army could probably not have done<sup>22</sup>. However, across the subcontinent the long-term repercussions of communal violence have continued to bedevil public and private life – in the conflicts between India and Pakistan, in continued suspicion and hostility between religious communities in both countries, and in the private suffering, often silently born<sup>23</sup>, by those who witnessed and sometimes committed atrocities, whose wounds have never been healed. They are testimony to the accuracy of Gandhi's sense of the power of violence in the name of religion, and of his own sense of failure to find lasting solutions to a problem which was far more complex than even he realised.

Despite what looks like failures in Gandhi's own life, he remains an immensely powerful and attractive public figure who has become international 'property' and inspiration to many since his death. In part this is related to the great need for peaceful solutions to seemingly intractable political and socio-economic problems, and the hope that Gandhian *satyagraha* might provide an alternative to violence and political compromise. But there is also a way in which Gandhi has become an inspiration for those who feel imprisoned by their own religious traditions, or who fail to gain inspiration from any organised or established 'religion'.

As this essay noted earlier, Gandhi understood true religion to be the individual's quest for Truth deep within each living person. It was not defined in terms of creed or dogma, and it was not guarded by specialist practitioners or hierarchical structures. It was also very eclectic in its spiritual and theological understandings and its practices of worship. Not surprisingly many people were drawn to Gandhi and his simple *ashram* communities in his own life time. He had a profoundly attractive and welcoming personality: some would have said he was charismatic. But those who associated with him were drawn by more than his personality. Some were Indians who were trying to

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (1951:181). Campbell-Johnson was Mountbatten's Press attaché.

<sup>23</sup> For a profoundly moving account of this, see Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Violence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998).



find a way of living within their religious traditions while being empowered to live morally in a changing world, without being held back by enervating traditions. There were many such earnest seekers in the India of Gandhi's time and in the generations before him who were confronted particularly in the nineteenth century with the challenges of other 'world religions' and the contrast between new social sensitivities and the restricting and seemingly unchanging nature of many of India's religious traditions<sup>24</sup>. Gandhi was a breath of fresh air when he claimed that religious ideas were always evolving.

Only God is changeless and as His message is received through the imperfect human medium, it is always liable to suffer distortion in proportion as the medium is pure or otherwise<sup>25</sup>.

Here was justification for religious reform, for challenge to existing tradition, and for openness to new insights. Foreigners who came to his *ashrams* and worked with him were often people who were on the fringes of their own religious traditions or had virtually abandoned them<sup>26</sup>. Gandhi's preaching and the religious practices in his *ashrams* allowed people to seek for a spirituality which seemed truthful to them, unfettered by creeds, the notion of unchanging authoritative tradition, or a priestly class. It was also supremely practical, leading to a simple life style and to service of others.

Of course many people then and now have found their religious traditions to be liberating and sustaining, giving them a structure of faith and practice within which they can move to greater depths of spiritual sensitivity, and which motivates them for public service. Gandhi's ideal was never to encourage people to leave their faith traditions but to become better believers within them. As he wrote in 1924, he believed that the world's main religious traditions were equally true though personally Hindu tradition gave him all he needed,

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<sup>24</sup> See Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-religious Reform Movements in British India* (1989).

<sup>25</sup> *Young India*, 4 September 1924, in J. Brown (ed.), *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008: 52f).

<sup>26</sup> One interesting British follower of Gandhi was C.F. Andrews, one-time Christian missionary. He did finally return to Christianity. See H. Tinker, *The Ordeal of Love: C.F. Andrews and India* (1980).

It contains all that I need for my growth. It teaches me to pray not that others may believe as I believe but that they may grow to their full height in their own religion. My constant prayer therefore is for a Christian or a Mussalman to be a better Christian and a better Mahomedan. I am convinced, I know, that God will ask, asks us now, not what we label ourselves but what we are, i.e., what we do. With Him *deed* is everything, *belief* without deed is nothing. With Him doing is believing<sup>27</sup>.

For Gandhi therefore all true religion, within or outside a named religious tradition, consisted of seeking for Truth and growing in self-understanding and therefore growing in perception of the divine.



This essay has examined three significant themes in the life, work and thought of Mahatma Gandhi. We have seen how, in the context of early 20<sup>th</sup> century India, he wrestled with the role of dominant religious traditions in sustaining varieties of power structures and inequalities, the connection between religious beliefs and organizations and violence, and the quest for an authentic and active spirituality in a changing context where many ‘religions’ seemed to fail to meet the needs of serious seekers after meaning and truth. These are themes which Martin Prozesky has often addressed in his own academic and more public work in the very different context of South Africa during and immediately after apartheid. They are indeed enduring issues which will always confront men and women in their thinking and their practice. It is for this reason that I gave as the title to this paper, ‘Gandhi: a man for our times?’ When Martin, and indeed many of us, were starting our academic careers, and engaging in the study of history, politics and religion, there were some who predicted the march of ‘secularization’ and the death of religion as a force in public life. If ever a prediction was proved wrong this was perhaps one of the most egregious. We know from events around us the continuing power of religious traditions and organizations, and the ways in which some of them sustain social

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<sup>27</sup> *Young India*, 4 September 1924, in J. Brown (ed.), *Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (2008: 53).

and political power structures, and justify profound inequalities. We see their links to local and international acts of violence. We can see, too, the influence of varieties of fundamentalisms, and the dangers where serious scholarly reflection on the nature of scripture and tradition is absent. It is therefore as urgent as it has been in the past that new generations of scholars should continue to examine these issues which cross established academic disciplines, that they should engage with men and women in the past who were as thoughtful on these issues in their own times, and that they should contribute to public as well as academic debate.

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# Convergence and Divergence: A Christian Response to Prozesky's 'Global Ethic' and Secular Spirituality

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to identify areas of convergence and divergence in the value systems of secular ethics and Christian ethics and to address what is meant by the moral development of individual persons and communities. The article discusses the views of Martin Prozesky on religion, the creation of a global ethic and secular spirituality from the perspective of Christian ethics. The discussion draws on the 'Barthian-Thomism' of Nigel Biggar and the four key moral questions posed by Dallas Willard in order to identify elements of convergence and divergence related to worldviews, values, virtues and the moral development of persons and groups.

**Keywords:** value systems, secular ethics, Christian ethics, moral development, global ethics, secular spirituality, worldviews, values, virtues

## Introduction

A massive poster that currently adorns a wall of the University of South Africa (Unisa) reads, 'Education is the great engine of personal development' (Nelson Mandela). It is a shortened version of a statement in *The Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (1994: 144):

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor; that the

son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine; that the child of farm workers can become the President of a great nation.

Few would question the truth of this statement, but what is 'education'? A narrow understanding of education includes the accumulation of knowledge and skills for example, in the fields of medicine, the social sciences, business, and law.

However, were *moral* education to be omitted from the social educational endeavours of families, schools, civil society and the universities, society would be exposed to doctors, mine-owners and presidents who could abuse their positions and power<sup>1</sup>. Thus Prozesky (2014: 297) notes that '... there can be no evading of responsibility for ethical enhancement by our universities ...'. Venter (2012: 111-118) argues that theologians at public universities must examine the ethical dimension of knowledge construction and that moral virtue needs to be part of communal life and social well-being.

This article forms part of a *festschrift* that seeks to honour the work of Professor Prozesky, and is written in a context of moral complexity and crisis in South Africa<sup>2</sup>. In recent years, many reports have emerged in South Africa about instances of fraud, corruption, the abuse of power and a disregard for the humanity and rights of others on the part of leaders within the government. These include the reports of the highly regarded former Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, *Secure in comfort* and *State Capture* (Gqubule 2017: 85-179) and Jacques Pauw's exposé published in 2017, *The President's Keepers: Those Keeping Zuma in Power and out of Prison*. On the other hand, some in government, business and civil society have acted in ways that are fair, honest and socially responsible<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent South African examples include those implicated in the Life Esidemini and Aurora mine scandals and the Presidency of Jacob Zuma.

<sup>2</sup> During February 2018, South Africans witnessed the resignation of President J. Zuma and the inauguration of Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa as their new president. Ramaphosa's government now has the massive task of eliminating corruption, dealing with contentious issues such as land redistribution and rebuilding the country. Yet, many of those officials complicit in the dereliction of their duties during the previous administration remain in their posts.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, see T.M.G. Digital, Politics: Vytjie Mentor endorses Mcebisi Jonas over proclamation on Gupta's (2016).

The aim of this article is to note these contradictory moral realities, identify areas of convergence and divergence in the value systems of secular and Christian ethics (Prozesky 2013: 8) and to address the nature and means of the moral development of individual persons and communities. Hence, the article discusses the views of Prozesky on religion, the creation of a global ethic and secular spirituality, along with the views of some secular humanists, from the perspective of Christian ethics.

The methodology employed is to draw on the Barthian-Thomism of Nigel Biggar<sup>4</sup> and four key moral questions posed by Dallas Willard<sup>5</sup> to identify the convergence and divergence between secular and Christian perspectives on reality, values and moral development. The article draws on the disciplines of Theological Ethics and Applied Ethics. Theological Ethics or, (in this instance), Christian Ethics is an important perspective because in many of his works, Prozesky discusses religion, especially the Christian faith, alongside a variety of ethical concerns related to public affairs. Biggar (2011:45) states that,

... Christians should look to the integrity of their ethics – to its theological narrative integrity – ... [and] they should expect to find consensus with non-Christians on ethical matters – but only occasionally and provisionally.

In this article, the discipline of Christian Ethics is not seen as a minor subspecies of Ethics, relevant only to Christians. Rather, the article compares the writings of thinkers (Christians and others) who all contribute to the common task of defining the nature of ethics, based on the presuppositions and perceptions of reality that influence their interpretation of the data they draw from the human, natural, economic and other sciences.

This discussion of secular and Christian ethics is relevant to the teaching and practice of Applied Ethics because it seeks to identify, evaluate and apply ethical understanding and moral teaching to specific contexts and

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<sup>4</sup> Biggar is Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at the University of Oxford and Director of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life.

<sup>5</sup> Willard (1935 - 2013) was a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California and a well-known Christian author and public speaker.

problems within social experience (see Beauchamp, Walters, Kahn & Mastroianni 2014; Rossouw & Van Vuuren 2010). For this reason there has been a resurgence of interest in the teaching of virtue ethics in university courses or degrees and in the ethical issues of business, medicine, the Church, the environment, the law and politics (Kretzschmar & Bentley 2013). In addition, the websites of organisations such as the Ethics Institute of South Africa (2018) and the Business Ethics Network of Africa (BEN-Africa, 2018) advertise conferences, seminars and training in the area of applied business ethics.

### **The Work of Professor Martin Prozesky**

Professor Prozesky's long and distinguished career commenced at the University of Rhodes in 1969 where he was a temporary lecturer. Later he was a Professor Emeritus and Senior Research Associate at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN). Most of his academic life was spent at UKZN, but he was also a visiting scholar at universities such as Oxford, California, Sydney, Cape Town and the Free State. He published books and articles in various fields of research, including Religious Studies (1984; 1996), Theology (1990; 1992) and Ethics (2007)<sup>6</sup>. He also contributed to debates on current affairs in local newspapers. Prozesky was a founder member of the academic journal *Religion in Southern Africa* (renamed the *Journal for the Study of Religion*), and of the Unilever Ethics Centre in Pietermaritzburg. In this article, particular attention is paid to his writings on secular spirituality, a 'global ethic' and moral formation.

Initially, I only knew Professor Prozesky by repute. Later I met him at academic conferences. In an earlier article (Kretzschmar 2008), I interacted with Professor Prozesky's writings on secular spirituality and revised a chapter in the book *Ethics for accountants and auditors* (Kretzschmar 2012). I am grateful for this opportunity to engage further with the thinking of Professor Prozesky. I deeply value his integrity, collegiality, dedication to the search for truth, openness and commitment to social justice. Nevertheless, much as I agree with certain of his convictions, in some respects my own views differ from his as I argue below.

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<sup>6</sup> Other articles in this journal issue discuss several additional elements of Professor Prozesky's writings.



## Nigel Biggar's Barthian-Thomism

In his book, *Behaving in Public: How to do Christian Ethics* (2011), Biggar argues for a *via media* that he calls 'Barthian-Thomism'. Biggar refuses to choose between "'conservative" biblical and theological seriousness [and] "liberal" engagement with social policy' (Biggar 2011: xvii).

Biggar (2011: 26-29) draws on Aquinas's notion of natural law (*Summa Theologica* Ia IIae.94.2), and argues that Christians need to recognise that moral wisdom can be found outside the Church and that Christians can engage with other thinkers about the nature of reality and pertinent ethical issues based on our common humanity. The world, because it is God-created, bears the imprint of God's design and ordering. By using our God-given reasoning powers, human beings can acquire some understanding of the world. While it is true that human understanding is damaged by sin, Biggar (2011: 29) says,

... for Aquinas, human reason unaided by special revelation is still capable of grasping accurately some important ethical things, as is implied by his own heavy borrowing from the ethical thought of the pre-Christian Aristotle.

Christian and secular thinkers can find a meeting point in their experience of life, and they can reflect on the meaning of life, human nature and the universe in which we live. For Christians, or other religious believers, to insist that one can only talk to those who share one's faith is to end the conversation before it has begun.

Biggar (2011: 19-20, 83-7, 109-110) notes the theologian Barth's openness to learning from those outside the Church. However, Biggar (2011: 7-9, 110) points out that from Barth we also learn that without God's revelation we cannot arrive at a full and proper understanding of the nature of reality or moral matters because sin has marred and distorted human reason. Hence, Christians who engage in a dialogue with other thinkers need to maintain their 'theological integrity', and contribute their insights on creation, human nature, Christology, salvation, eschatology and the like to the wider discourse because these are essential to their convictions about reality and morality.

Such a Barthian-Thomist dialogue opens up and enlivens a debate about both convergence and divergence between secular and Christian think-

ers. In such a dialogue, the parties need to commit themselves to consider the arguments and not resort to misrepresenting or denigrating each other's positions. Biggar (2011: 7, 75) argues against disrespect and humiliation in favour of engagement, communication and persuasion, but with a willingness to listen, learn, and be humble and charitable. In a public debate, what is said is as important as how it is said (Biggar 2011: 47). He goes on to say that mere tolerance is not enough because in the context of rank injustice, 'critical candour' or 'prophetic denunciation' need to be employed in the interests of truth and justice (Biggar 2011: 71-73, 108).

### **A Dialogue in Response to Willard's Four Questions**

In pursuit of the moral debate between Christians, secular thinkers, agnostics or members of other religious faiths, Willard (2009: 50-56, 61)<sup>7</sup> poses the following four questions:

1. What is reality? (The worldview issue)
2. Who is well off or blessed? (What is well-being or the good life?)
3. Who is a truly good person? (The issue of moral character)
4. How does one become a truly good person? (The development issue)

In the next section, I compare the views of Prozesky and other thinkers on these questions<sup>8</sup>.

#### ***What is Reality? (The Worldview Issue)***

In a chapter entitled 'Ethics, spirituality and the secular', Prozesky (2006: 128) states, 'In short, nothing less than a fully inclusive *global* ethic is now urgently in need of creation by people with truth and goodness in their heart, minds and efforts'. Prozesky (2006: 129-30) goes on to propose a secular ethic and is highly critical of religion. He writes:

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<sup>7</sup> I pose similar questions in Kretzschmar (2012: 61-68): 'Why should anything be Valued; What is a good life; Why should I be moral; and What is the role of moral communities?'

<sup>8</sup> Their writings do not respond directly to Willard's questions, but I have sought to select those that deal with these aspects of the moral debate.

Religion as we usually encounter it cannot provide a shared basis for the transforming, enriching and sustainable ethical praxis in the world, and probably never will. Furthermore, I am increasingly persuaded that religion as we know it can no longer even provide a home for spirituality.

He argues that religion is ‘a game of power, control and domination’, it ‘divides people and cultures’ and inculcates ‘spiritual dependency and passivity’ (Prozesky 2006: 131). He continues:

Nor can anyone who has experienced religion from within be unaware that its priorities are not concern for the greatest well-being of this wounded world of ours. Its gaze is fixed on heaven, not earth (Prozesky 2006: 131).

In the place of religion, Prozesky proposes the creation of a secular spirituality and a global ethic, ‘... ethics cannot avoid an engagement with spirituality if it is to be holistically transforming and enriching’ (Prozesky 2006: 129). Yet, in developing his secular spirituality and global ethic, Prozesky draws on the sacred writings of leaders within these self-same despised religions. For example, he refers to Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha, Confucius, African sages and Gandhi (Prozesky 2006: 131). This raises further questions: which criteria should be used to select ‘the best’ elements of these religions; how should they be arrived at; and, are they valid? I return to this point below.

It is certainly true that particular religious teachings and practices need to be criticised. A religion that turns its back on the ‘woundedness’ of the world can be criticised as faulty or distorted<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, to defend actions that are clearly immoral, such as religious persecution, violence and abusive practices, is both wrong and unwise. Similarly, to create a caricature of religion, one that draws only on negative examples is also not valid. With reference to Christianity, further distinctions can be made. Consider for example the difference between the civil religion exemplified by the many individuals who loosely identify themselves as ‘Christians’ and genuine, practicing believers,

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<sup>9</sup> Hence, Henri Nouwen (1979) speaks of Christ (and Christian believers) as ‘wounded healers’.

or between authentic and abusive religious teachings and practices. As G. K. Chesterton stated, 'Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried' (quoted in Willard 1988: 1)<sup>10</sup>.

Particular religious abuses cannot invalidate the teachings of all religions and the ethical practices of their adherents. In the same way that the actions of some corrupt doctors, engineers or lawyers do not totally invalidate medicine, engineering or the law, so the abuse of religion cannot invalidate all faith traditions. Arguably, Prozesky recognises the validity of this argument, as he draws on the 'best' examples of religious moral values in his construction of a global ethic. Furthermore, religious traditions such as Christianity do subject themselves to internal critique. Thus in Judaism, prophets such as Isaiah and Amos denounced religious ritual that was hypocritical because social justice was disregarded and, in the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles spoke out vehemently against behaviour that was immoral and unjust.

It is important to note the difference between Prozesky's secular spirituality and the 'new' atheism of Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens. He draws the following distinction (2009: 242) between the terms 'secular' and 'secularism':

'Secular' means independent of religious control of any kind; it means fairness and neutrality of stance towards them, but the neutrality is an enabling or facilitative neutrality because it provides freedom of belief and operation for all. By contrast, 'secularism' is a philosophy or ideology which opposes religion, deeming it to be a bad thing, at best confused and at worst deeply damaging to humanity.

Though critical of religion, Prozesky draws on certain religious values and examples in the construction of his global ethic. However, it is questionable whether his critique of religion as outlined above fully displays the fairness and neutrality spoken of here. It appears that Prozesky's global ethic is an essentially secular one, albeit one that draws on particular religious traditions,

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<sup>10</sup> See Part I, Chapter 5, 'The Unfinished Temple' (no pagination) of Chesterton's book, *What's Wrong with the World*, <https://www.basilica.ca/documents/2016/10/G.K.Chesterton-Whats%20Wrong%20With%20The%20World.pdf>. (Accessed on 27 February 2018).

as a commitment to a particular faith tradition is not required nor is a belief in God.

Secular humanists and atheists (Markham 2007: 80-88) go much further than Prozesky and stress the purely material nature of the universe and also reject any notion of the existence of a personal, creator God who is transcendent Spirit. Christians are accused of holding views that are antiquated and contrary to reason. Yet, secular thinkers may assume that their own views are beyond reproach. However, can a secular and materialist understanding of reality provide an explanation for the origin of the universe, and why anything ought to be valued?

The following question is posed by Haught – if reality is conceived of as being purely material, from where do secular thinkers derive the notion that human reason ought to be valued, that human beings have dignity and rights, and that morality is important (Haught 2008: 15-27)? Haught further states,

Dawkins and his associates [the new atheists] declare that reference to God is unreasonable, but what is really unreasonable is their refusal to look for an ultimate explanation as to why the universe is intelligible, why truth is worth seeking, and why we can trust our minds as they reach toward deeper understanding and truth (Haught 2008: 52).

Interestingly, Anthony Flew, well known for his earlier atheist position and critiques of the ‘proofs’ for the existence of God, later on moved to a deist position because of the scientific evidence for design provided by 50 years of DNA research. According to Young (2010: 1), Flew came to recognise that ‘... by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce [life], that intelligence must have been involved’.

According to Biggar (1997: 5-6), if there is no transcendent and objective moral referent, then moral values are not real but only a matter of personal taste or human will,

... there remains no longer any hope or *rational* discussion about moral matters. Since there is no moral reality to know, moral opinions cannot claim to know it. They can therefore be neither true nor false. So when moral opinions clash, the conflict cannot be resolved by an appeal to reason. It can only be solved by the triumph of one will over another – that is, by the triumph of superior might.

Moreover, appeals to reason, moral value, justice, personal integrity or the common good cannot sway those who do not recognise these as values, let alone as moral obligations.

By way of contrast, a Christian view of reality is that we live in an intelligible, God-shaped universe. God is the creator and designer of the physical universe and further sustains the world, counteracting the forces of entropy. God, on the one hand, is transcendent and infinitely mysterious, and on the other hand, immanent and willing to enter into relationships with human beings. Rather than a precarious trust in human reason and experience alone, a Christian ethic is based on a view of a God-shaped reality that evokes wonder, overcomes evil and enjoins believers to embark on a rigorous process of moral conversion. God is the objective referent of the morality partly perceived by human beings and the source of a deeply imbedded moral conscience which itself needs to be redeemed and cultivated. Through Christ's incarnation, suffering and victory over evil and death, God provides a pathway for our human redemption and restoration, and for that of a deeply damaged physical world<sup>11</sup>.

Hence, the essential divergence between a Christian view of reality and that of Prozesky is that the former is based on God as a transcendent, yet knowable, Being and it draws on both natural law and revelation. The latter view of reality is a secular spirituality based on human experience and reason, together with some religious insights.

### ***Who is Well off or Blessed? (What is Well-being or the Good Life?)***

Willard's second question asks how can the 'good' life, or a life worth living, be characterised. Prozesky (2013: 8-10) stresses the 'convergence', or widespread acceptance of core moral values, between adherents of different religions and other moral thinkers:

It can be summarized as the twin core values of a willingness to com-

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<sup>11</sup> Space does not permit a discussion of the 'problem of evil' or the 'problem of goodness'; the former presents a challenge to theists and the latter a challenge to atheists.

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bine legitimate self-interest with real, active concern for others, coupled with integrity, understood as consistently honest behaviour.

Elsewhere, Prozesky (in Rossouw, Prozesky, Burger, du Plessis & van Zyl 2007:44) quotes the American secular humanist philosopher, Paul Kurtz<sup>12</sup> who argues that humanity ought to progress beyond religious faith to a ‘higher’ stage of ethical existence. He provides this four-point statement of the ‘common moral decencies’ that reveal how good people should live (Kurtz 1988: 82-96):

- *Integrity*, which includes truthfulness, promise-keeping, sincerity and honesty;
- *Trustworthiness*, which involves fidelity or faithfulness, and dependability;
- *Benevolence*, which includes goodwill, non-malfeasance as applied to persons and property, sexual consent and beneficence;
- *Fairness*, including gratitude, accountability, justice, tolerance and cooperation.

Prozesky also draws on the writings of Rushworth M. Kidder (1994: 18) who lists the following eight core values shared across cultures: love, truthfulness, fairness, freedom, unity, tolerance, responsibility and respect for life.

The values suggested by Prozesky, Kurtz and Kidder can be endorsed by Christians. Arguably, these values are secular versions of long-standing Judeo-Christian norms and values. For example, the Judeo-Christian norm, ‘be holy as I am holy’ is replaced by ‘integrity’; faith in God and living in accordance with God’s moral will are replaced by ‘trustworthiness’; ‘love your neighbour’ is replaced by ‘benevolence’; and acting justly because one is a recipient of God’s grace, forgiveness and love is replaced by ‘fairness’. Nevertheless, a significant degree of convergence exists between secular and Christian ethics about what can be considered to be the moral values that are recognised as essential to a good life.

Although there may be areas of agreement because of what Aquinas called ‘natural theology’, secular ethics and Christian ethics are not fully

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<sup>12</sup> See Lowder (2001) for a summary of a debate between Kurtz (secular humanism) and Craig (theism).

compatible because of the former's partial or complete dismissal of God. Further, Christian morality is about more than human flourishing; it is based on faith in God, *agapē* (love), love for God, self, other human beings and creation, and the hope of the resurrection and the life to come (Wright 2010: 181- 89).

Hence, this discussion asks whether (as Prozesky has done in the creation of his global ethic and secular spirituality) moral values can be separated from the particular worldviews with which they are associated? Moral values such as justice and compassion may be lauded, but on which moral worldview are these based or, as Biggar (2001:1-10) partly drawing on what Hauerwas (1981 & 1983) would say, out of which narratives do they emerge?

Although many may agree that the values already mentioned are important, why ought human beings be required to adhere to them? Are they values that we recognise as being important, or are they norms and obligations that have to be obeyed? Moral obligation, as noted above by Biggar, cannot be derived from divergent human opinions or a relativist view of morality. Thus, lacking an objective transcendent moral Being, on what basis can human beings be obliged to resist self-gratification and promote the well-being of others? According to Christian Ethics, loving one's neighbour, including one's enemies, is a clear Divine command, though difficult to obey. It extends beyond moral choice to service and, often, sacrifice. Although people holding to a variety of worldviews may themselves make sacrifices, such as doctors who work in war-torn areas of the world, on what moral basis can those who adhere to a secular ethic call upon others (or themselves) to do so?

In Christian Ethics, love is the ultimate moral value because God is love. Further, human well-being, moral understanding and the appreciative stewardship of creation are derived from a deepening relationship with God. This relationship is mystical, intimate, transforming and very practical. Wisdom and an ever-deepening understanding of God and love for one's neighbour are the result. Human conscience, albeit imperfect, is part of our human essence because we are made in the image of a good God. Even human intelligence, through which we reason, seeking to understand our world, is a gift of God. Along with material needs, the 'good life' as Christians understand it, also encompasses hope for the future, meaning and connectedness. Connection with God provides a sense of belonging and meaning within the vast universe (Küng 1997: 142-43) and moral obligations are derived from



theological understanding. A good relationship with God and others provides both nurture and opportunities for care and creativity in the context of the family, faith community, friendships, society and the world of work.

In short, for Prosezky the good life is one that excludes selfishness and greed and has a concern for others. Christian ethicists would agree with and support this understanding. However, according to Christians, because a good life is founded on and motivated by God, it cannot be fully understood or experienced apart from God. A life lived according to the will of God, in God's gracious presence, is not simply a good, but a blessed life.

### ***Who is a Truly Good Person? (The Issue of Moral Character)***

In this section, Willard's third question is discussed, how can human goodness be understood? Prozesky (2007: 105) proposes that the following nine values provide a basis of moral goodness,

... generosity, integrity, truthfulness, respect, justice and fairness, inclusiveness, responsible effort in the service of the good, freedom governed by responsibility, and beauty of presence.

What we want, says Prozesky (2013: 18) is integrity, other-concern and honourable behaviour, and what we do not want is selfishness, greed, theft and cheating.

Christians can readily accept the importance of these values and the need for them to be exhibited in virtuous behaviour. Not only the adherents of different religious faiths, but also the critics of religion can agree that these values are central to human flourishing. Certainly, life in the family, churches, business world, medicine and government would be improved by practical adherence to these and similar values. However, it is significant that the key Christian values of faith, hope and love and the virtue of humility are absent from this list (Wright 2010: 181 - 98).

As noted by Prozesky and Biggar above, human reason and experience can produce a measure of agreement on what constitutes a good life. Nevertheless, a secular approach to ethics cannot easily explain why morality is important for human life to flourish. Is it by accident or design that a moral

life is essential to human well-being? Those who advocate one or another form of a secular ethic also need to defend which criteria are to be used to choose one set of values over another. For instance, on what basis are humility and faith excluded from a global ethic, whereas justice and integrity are included? Because some people do not believe in God, Prozesky (2007: 121-22) employs 'inclusiveness' as a criterion and thereby excludes a distinctively Christian ethic. Is this inclusiveness a valid criterion? Complete inclusiveness is not possible as there are conflicting values, for example, group loyalty versus justice. This means that moral choices need to be made, not only between what is right and wrong, but also between one value and another.

The question is, can a purely secular ethic fully sustain and motivate moral life in a South African or any other context? Can values, once separated from the religious framework from which they are derived, especially if they contain no ultimate sense of purpose (*telos*) or accountability, supply the moral obligation required to overcome greed and violence? Another significant area of divergence is that secular approaches see no need for morality to be based on the human experience of God's love that motivates love for God, others and all that God has created.

### ***How Does One Become a Truly Good Person? (The Development Issue)***

Willard's final question deals with moral formation; how are integrity and other moral virtues to be developed in persons and communities?

It is noticeable that discussions of ethics based on a secular view of reality mention the need for moral values and virtues, but rarely pay attention to how virtuous character can be formed. For instance, virtue ethics and the need for virtues such as openness, integrity and benevolence are mentioned in the widely used text *Business ethics* (e.g. Rossouw & van Vuuren 2006: 59-63, 148-152. The fourth edition of this book (Rossouw & van Vuuren 2010: 67-71, 124-137) also discusses virtue ethics according to Aristotle. It goes on to discuss ethics and human potential, noting the 'ethical neglect' in organisations and arguing that people's ethical potential ought to be unlocked. However, a discussion of the means of moral formation is absent and, other than noting that religious traditions are against consumerism, mentioning the role of the church in the Middle Ages and religious affiliations (2010: 26, 174, 264),

religious faith as a means of unlocking this ethical potential is not discussed<sup>13</sup>. A further example can be seen in Baker's (2009: 23) commissioned discussion of Business Ethics. He admits that,

Producing more businessmen with this quality [a highly developed sense of ethics] is slow work since it depends upon the complex and long-term influence of family, culture, religion, education and the level of the moral democratic and economic development of a country.

He does not discuss how moral character is to be formed, but rather lamely remarks, 'Ethical rules are found in many forms, all of which hopefully can improve conduct' (Baker 2009: 10).

Prozesky (2007: 77) rightly emphasises the importance of the moral choices we make:

It is the choice whether we will live mainly *for ourselves, or with real, active concern for others as well*, the choice between basically selfish and unselfish ways of relating to others – between generosity and greed.

Moral choice is indeed vital, but who or what will convince those who are greedy and immoral to change their ways? Can a course in Applied Ethics, for example, address the formation of moral character and produce commitment to moral action?

According to Prozesky (2006: 137), what we need to take us towards a future with less suffering and greater well-being is, '... a new kind of soul on this planet, involving a fresh confederation of conscience, knowledge, love and spirit'. Whereas Kurtz deliberately excludes God from his moral vision, Prozesky's global ethic does not require faith in God. Elsewhere Prozesky (2007: 1) states,

Conscience – and conscience alone – can be the foundation for a greater global flourishing, but only if we make it richer, deeper and stronger

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<sup>13</sup> See Kretzschmar (2012: 27-70) for a discussion of several religious and secular value systems that professionals can draw upon to inform and motivate moral action.

than before. [It sets out] to dethrone the greed, violence, narrowness and lies that plague our existence.

What forms moral persons and builds ethical societies? Prozesky (2014: 295-298) argues that the home, beliefs and value-systems, the school, the workplace, the professions and leadership, sport, the universities and the political economy are means of moral inspiration and formation. Certainly, these are vital means by which personal and communal morality is shaped (or malformed – depending on the extent to which these conform to commonly accepted values). In a discussion of the need for human responsible effort in the service of the good, Prozesky (2007: 125) speaks of the importance of ‘resolve’ and ‘moral backbone’;

It means taking responsibility for things and not sitting back waiting for others to do something. It means strength of purpose and perseverance rather than half-heartedness, initiative rather than passivity, self-discipline and self-control, rather than weakness of will.

In short, human effort and resolve are required to form persons who are able to be moral and do what is right.

Notably, faith communities do not form part of this list (a point to which we return below). Interestingly, Prozesky (2014: 298-299) notes that ethics does not have ‘its own dedicated organizational support’ ... ‘The result is that moral goodness is fragmented and dispersed, under-resourced and often voiceless. People of conscience, thinking about the grave moral ills all around them, can therefore be forgiven for feeling morally powerless and despondent’.

Christians accept Prozesky’s stress on choice and conscience as important for the development of good character and conduct. From a Christian perspective, however, the extent of human moral capability to choose the good and the purity and reliability of human conscience and is not as great as Prozesky and others may imply. Thus, Biggar (2011: 37) states, ‘Sin distorts moral cognition as well as moral motivation’. Therefore, moral education needs to overcome moral incapacity; to motivate and enable the formation of good character.

Human beings are capable of both moral altruism and evil. It is well known that some mothers go hungry so that their children can eat, and there are individuals and groups who are committed to fight for the survival of

animals and the protection of the environment. Many social workers, pastors, psychologists and doctors spend time and energy to restore those who are hurt, broken and ill and some in government, business and civil society act in ways that are fair, honest and socially responsible. In contrast, millions of hideous acts of violence are perpetrated daily in our world. Some parents abuse their children, many animals are exploited, pollution poisons the environment and some social workers, pastors, psychologists and doctors are found guilty of grave malpractice. And, as already noted, some in government, business and civil society misuse their power in acts of theft, corruption, intimidation and the dereliction of duty. Moreover, can those who do *not* commit explicit acts of violence, honestly state that they never have evil thoughts, never wrestle with (or succumb to) temptation, never fail to assist others when it is in their power to do so, and never harm others in ways that stop short of physical violence? Can moral evil simply be triumphed over by good intentions and resolve?

Christians argue that because the world has ‘fallen’ into sin, human beings are in need of redemption. Unless the heart or inner self of a person is saved and transformed by God, moral choice cannot be properly exercised and formation fully fostered. This is based on Jesus’s teaching in Mark 7: 20-23:

It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

Thus, the goal is not self-improvement, but a radical renewal of character and life (see Colossians 3: 5-10). Christians believe that the training of conscience and the process of moral formation follow on from turning to God and being filled with the Holy Spirit; trust in God is both the foundation and motivation of the moral life.

Finally, Christian morality encompasses more than the knowledge of ethical values or critical ethical reflection; it is the pursuit of good character and a commitment to moral action in all spheres of life. Because we human beings often choose what is wrong, to the detriment of ourselves and others, our moral judgements and desires need to be redeemed. According to Biggar (2011: 80),

... the moral life is primarily about the ordering of attitudes and dispositions, curbing some and growing others. Most fundamentally it is about the education of desire or love.

Furthermore, individual moral formation needs the support of a moral community, such as the family and Church, to transmit moral teaching and support moral development. For this reason, Kourie (2006: 88) notes that a secular spirituality, such as is proposed by Prozesky, once uprooted from 'established wisdom traditions', lacks 'community support', and has no adequate 'matrices for spiritual development'<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, as noted above, Prozesky himself laments the absence of 'dedicated organizational support' for ethics. Therefore, Wright (2010: 257 - 84) speaks of a Christian virtuous circle of moral formation that includes scripture, stories, examples, community and practices. The goal or purpose is for the virtues that are the 'fruit of the Spirit', namely 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Gal 5: 22 - 23b) to become rooted in the lives of Christians. Love for God and our wounded world, dedicated attention to the needs of others and a passion for social justice can be awakened, nurtured and given expression within such communities.

Hence, Christian ethicists agree that moral formation is a complex and multifaceted process, and that human beings have a vital role to play by being morally responsible and active. However, they would not agree with the views of scholars such as Prozesky that human persons on their own without God's work of redemption, motivation and empowerment, and the support of a committed moral community, are fully able to choose and follow a moral life or rescue humanity and the natural world from evil and decay.

## **Conclusion**

The writings of Prozesky and other scholars, as discussed in this article, reveal a profound awareness of the ethical challenges facing societies across the globe. Biggar's approach of Barthian-Thomism creates space for a dialogue on morality and moral formation from a variety of standpoints. The various

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<sup>14</sup> For a further discussion of the importance of moral community and faith practices see Koopman and Vosloo (2002: 8-9, 51-54, 98-127); Conradie 2006:47-55); and Hauerwas (1981 & 1983).

answers to Willard's four questions discussed above illustrate both convergence and divergence. A degree of convergence is seen in the answers to Willard's second question ('what is the good life?') and third question ('who is truly a good person?'). Values such as justice and benevolence and virtues such as integrity and generosity are commonly accepted, but the divergence is seen in the varied understandings of the source and motivation of these values and the narrative that encompasses them.

With respect to Willard's first question ('what is reality?') and fourth question ('how does one become a truly good person?') a marked divergence can be detected. Whereas Biggar would see reality as being necessarily rooted in God, for scholars such as Prozesky this is not the case. Further, the perception of the ways in which good people are formed differs substantially among the scholars who have been quoted. Professor Prozesky is right to stress the importance of moral choice, conscience and commitment, and the need for an agreed understanding of ethics to bring about moral change in our global world. Thus far, substantial agreement can be reached on the basis of reason and Aquinas's natural theology. However, Christian ethicists have far less confidence in the moral capacity of human beings than do scholars such as Prozesky. The theological integrity that Biggar stresses means that insights drawn from the Christian scriptures, theology and experience have a crucial role to play in the discussion of human, social and environmental reality and the means of the moral development of individuals and communities. If this is God's world, a truly moral life cannot be lived apart from God.

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# Teilhard de Chardin's Vision of Science, Religion and Planetary Humanity: A Challenge to the Contemporary World

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## Abstract

Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a great thinker, scientist, and mystic – he was above all an extraordinary human being whose inspiring vision still remains far too little known. He visited South Africa twice, in 1951 and 1953, to undertake palaeontological research and collaborate with South African colleagues. Throughout his life, but especially towards its end, he was much interested in the future of planetary humanity and he always stressed the importance of *seeing*, of having a vision that pulls us forward and upward. For him, life *is* vision. I examine how this vision – embracing science, religion and the future of humankind – presents a challenge to the contemporary world and an inspiration to create a better future for all.

I first look at our world in crisis, dominated by science, but politically fragmented, suffering from much injustice, poverty and violence. Where are we going? Teilhard's evolutionary, convergent and universalist thinking can be a guiding light for the contemporary world to move forward.

At the present state of crisis, planetary humanity is faced, more than ever before, with the responsibility for its further self-evolution. Has the human species the evolutionary capacity for developing its life to a higher stage, for truly transformative action to create greater collaboration and unification, more universal peace and justice? This is a decisively critical question, for to evolve further is no longer just an option, but an imperative.

What are the spiritual energy resources needed for the further development of the human community, especially the necessary zest for life, the all-transforming power of love and compassion available in order to

develop an environmentally and ecologically sound way of life to ensure the wellbeing of all people and the planet? In order to be able to evolve further, we need a new spiritual awakening, and a deeply mystical, action-oriented spirituality in the contemporary world. I hope to show that Teilhard's integral vision, rooted both in modern science and a fervent faith, can be an empowering vision for us all.

**Keywords:** science, religion, planetary humanity, vision, the future of humankind, self-evolution, evolutionary capacity, universal peace and justice, spiritual energy, zest for life

In truth, at the rate the consciousness and the ambitions of the world are increasing, it will explode unless it learns to love. The future of the thinking earth is organically bound up with the turning of the forces of hate into forces of love (Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* 1971:125).

It is a special honour to write an essay for this *Festschrift* celebrating Martin Prozesky's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. He and I have been in professional contact over many years, meeting on different occasions, especially during his visits to England. But most of all I am deeply grateful to him for inviting me in 1993 to undertake some teaching at what was then still the University of Natal. Thus I owe him especially my very enriching visit and travels around different parts of South Africa at that time, meeting many South African specialists in Religious Studies and Theology, followed by another visit in 1996. I have chosen to contribute a paper based on my long-standing research on the French Jesuit scientist-mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) who, late in life, in 1951 and 1953, came to South Africa twice, spending each time several months there. He undertook geological and palaeontological fieldwork, met South African colleagues and visited all the important paleontological collections in different museums around the country. In his *Letters from a Traveller* several descriptions of his experience can be found. On leaving Johannesburg in September 1953, he wrote to his brother: '... whatever part of South Africa you visit, it's a magnificent country, and I can't leave it – and the friends I have

made there – without a pang of regret<sup>1</sup>.

Teilhard de Chardin was a great thinker, a great scientist, a great mystic – he was above all an extraordinary human being whose inspiring vision still remains far too little known. He so much stressed the importance of *seeing*, of having a vision that pulls us forward and upward. For him, life *is* vision. As he wrote in the Foreword on ‘Seeing’ in his great book *The Human Phenomenon*:

*Seeing.* One could say that the whole of life lies in seeing – if not ultimately, at least essentially...See or perish. This is the situation imposed on every element of the universe by the mysterious gift of existence. And...to a higher degree, this is the human condition<sup>2</sup>.

In order to show what a challenge Teilhard’s vision presents today, I shall begin with some general comments about the critical state of the world; then reflect on planetary humanity at the crossroads in order to consider what spiritual resources we possess for ensuring the future wellbeing of people and planet. I will conclude by summing up some of the major aspects of Teilhard’s life and vision that can help a world in crisis to move constructively forward.

## **A World in Crisis: Where are we Going?**

We are living in a highly interconnected, global world with many seemingly insoluble problems: there is the runaway growth of the human population, the maldistribution of resources, the existence of widespread military and structural violence, the absence of stable peace. There are also the profoundly unjust inequalities linked to the growing imbalance between the extremes of abject poverty and those of ostentatious wealth, and there is the threat of ecological disaster looming large on the horizon. Many of these crises affect African countries as much or even more than other countries around the globe.

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<sup>1</sup> Teilhard de Chardin (1996: 346), in his *Letters from a Traveller*. Detailed descriptions of his first and second visits are found in Claude Cuénot’s *Teilhard de Chardin. A Biographical Study* (1965: 314-26; and 327-46).

<sup>2</sup> P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*. A New Edition and Translation of *Le Phénomène humain* (1999: 3); hereafter cited as HPh.

Our age is often described as an age of unbelief, with its growing secularism, especially in the northern hemisphere, where many people appear to be spiritually impoverished, marked by a crass materialism, much greed, and a loss of transcendence. Yet at the same time we know of many people with a deep ethical commitment to transformative social and ecological action, attracted to a new spirituality emerging from within the secular. We recognize not only uncertainty, doubt and loss of moral certitude, but also other signs that indicate a sincere search for meaning and a willingness to experiment. Thus it is not primarily abstract religious thought and dogma that are most important, but lived religious experience which is vital wherever it is found, whether inside or outside traditional religious institutions.

This emphasis on experiment and experience which is such a strong characteristic of our scientific approach to the external world has also become more important for the worlds of our mind and soul. Contemporary religiosity is characterised by a great search for interiority and a new inwardness, a longing to explore our 'inner space' which can provide a true counterweight to our dazzlingly dizzy scientific probes into outer space. This search for a contemplative depth-dimension within us responds to a great contemporary need to heal a hectic and disjointed outward life marked by over-activity, unrest and much superficiality in human relations. But this hunger and thirst for interiority, meditation and prayer of the quiet are not the only characteristics of contemporary life. They are accompanied by a search for a greater outward collaboration and unification at all levels, whether one thinks of growing international social and political movements, international development projects, peace or ecological movements, to name but a few.

The great intellectual adventures of modern times have primarily been connected with scientific and technological inventions. These represent an ongoing, continuing quest for the exploration and understanding of the world around and within us, of cosmos, nature, life, and human beings – their immense diversity and richness, and the social, cultural and spiritual evolution of the human species.

The scientific quest can be described as a quest for ever more knowledge, a quest which expands our perception and experience of the boundaries of the real; it ultimately seeks the unity and interrelatedness of all knowledge. But like all human endeavours, the pursuit of science is characterised by profound ambivalence and many ethical problems. Whilst the search for the unity of knowledge is its positive side, science can also have a

dark, negative side, for its driving force can be the lust for power and domination, for exploitation and destruction. The power of analytical science is so immensely great today that, if ruthlessly pursued to the limits of its possibilities and unchecked by ethical criteria, it can destroy the natural environment and human life itself.

Teilhard de Chardin saw perhaps less of this dark side of modern science, its power for evil and destruction, than we perceive today. His own practice, praise and love of science were undertaken from a position of responsibility and deep reverence, permeated by a religious spirit. He understood the scientific quest as a search for the unity of knowledge and saw it at its deepest level as closely related to the deep human longing for union that expresses itself in the scientific, religious and mystical quest.

Yet he was also never tired of pointing out how our understanding of science is much too narrow, particularistic and fragmentary. Its power of analysis must now be matched by attempts at synthesis, by a more holistic and global way of thinking. Scientists have analysed the physical-biological as well as the mental and psychic aspects of the human being, but have not given the same attention to the moral and spiritual needs of people. This is where Teilhard saw everything from a wider, more universal perspective and in need of transformation. Science and mysticism are not in opposition to each other but ultimately interrelated. For him the rational and mystical are much closer to each other than generally thought. Teilhard's holistic vision is grounded in both science and faith; both are approached from an all-embracing perspective that is evolutionary, convergent, and universalist. Its comprehensiveness and depth offer a tremendous challenge to our contemporary world. It is a challenge that can empower people to think, act and live differently – not simply to live, but what Teilhard calls to 'superlive': to live a fuller, better, more rewarding life shared with one's fellow human beings.

Through his temperament and travels, and through his detailed scientific studies of the history of human life on earth, Teilhard developed an extraordinary sense of the earth as a whole, and of humankind as one. He spoke early of the 'planetisation' of humankind, or what we today would call 'globalisation'. One of the strongest expressions of this sense of the earth and of humanity as *one* is found in his 1931 essay 'The Spirit of the Earth'<sup>3</sup>. He describes this as 'the passionate sense of common destiny that draws the

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<sup>3</sup> Published in his book *Human Energy* (1969: 19-47); hereafter cited as HE.



thinking fraction of life ever further forward’, and speaks of ‘the evolution of a greater consciousness’ whereby human thought ‘introduces a new era in the history of nature’ which involves a renewal of life, a ‘crisis of birth’, which he saw linked to a process of raising the whole ‘edifice of life to a new stage’<sup>4</sup>. He saw the whole world and all peoples within it as *one*. Beyond the external forces of unification or globalisation, brought about by scientific research, economics, finance, political power, media communication or even militarization, Teilhard was looking for the ‘miracle of a common soul’ (HE, 35) for a greater convergence and union of the diverse elements of humanity. This cannot be achieved without the powers of love and compassion. It is an ideal that cannot be reached without developing the spirit of the earth, nor can it be found without what he calls ‘the arising of God’, that is to say, the continuous development of the idea of God on earth, or what some might perceive as the openness to the presence of the spirit.

Teilhard recognized that there may exist resistance ‘to open our hearts wide to the call of the world within us, to the *sense of the earth*’ (HE, 31). Yet this sense can reveal to us ‘the newly freed energies of love, the dormant energies of human unity, the hesitant energies of research’ (HE, 32). He explains these in both metaphorical and religious terms. Love is described as ‘the most tremendous and the most mysterious of the cosmic forces’. ‘Huge, ubiquitous and always unsubdued’, love is a ‘wild force’, but also ‘a sacred reserve of energy’ – it is ‘like the blood of spiritual evolution’ (HE, 33, 34). As to human unity, human beings often experience more of an ‘instinctive repulsion’ and distance from each other than genuine attraction; we cannot truly love millions of strangers but are often profoundly disturbed by the plurality of human beings we encounter. The ‘spirit of the earth’ and the experience of human unity seem at present more of a dream than a reality, yet Teilhard felt that this ‘sense of, this feeling for greater human unity is now ‘in process of formation’’; it is ‘the irresistible pressure which unites people at a given moment in a passion they share’ (HE, 35 – my translation). This creates a movement towards human convergence and union through a new form of love practiced through mutual ‘interlinking’ rather than mere personal attraction<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> These quotations are found in HE, 31, 27, 28, 37.

<sup>5</sup> The French original reads ‘l’amour d’interliaison, au-dessus de l’amour d’attirait’; see *L’Énergie Humaine* (1962: 44).

Teilhard's remarks of more than eighty years ago (1931) may seem incredibly over-optimistic today, especially when we think of some of the controversial applications of contemporary scientific research, and the excesses of material production and over-consumption. They invite strong critique, but to be fair, Teilhard also diagnosed many symptoms of a growing crisis in different spheres of human activity. He wrote in the same essay:

From the economic and industrial point of view the crisis is evident .... Too much iron, too much wheat, too many automobiles – but also too many books, too many observations; and also too many diplomas, technicians and workmen – and even too many children. The world cannot function without producing living beings, food, ideas. But its production is more and more patently exceeding its powers of absorption and assimilation ... we must ask what this excess production means. Is the world condemned, as it grows, to automatic death by stifling beneath its own excessive weight?

He answered this question in the negative and interpreted the numerous problems in the contemporary world as a 'crisis of birth'. He finished his essay on 'The Spirit of the Earth' with the powerful, visionary statement:

The age of nations has passed. Now, unless we wish to perish we must shake off our old prejudices and build the earth .... The more scientifically I regard the world, the less can I see any possible biological future for it except the active consciousness of its unity (HE, 37f).

Teilhard's way of thinking is thoroughly shaped by the evolutionary dynamic of becoming. For him, the world is going somewhere! His essay 'How I Believe' (1934), also from the 1930s, is preceded by an epigraph that sums up his vision in evolutionary terms:

*I believe that the universe is an evolution.  
I believe that evolution proceeds towards spirit.  
I believe that spirit is fully realized in a form of personality.  
I believe that the supremely personal is the universal Christ<sup>6</sup>.*

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<sup>6</sup> Teilhard de Chardin (1971: 96). For Teilhard's discovery of evolution, see King's 'A Vision Transformed' (2013: 590-605).

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In other words, evolutionary processes are universal; they embrace all realities, from the depths of matter to the height of spirit, from the cosmic to the human and divine which Teilhard perceived everywhere and encountered above all in the incarnate and cosmic Christ. The universe was not simply an object of scientific enquiry for him, but a living, evolving reality. The world of nature, ‘Mother Earth’, which he passionately loved and embraced as something alive, pulsating with energy and growth, revealed to him a greater presence, an environment suffused with the divine.

Many passages in his writings express a strong sense of the interdependent unity and organicity of all living things. He wrote in 1942 that through studying the history of the cosmos and of all forms of life,

... we have gradually come to understand that no elemental thread in the Universe is wholly independent in its growth of its neighbouring threads. Each forms part of a sheaf; and the sheaf in turn represents a higher order of thread in a still larger sheaf – and so on indefinitely ....

This is the organic whole of which today we find ourselves to be a part, without being able to escape from it...in countless subtle ways, the concept of Evolution has been weaving its web around us. We believed that we did not change; but now... we are becoming aware of the world in which neo-Time, organising and conferring a dynamic upon Space, is endowing the totality of our knowledge and beliefs with a new structure and a new direction<sup>7</sup>.

He sees humanity moving into a new environment, into ‘a world that is *being born* instead of a world that *is*’ (FM 88), with a new relationship between matter and spirit, a new humanism, and a new understanding of God – complementary movements which perhaps mark ‘the beginning of a new era for humankind’ (FM 96).

### ***Planetary Humanity at the Crossroads***

This is the rise of a truly planetary humanity where the increasing complexity of matter and material organisation results in an accompanying rise of

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<sup>7</sup> See his essay ‘The New Spirit’ (1942) in P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (1965: 82-96). See esp. 85; hereafter FM.

consciousness and spiritual awareness. For Teilhard this is connected with the mutual embeddedness of the biosphere with what he called the 'noosphere', the specific human sphere of thinking and action, today sometimes described as the 'planetary mind'. This also includes important aspects of what we today call eco-justice and social justice, animated above all by the transformative and healing powers of love. For Teilhard, the noosphere has also a deeply spiritual dimension which he described as 'the divine milieu', a field of divine energy and a central focal point which is both immanent and wholly transcendent at the same time.

Teilhard was a great scientist. He qualified in geology, was well acquainted with biology, physics and chemistry, and excelled in palaeontology, the study of human origins, where he gained an international reputation. But the more closely he studied ancient fossils, the more he turned away from the past and developed a fascination with the present, and even more the future. Reflections on the future of humankind and its further social, cultural and spiritual development feature prominently in his work. He expressed with clarity and forcefulness that we are *one* humanity, with *one* origin, and *one* destiny. We are also a group of humans that has not yet reached maturity in terms of its possibilities. Its immense problems somehow resemble the turmoils of youth. Teilhard argued that all of humankind bears a profound sense of responsibility for the shape of its own future, and that humanity's future must be developed in close interrelation with all forms of life, with the whole of nature in its global and planetary dimensions.

On whatever continent we live today, it is becoming obvious that ever more people are developing a new planetary vision and sense of the earth. The general awareness of the history of the earth, of life and the great biodiversity of our planet is much greater today than ever before. The public media and the environmental movement have each contributed to this increased knowledge of the richness, but also the vulnerability, of our biosphere and human habitat. So many of us experience the living world as a marvellous and ever so vulnerable environment that is constantly faced by threats and disasters.

A new consciousness is emerging in the world in connection with our understanding of the story of the universe, linked to our knowledge of the immensity of space, the depth of time, and the complexity of life and of human cultures in a globally interconnected world. This awe-inspiring story is beautifully told in the film 'The Journey of the Universe. The Epic Story of Cosmic, Earth, and Human Transformation' produced by Mary Evelyn Tucker,

John Grim and Brian Swimme<sup>8</sup>. It demonstrates clearly that the story of humanity emerges out of the story of the universe and is an integral part of the vast, interconnected web of life covering our planet Earth.

The discovery of universal evolutionary processes implies a *profound revolution* in human thinking and action; it gives rise to an altogether new awareness of the universal processes of evolutionary becoming that now call for the further self-evolution of humanity. This implies that humanity bears a tremendous responsibility for the future evolution of the whole human species and the planet itself.

Teilhard asked how can we be ‘architects of the future’? How can we develop a better, higher life for the human community? He reflected on the conditions and criteria by which human beings might become more united – economically, politically, and spiritually. How will the human species evolve further? His book *The Future of Man* carries the motto: ‘The whole future of the Earth, as of religion, seems to me to depend on the awakening of our faith in the future’ (FM, 7). He combined such *faith in the future* with what he called ‘*faith in man*’, that is, a faith in the further development of human beings, and in the greater global collaboration and unity among the peoples of the earth. He spoke of a new threshold in the development of human consciousness and organization, not simply a search for the continuity of life or mere survival. What is needed is the development of life to a higher stage which involves an effort to create a higher form of life, a more unified humanity.

The problem of the future is paramount for the present: will humanity survive or be annihilated, will it progress or stagnate? Teilhard thought we have no decisive evidence for either hope or despair, but we have today perhaps more reasons to be pessimistic than he was more than sixty years ago. One thing is certain: we need to find the right road, make the right choices and put our will into effective action to create the right world for humanity today. Teilhard was certainly convinced that despair cannot provide the necessary energy for action, but hope can.

In a postscript written to *The Human Phenomenon* eight years after its completion he describes the social phase of human evolution as ‘the rise toward a collective step of reflection’, a second stage of hominisation whose final success is by no means certain, although this process has certain irreversible

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<sup>8</sup> See Swimme & Tucker’s *The Journey of the Universe*. Available at: [www.JourneyoftheUniverse.org](http://www.JourneyoftheUniverse.org).

features, so that he can ask how 'can we fail to see in this revealing association of technical arrangement and psychic centration that it is forever the same great force at work (although in a proportion and depth never attained before) – the very force that made us?' (HPh 219, 220).

Humanity now bears full responsibility for its own future; both education and scientific research play a great role in this. It is also an immense challenge – the kind of future we will get depends to a large extent on the quality of people who shape it. Teilhard emphasised the need for a '*homo progressivus*' (FM, 137), for future-oriented, future-affirming beings with a wide, open awareness who have the energy of thought, the vision and perception to recognise the problems of the future and find their solutions, and who possess the necessary energy and will to action for putting them into practice.

This is a bold vision entailing tremendous challenges and risks – a vision that may instil fear in some of us and invite others to new experiments and great daring. Teilhard was a pioneer in calling attention to the problems of the future; again and again he insisted on the need for a scientific study of and consciously planned work for the future. The social integration of people around the globe into some kind of 'super-humanity' presupposes the further self-evolution of the whole human species towards a higher order. Like some of his scientific colleagues Teilhard took it for granted that a basic mutation has already taken place in modern post-Darwinian, post-Marxian and post-Freudian consciousness, but he postulates yet another necessary mutation: a greater awareness of humanity's necessary collectivity and the emergence of a higher collective consciousness to form a higher, new collaborative reality, just as the individual brain is something over and above the innumerable cells it consists of.

Teilhard's firm personal belief in a finally successful outcome of evolution was directly related to his detailed scientific knowledge, but his interpretation of the overall direction and ultimate goal of evolution was ultimately grounded in his fervent Christian faith and deep Christian hope, in the light of which he interpreted all the data of evolution available to him.

In an essay called 'The Grand Option' (1939; in FM, 37-60), he discussed the possible paths humanity might take next, finding itself at the threshold of higher human socialisation. What road should be taken? Should it be,

1. That of pessimism or optimism?

2. If the latter, would it be an optimism of withdrawal or an optimism of evolution?
3. Should the further evolution of the human community occur in terms of more plurality or higher unity?

For Teilhard, the right choice consists always in the necessary action for the higher unification and unity of humanity. This is the overall direction of the further evolution of the human species<sup>9</sup>. In his view, humanity has practically lived for most of human history without analysing its own activities; it has existed from hand to mouth in the pursuit of more or less limited aims, guided more by instinct than by reason. But now, with the expansion of our thought, the environment of human action has changed; with our new awareness of the immensities of space and time, of past and future, of living in an evolutionary and convergent universe we experience a sense of ‘universal unification’.

Teilhard saw these general, irreversible developments as indications ‘that the spirit has acquired an added dimension’, that a ‘wave of new life’ penetrates all our undertakings and that everything is animated ‘with a flow of Presence and Love’, a love which he also described as ‘the free and imaginative outpouring of the spirit over all unexpected paths’ (FM, 55). He spoke of a,

*general and irreversible* readjustment of the values of existence ... showing our accession, beyond all ideologies and systems, to a different and higher sphere, a new spiritual dimension.

He also referred to ‘the greatness of the present moment’, to a ‘new world into which we are being born’ (FM, 60). These inspiring words come from a great visionary thinker seeing far ahead. Yet this text makes painful reading, if set into the socio-political context of 1939 when these words were written, six months before the outbreak of the Second World War. Yet Teilhard was fully aware of the length of time and the many battles it might take for planetary humanity to evolve to this higher stage of life. He admitted that ‘further ideological clashes and moral dissensions lie in wait for us as we go forward; and also further unions and further triumphs (FM, 60).

As always, he remained a prophet of hope to the last, presenting an

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<sup>9</sup> In what follows I paraphrase FM, 59-60.

empowering vision to suffering humanity. Moreover, after the end of the Second World War, he spent another decade working out what resources we can draw upon for nurturing the zest for life and the desire to evolve in order to create a worthwhile future for all people and the planet. Given the immense problems of the contemporary world, we are more painfully aware than ever before that planetary humanity is now truly at the crossroads: much decisive action is needed to find acceptable solutions for our immense social, political and environmental problems. Which of Teilhard's ideas can challenge and inspire us in our work for the future?

## **Spiritual Resources for the Future Wellbeing of People and Planet**

An enormous number of material and spiritual resources are needed to ensure a viable future for humanity. Certain external and internal conditions have to be fulfilled if human and natural life are to remain in balance. If these conditions are not met, life on earth will fail. Teilhard was well aware of our precarious situation, as clearly stated in his late work *Man's Place in Nature*, written in Paris in 1950, after the Second World War, when he commented:

Should the planet become uninhabitable before mankind has reached maturity; should there be a premature lack of bread or essential metals; or, what would be still more serious, an insufficiency, either in quantity or quality, of cerebral matter needed to store, transmit, and increase the sum total of knowledge and aspirations that at any given moment make up the collective germ of the noosphere: should any of these conditions occur, then, there can be no doubt that it would mean the failure of life on earth; and the world's effort fully to center upon itself could only be attempted again elsewhere ...<sup>10</sup>.

Teilhard often speaks about the need to examine all available energy resources, especially those required for nourishing and sustaining human growth and action. Central to maintaining the dynamic of action is the *zest for*

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<sup>10</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Man's Place in Nature* (1966: 118).



*life*, the will to live and love life – this is an indispensable requisite for the continuity of life, especially in the form of a higher life, and also for the development of a planetary ethic. Enemy number one is indifference and boredom, the loss of a taste for life, the absence of inner resources, and the danger of dropping out of collaborative action altogether. Teilhard highlighted the existing contradiction,

that all over the earth the attention of thousands of engineers and economists is concentrated on the problem of world resources of coal, oil or uranium – and yet nobody...bothers to carry out a survey of the zest for life: to take its ‘temperature’, to feed it, to look after it, and...to increase it<sup>11</sup>.

The taste and zest for life, for all life, human and non-human, is essential for the future of our planet<sup>12</sup>. Similarly to the way in which we are concerned to preserve the biodiversity of life forms, we need also to take conscious account of and responsibility for maintaining the rich ‘noospheric’ diversity of religious and spiritual ideas, since they provide us with irreplaceable resources for feeding the zest for life.

Teilhard favoured a closer contact and dialogue between members of different faiths, and encouraged their active collaboration in making the world a better place through promoting a greater integration of the diverse elements of humanity. After his return from China, he was actively involved in interfaith dialogue in Paris between 1947-1950, but this is generally little known. On several occasions he reflected on the contribution of different world faiths to the ongoing convergence of religions<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Activation of Energy* (1970:236; hereafter AE).

<sup>12</sup> An extensive discussion of Teilhard’s understanding of ‘the zest for life’ is found in my two essays ‘Feeding the Zest for Life: Spiritual Energy Resources for the Future of Humanity’ in Thierry Meynard, S.J. (ed.): *Teilhard and the Future of Humanity* (2006: 3-19); and ‘The Zest for Life: A Contemporary Exploration of a Generative Theme in Teilhard’s Work’ in Ilia Delio (ed.), *From Teilhard to Omega: Co-creating an Unfinished Universe* (2014: 184-202).

<sup>13</sup> See Ursula King, *The Spirit of One Earth. Reflections on Teilhard de Chardin and Global Spirituality* (1989), esp. Chapter 7, ‘Exploring

In looking at its resources, the human community does not give the same attention to its available spiritual energy resources as it does to the calculation of its available material energy reserves. Yet spiritual energy resources are indispensable for sustaining persons and planet; human beings bear the responsibility to locate them, use them for their sustenance, and increase them. The religious and philosophical traditions of the world – our global religious heritage – contain irreplaceable resources on which we must draw to nourish our zest for life, sustain the biosphere, foster the growth of the noosphere, and advance the balanced integration of the diverse groups and nations of the global community. Nowhere is this better expressed than in Teilhard's 1950 address on 'The Zest for Living' (AE, 229-43). At the deepest level, the zest for life is linked to an act of faith:

... what is most vitally necessary to the thinking earth is a faith – and a great faith – and ever more faith.

To know that we are not prisoners.

To know that there is a way out, that there is air, and light and love, somewhere, beyond the reach of all death.

To know this, to know that is neither an illusion nor a fairy tale. That, if we are not to perish smothered in the very stuff of our being, is what we must at all costs secure. And it is there that we find what I may well be so bold as to call the *evolutionary role* of religions (AE, 238).

He stressed that contemporary religious needs are different from those in the past, and that our historically new situation and consciousness require a new spirituality and a new image of God. A spirituality mainly concerned with the individual is no longer sufficient; what is needed is a faith in humanity and

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Convergence: The Contribution of World Faiths'; and Chapter 8, 'Teilhard's Association with the World Congress of Faiths, 1947-1950'. I have examined the themes of the convergence of religions, of religion and evolution, and of spiritual energy resources in relation to the rise of a new mysticism more fully in my book *Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions: Spirituality and Mysticism in an Evolutionary World* (2011). The Foreword was written by Joseph Needham. A more comprehensive treatment of contemporary spirituality in a pluralistic global world is found in my work *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for Meaning and Fulfilment* (2009).

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the earth. Teilhard's own spirituality was deeply rooted in what he called the '*divine milieu*', a deep faith in a divine centre and heart of the world that suffuses every context and environment with the energy, presence, and grace of the spirit whose dynamic action animates the entire universe. Thus the noosphere is not only a sphere of human evolution, but one that bears the traces of divine love and transfiguration. Love is for him both a human task and an 'effect of 'grace' and 'revelation''<sup>14</sup>. To create stronger bonds within the human community and bring about a better world for all, the energies of love – the highest form of human energy and 'the blood of spiritual evolution' (HE, 34) – in all their different dimensions and practical expressions are what is needed most.

We cannot advance the world and the flourishing of people and planet without a *zest for life*. He described this zest as 'nothing less than the *energy of universal evolution*' but, at the human level, the feeding and development of this energy 'is to some degree *our responsibility*' (AE, 231, 232).

This theme preoccupied him until the day of his death. In one of his last essays, the profoundly personal and mystical text 'The Christic' (See HM, 80-102), written in March 1955, he speaks of 'the primordial sources of the *Energy of Evolution*' which modern science has discovered, but also of the need for humanity 'to find a way to increase the *Drive of Evolution*':

If humanity is to use its new access of physical power with balanced control, it cannot do without a rebound of intensity in its zest to act, in its zest to seek, in its zest to create (HM, 96-97; my translation).

Teilhard de Chardin's vision of how to feed 'the zest for life' within ourselves and within the world is truly empowering and inspirational, if we really want to seed and grow a better future for the whole of humanity, and not only for its privileged members. There now exists a growing number of 'noospheric institutions' which are working in ever so many fields for the good of the inhabitants of the earth. New processes of global networking are constantly emerging, and the possibilities for a 'global-interlinking-through-

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<sup>14</sup> AE, 242. I have discussed Teilhard's understanding of love in 'Love – A Higher Form of Human Energy in the Work of Teilhard de Chardin and Sorokin', in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* (2004: 77-102).

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love' that Teilhard first perceived in the 1930s, have grown exponentially through the fast advances of electronic means of communication and other ways of networking around the globe, and that also includes multiple new ways of understanding spirituality today. This is an important general point to make, but it also applies to the African situation where religious pluralism is vividly present, from multiple indigenous religious traditions to the richness of many different Christian, Muslim and other faiths.

### ***The Challenge of Teilhard's Life and Vision for the Contemporary World***

The greatest challenge of all lies perhaps in Teilhard de Chardin's own example, in the powerful testimony of his life's experience in which a scientific and spiritual vision of the world, humanity and God are so deeply interwoven. Teilhard was blessed with an extraordinarily rich life, full of adventures of mind and spirit, yet in his own church he was marginalized and made to suffer, ostracized for his integral vision of combining the insights of evolutionary science with those of a fervent Christian faith. In the words of his former Jesuit superior, Fr René d'Ouince SJ, Teilhard was truly 'a prophet on trial' in the church of his time<sup>15</sup>. Today he has become somewhat more accepted and better known than sixty years ago, but he is also still largely ignored, especially among Roman Catholics.

Few people will know that already in the early twentieth century Teilhard de Chardin reflected critically on cultural and religious diversity, global interdependence and a growing 'planetisation' of the human community. He reflected on biodiversity and the fragility of life on the planet, but also on the significant contribution of China in shaping the future of humanity. It was amidst the killing fields of the First World War that he first perceived the rise of human interthinking and interaction. He eventually described this as the rising of the 'noosphere', of a layer of interlinking connections that encircles our planet like the geosphere, the biosphere, the atmosphere and other layers surrounding the earth. For some people this extraordinary foresight makes Teilhard almost a patron saint of what we now know as the internet.

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<sup>15</sup> See René d'Ouince, *Un prophète en process: Teilhard de Chardin dans l'Église de son temps* (1970).

To sum up the unity of Teilhard's life and thought, it seems to me most appropriate to characterise him by one metaphor he so frequently used himself – that of fire, flame, and spark. He truly was a 'Spirit of Fire'<sup>16</sup> who followed the 'road of fire' throughout his life and writings. He was a man of deep thought and faith, but also of great depth of feeling – a *passionate* thinker rather than a merely intellectual one. This is evident from many of his letters, diary entries and essays, especially the spiritual autobiography *The Heart of Matter* (1950), written late in his life<sup>17</sup>.

But this integral vision is there from the very first essay on 'Cosmic Life' (1916)<sup>18</sup> which celebrates 'communion with God through the world'. Traditionally, religious people have often sought communion with God by separation and escape from the world, whereas many secular people, immersed in the world, have pursued the development of the world or immersion in nature without a link to the divine. For Teilhard, both these 'fires' or 'energies' need to be combined in 'communion with God through the world' where God is loved like the world and the world is loved as something divine, as animated by the spirit of God. In many ways this is an ancient Christian vision going back to the cosmic hymns of St Paul and the early Greek fathers, but Teilhard translates this into a partly new vision rooted in a dynamic, evolutionary universe.

Another important, unusual element of his spirituality is his emphasis on the feminine which he also calls the 'unitive element'. By this he refers particularly to the love he had experienced through the influence of women in his life – initially the nurturing presence of his mother, the love of his sisters and cousins, and later his lasting friendships with a number of outstanding women<sup>19</sup>. It was through these experiences that he really felt that the universe

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<sup>16</sup> I have used this as the title of my biography, *Spirit of Fire: The Life and Vision of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (revised edition 2015).

<sup>17</sup> This essay forms part of a collection of articles published in a book of the same title. See P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter* (1978: 15-79).

<sup>18</sup> Found in P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in Time of War* (1968: 13-71).

<sup>19</sup> See for example the important correspondence with his cousin, Marguerite Teillard-Chambon, in P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier-Priest 1914-1919*; and also the correspondence with the American sculptor Lucile Swan, *The Letters of Teilhard de Chardin and Lucile Swan* (1993). For a discussion, see Ursula King, *The Letters of Teilhard de*

is suffused by love. Love is the secret thread that runs through the universe, the outpouring of the spirit over all unexplored paths.

Teilhard argued that humanity has to harness the powers of love and develop them to a much greater potential than ever before. Human beings need love as much as they need light, oxygen and vitamins. We need love to be well, whole, and connected in communion and union. His understanding of love refers not only to love between individuals, but envisages a new kind of love that creates the strongest bonds across the whole human community. This is what Teilhard understood by building up the earth: the *amorization* of planetary humanity and the whole universe. Teilhard can only be understood in the wider context of evolution, providing us with a new cosmology and a new Earth consciousness. It is as if all his thoughts were nested within ever expanding circles of the universe. This may be the reason why Thomas Merton entitled his essay on Teilhard's *Divine Milieu* 'The Universe as Epiphany'. Teilhard provides a great example of 'seeing anew' by celebrating a vision at once cosmic, human, and divine<sup>20</sup>.

He discovered the heart of God in all creation, in the heart of matter, of life, and of humanity. The divine heart beats at the centre of an evolving cosmos and for Teilhard it was above all encountered in the cosmic Christ 'clothed in the glory of the world'. Living in the divine milieu means discovering fire through the all-transforming power of love, forging a new spirituality in and for an evolutionary world, a spirituality that is linked to a new mysticism of action, love, and unification.

Teilhard once described himself as 'consumed by fire from within'. His spirituality may be described as a pan-christic fire and heart mysticism<sup>21</sup>.

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*Chardin and Lucile Swan. A Personal Interpretation.* Published as *Teilhard Studies Number 32* (Fall 1995) by The American Teilhard Association.

<sup>20</sup> This great cosmotheandric vision provides the structure for his autobiographical essay 'The Heart of Matter' (see note 17 above). This cosmotheandric vision is found in the letters of St. Paul and the early Christian fathers, but it also plays a great role in Raimon Panikkar's work. See Ursula King, 'The Cosmotheandric Vision of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Raimon Panikkar', in *Teilhard Studies Number 72* (2016).

<sup>21</sup> See Ursula King, 'Consumed by Fire from Within: Teilhard de Chardin's Pan-Christic Mysticism in Relation to the Catholic Tradition, in *The Heythrop Journal* (1999: 456-77).

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but also a mysticism that in Kathleen Duffy's poignant expression is closely interwoven with 'seeing the inner face of evolution'<sup>22</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Our contemporary worldview is above all shaped by the immense power of modern science and technology as well as global economics. This affects all areas of life and has a deeply transformative impact on all traditional cultures and beliefs. The rise of evolutionary thinking from the nineteenth century onwards has had a tremendous impact on the world, but relatively few religious thinkers have systematically explored the importance of evolution for their religious beliefs and traditions. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is an outstanding exception here as is, in the context of other religious traditions, the Indian philosopher and mystic, Sri Aurobindo, and within Islam, Mohammed Iqbal.

But where is Teilhard's legacy debated today, his prophetic voice listened to? Where are his ideas experienced as energising and empowering? These questions will be answered differently, depending on where one lives and is coming from. Even after a thorough, critical sifting, Teilhard's ideas still provide many valuable perspectives for fresh creative thinking, whether on the evolutionary understanding of the universe and planetary humanity, or in relation to contemporary process thought, or in the context of the ecological movement and sustainability debates. Although global thinking has much advanced on environmental issues, elements of a truly balanced ecological spirituality can already be found in many of Teilhard's writings. In fact, some of the powerful statements in the new *Earth Charter*, aimed to ensure the future of the community of life on our planet, would have deeply resonated with him<sup>23</sup>.

It is particularly Teilhard's personal experience and understanding of spirituality and mysticism, centred on the cosmic Christ, and a deeply personal Christian faith related to the dynamic of the contemporary world, which attract many of his followers. Yet even in contemporary works on spirituality Teilhard

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<sup>22</sup> See Kathleen Duffy, *Teilhard's Mysticism: Seeing the Inner Face of Evolution* (2014).

<sup>23</sup> See the essays edited by Celia Deane-Drummond, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin on People and Planet* (2006). I contributed 'One Planet, One Spirit: Searching for an Ecologically Balanced Spirituality' (2006: 74-95).

is rarely given the careful attention he deserves as a creative thinker in this field, and as someone who embodies some of the best Christian spiritual practice.

It is of considerable interest to know that especially during the 1960s, when Teilhard's book *The Human Phenomenon* (then first misleadingly mis-translated as *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959) attracted wide international attention, several well-known African leaders, such as Julius Nyerere from Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda from Zambia, Milton Obote from Uganda and Leopold Senghor from Senegal, read Teilhard's work, and some of them quoted from it. Attracted by Teilhard's futuristic vision of the world as a 'civilization of the universal' developing through panhuman convergence, they empathized with his view of the complementarity of the world's civilizations. According to a recent commentator, Senghor saw in Teilhard's 'civilization of the universal' a future,

in which African traditional values and cultural forms could exist in solidarity with a global community that emphasized reciprocity and similitude. Senghor believed that if Teilhard's approach could be realized, and human races are complementary, then Africans should strive to remain true to their origins and not be too quick to break from past ideals in order to embrace western modes of living, thinking, and behaving<sup>24</sup>.

There are many 'generative ideas' in Teilhard's work – ideas that can generate and bring about change. His thinking and vision can greatly contribute to and widen out contemporary discussions on global developments in many areas of human activity, from economics and politics to education, ethics, peace and eco-justice as well as religion and spirituality, to list some of the most obvious and urgent issues. Let us recognize the unique legacy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and rejoice that the twentieth century has brought forth such a man of faith and dynamic vision wherein science, religion and mysticism are so creatively interrelated. Far from being outlived and passé, his ideas may attract a renewed interest today, since they can enrich our

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted from Charlotte Walker-Said's blog 'The Global Reach of Teilhard's Legacy' on the 'Teilhard Project', available at: [www.teilhardproject.com](http://www.teilhardproject.com) (Accessed on 12 May 2014.).



discussions and inspire transformative action to ensure the future of people and planet. His life and work provide a strong witness to the life-giving powers of a deep religious faith that relates strongly to the hopes, desires, needs and strivings of the twenty-first century world we live in. To conclude with Teilhard's own words: 'In truth, at the rate that consciousness and its ambitions are increasing, the world will explode unless it learns to love. The future thinking of the earth is organically bound up with the transformation of the forces of hatred into forces of love'<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Vision of the Past* (1966: 214). A somewhat different translation is found in P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*. (1971: 125).

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# Indigenous Knowledge Systems Discourse and Inclusionality: An Afro-centric Quest for Recognition in a Globalised World

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## Abstract

The main goal of this essay is to argue that in a multicultural and globalised world, the indigenisation of knowledge production has to be pursued in a way that demonstrates an element of inclusivity. To achieve this goal this article's structure has three foci. *Firstly*, it is argued that the indigenisation of knowledge must be pursued under the presumption of a recognition that all knowledge is cultural or context specific to some degree. As such, the multicultural nature and plurality of knowledge systems formations should be acknowledged, as well as the fact that all knowledge production includes an aspect of the indigenisation of knowledge. *Secondly*, against this broader background, the argument for the indigenisation of knowledge in Africa goes hand-in-hand with the promotion of the intellectualisation of knowledge that is often regarded by Western scholarship as 'primitive', and thus redundant, in the face of modernity. This, however, is not only a universal for the production of all knowledge(s), but also foundational to all knowledge development, and should be recognised as such. *Finally*, given the plurality of knowledge formations, and the African celebration and development of its own knowledge formations, the quest for the indigenisation and intellectualisation of knowledge in African context, should be seen as a quest for the inclusionary appreciation of a multiplicity of global knowledges, whereby all knowledge is understood as context specific to some degree, and contributing to both local and general human wellbeing. This latter perspective implies a deliberately ethical stance, to the effect that in a globalised and multicultural world, no

knowledge system should be privileged as superior to any other knowledge system, and none, regarded as inferior.

**Keywords:** Indigenisation, knowledge, ethnicity, recognition, Africa, ethics, context, anthropology, recognition, multiculturalism, globalisation, inclusion-nality

## **Introduction**

In contemporary Africa south of the Sahara, the discourse of indigenisation has given impetus to the intellectualisation, and promotion of the study and development of African indigenous knowledge systems, across all the disciplines in the humanities and the natural sciences. This trend has impacted many systems across many regions in Africa, as well as in southern Africa, and is, for instance, evident in the fact that studies or research projects that are based on, or involve indigenous knowledge systems, are receiving preferential funding treatment as compared to those that are based on traditional Western knowledge systems. Yet, the precise argument for this phenomenon, has not been clarified sufficiently, and this article, aims to provide some perspectives on this hiatus.

Previously, knowledge systems of the colonizing powers, imposed themselves on the colonised as the only legitimate knowledge to the exclusion of the knowledge systems of the colonised. On the one hand, the colonial operationalising of these knowledge systems aimed at both the alienation of Africans from their own knowledges, existential realities, and traditions, as well as, the integration of the few into the colonial and colonising apparatuses. On the other hand, it prevented Africans from intellectualising and indigenising the knowledge(s) they encountered, on their own terms, and for their own purposes. This has led to the fact – as recognised by many postcolonial scholars regardless of their discipline orientation – that Africans in the postcolony have experienced the current dominant knowledge systems that have impacted and dominated the African epistemic terrain, as continuing to remain Eurocentric, and not African. Moreover, African leaders, scholars and academics have realised that much of what Africans know about themselves, has predominantly come from the Western world because of the history of colonialism. It is not rooted in the indigenous knowledges, and

indigenous self-understandings. It is in the face of the existential as well as knowledge development challenges that this multi-faceted phenomenon has brought about, that African leaders and scholars have engaged African-focused knowledge development and knowledge production, or, in short, indigenous knowledge systems intellectualisation. For Africans, this matter has also become an ethical issue that thrives mainly on contemporary African politics of identity, and development, within a globalising world.

Further, if the end of both direct, and indirect colonisation brought about commitment to engage the indigenisation and production of knowledge, it also gave rise to the recognition of the reality of the plurality of cultural experiences, and therefore knowledge production. The pursuit of indigenous knowledge systems and the intellectualisation of indigenous knowledges, and knowledge production, thus, go hand in hand with the realisation that the world is composed of different cultures and different modes of being in the world. This means that the recognition of the world's existential realities of multiculturalism, also means an acknowledgement of the reality of pluralism in the realm of knowledge. This multicultural perspective is important, because it also means that the pursuit of indigenous knowledge systems intellectualisation, should be understood as a quest for recognition in a world that has come to mostly accept the realities of multiculturalism. The indigenisation of knowledge through the pursuit of indigenous knowledge systems, then, do not only aim at correcting misperceptions that were created by Western scholars about African societies, especially during the time of colonisation. It also aims at displacing erroneous conceptions of notions of objectivity and neutrality in knowledge production, and the grounding of knowledge within African existential realities of self-understanding, and self-actualisation. Indigenous knowledge systems discourse, recognises that knowledge intellectualisation, and knowledge production, should not be divorced from contextual, nor cultural inclinations or experiences.

Finally, the main concern of this article is to put an argument forward for the inclusive nature of knowledge production. In a globalised and multicultural world, when knowledge is produced from multiple sites and from within multiple ethnicities, authentic knowledge production, is both multicultural and multi-ethnic. The logical deduction here is that, if all knowledge is multi-ethnic, knowledge as such, is inclusive of multiple ethnically-founded knowledges.

For this argument, the article is structured as follows: The *first* section

argues that the indigenisation of knowledge through the pursuit of indigenous knowledge systems intellectualisation and knowledge production, implies that authentic knowledge should be culturally contextual in the sense that it should be appreciative of (ethnic) existential life experiences. In the *second* section it is argued that the debate on the indigenisation of knowledge and the global receptivity of indigenous knowledge systems intellectualisation, has the recognition of the indigenous knowledge systems as foundation. This view counters erroneous Eurocentric understandings of knowledge. In the *last* section, whilst the indigenisation of knowledge implies that knowledge is always ethnic to some degree, the argument here is that in a world that has come to recognise the reality of multiculturalism, the quest for indigenisation should be understood as a quest for inclusionary instead of exclusionary knowledge production practices. It is argued that whilst there is the reality of cultural diversity, sometimes there is a strong element of cultural convergence in our human experiences.

## **Indigenisation of Knowledge as Recognition of Context Specificity of Knowledge**

During colonialism, the gathering, production, and dissemination of indigenous knowledge by anthropologists and missionaries, served as information for purposes of colonisation, and more generally, the promotion of colonising agendas. It is also well-known that all knowledge so produced, aimed at being responsive to academic developments and problematisations at home in the colonising countries. As such, if disseminated in the colonised context, it meant that the knowledge itself was distorted. Our current pursuit of indigenous knowledge systems development in Africa, is aimed to not only counter this trend in neo-colonial terms, but to produce knowledge that is relevant to the cultural contexts in which it is generated and disseminated. In this regard, there is a realisation among academics that knowledge production should link to the experiential world of indigenous communities, whereby social and cultural contexts play an academically indispensable role in the formation of discourses. For instance, there is a global consciousness among academics that terms used and examples generated with regard to particular phenomena in knowledge production, should be determined by cultural context and history, not least, Africa (Masolo 2010: 20). This is in stark contrast to

colonising academics of the Western world such as G.W.F. Hegel, who, arguing from hearsay and conjecture, is on record for describing Africa as devoid of history and culture. He writes,

The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has not yet succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an individual and his essential universality, so that he knows nothing of an absolute being [God or Law] which is other and higher than his own self (cited in Hamblet 2008: 138; also see Strauss 1976: 276).

But Hegel was not alone in this dehumanisation and distortion of African realities. Many Western anthropologists actually believed that Africa's history started with the advent of colonialism and Christianity. For example, whenever you studied the history of South Africa our standard history textbooks taught us that the history of South Africa started with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck whilst that of Zimbabwe was said to have started with the arrival of Cecil John Rhodes and the Pioneer column when they invaded Matabeleland in 1890. In the realm of religion, the message that was disseminated by Western missionaries was that Africans did not have a religion, or that they were animists. This distortion was not only in the realm of culture, history and religion. Even the founder of psychodynamic theory, Sigmund Freud, in his book *Totem and Taboo*, advanced the theory that the morality of Africans was comparable to the behaviour of neurotics in Western societies. As he put it,

We can thus judge the so-called savage and semi-savage races; their psychic life assumes a peculiar interest for us, for we can recognize in their psychic life a well-preserved, early stage of our own development.

If this assumption is correct, a comparison of the 'Psychology of Primitive Races' as taught by folklore, with the psychology of the neurotic as it has become known through psychoanalysis, will reveal numerous points of correspondence and throw new light on subjects that are more or less familiar to us (Freud [1918] 1938: 80).

Obviously such writings were aimed at promoting the belief that Africans came late on the stage of human evolution. This was mainly based on the Western



interpretation of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Ali Mazrui characterised this Western ethnocentrism as being part and parcel of the debiologisation of Darwin's theory whereby focus was shifted from a biological explanation of different cultures, to Western culture as the prototype of all world cultures. Thus he writes,

The shift from biological explanations of human backwardness to cultural explanations of the factor had important implications .... There is a quality almost of immutability, of being retarded, when a lack of development is attributed to hereditary characteristics within the race (Mazrui 1969: 92).

The Western ethnic interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution somehow greatly distorted the African indigenous identity. For example, a world respected colonial academic, Jan Christian Smuts delivered a Rhodes lecture at Oxford about an African person in which he had the following to say,

This type [i.e., the African] has some wonderful characteristics. It has largely remained a child type, with a child psychology and outlook .... The African easily forgets past troubles and does not anticipate future troubles. This happy-go-lucky disposition is a great asset, but it also has its drawbacks. There is no inward incentive to improvement, there is no persistent effort in construction, and there is complete absorption in the present, its joys and sorrows .... No indigenous religion has been evolved, no literature, no art since the magnificent promise of the cave-men and the South African petroglyphist, no architecture since Zimbabwe (if that is African ...) (Smuts 1940: 37-38).

Apart from the dehumanisation of the indigenous African within such colonial writings, any form of scientific architecture and arts that were found among indigenous peoples were thus attributed to external origins.

By denying the fact that creativity existed among the indigenous peoples, early colonial scholars fostered seeds of misrecognition of the indigenous African as the legitimate producer of knowledge. Indigenous Africans were not only described as lacking in scientific discoveries, they were also frequently described as actually lacking in moral values. A colonial Polish anthropologist, Stanlva Andreski would go as far as to assert that indigenous Africans were pathological liars. As he put it,

Concerning the African's lack of inhibition about telling lies – which forms one of the favourite topics for denigration among the expatriates – it is important to realise that the tribal customs not only do not enjoin telling truth to strangers, but even recommend dissimulations (Andreski 1968: 83).

Colonial conquest was not only about the annexation of foreign territories, rather it carried with it the imposition of Western knowledge systems and values that denigrated indigenous ones.

African indigenous knowledge systems thus denigrated as having nothing to contribute to human advancement in terms of civilisation and technological advancements, was indeed a European ethnic understanding of knowledge. Thus the indigenous African response to this European ethnic arrogance took two different approaches. The *first* approach was based on undermining the European self-acclaimed origins of human civilisation by asserting that the indigenous African pre-colonial civilisations actually superseded European civilisation. Thus in this vein, it was argued that,

Ancestors of the Negro race drifted into the Nile Valley from Ethiopia, trekked down the river and finally established themselves in Egypt. By 3000 BC, there were already a highly civilised community (Chigwedere 1998: 208).

In such writings the implied argument is that European scholarship wrote history in a way that did not recognise the African contribution to human civilisation.

The *second* approach, was that scholars globally positioned Africa as the continent where all humanity originated from – being the 'cradle of humankind', not least South Africa. If Africa is indeed the cradle of humanity, it could also be considered as the cradle of human civilisation. There is a school of thought among anthropologists, archaeologists and historians that asserts that 'Africa before the European had had its own complex civilisations' (Mazrui 1986: 73). This school of thought not only asserts, but also glorifies the indigenous African cultural and historical achievements, creativity, personality and identity. It should be celebrated rather than denigrated – if not despised by European ethnic scholarship – and is something that indigenous Africans should take pride in, and continue to intellectualise.

## **On Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Celebration of ‘Primitivism’**

One of the main approaches to the intellectualisation of African indigenous knowledge systems, has taken the form of revisiting the previously colonially denigrated and condemned African traditional knowledge systems. Regarded as foundational to knowledge development and knowledge production, it is regarded as not only worthy of reconstruction, but also of preserving, and intellectualisation for purposes that address current world systems problems such as global warming. Some anthropologists such as Michael Gelfand, puts his finger on the issue, when he criticises Western cultural practices, for their inherent capitalist goals and objectives, and an appreciation of indigenous Shona cultural practices. He writes,

The materialistic philosophy of the West with its emphasis on accumulation seems not to be a matter of any concern [among the Shona]. In this environment man (sic) is more interested in pure living with people and his link with Nature, with the land, the water and his cattle. He seems to have found peace of mind in the quietude of nature, the silence of the hills, the rush of wind, the resilient trees in which the spirits of his ancestors hover near him and where he finds inspiration and feels free (Gelfand 1981: 76-77).

This quotation shows an appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems and modes of living in contrast to the Western capitalist modes of being that is mostly concerned with the idea of the endless accumulation of wealth. It is also an example of the growing appreciation of contemporary scholars, of indigenous knowledge systems, and, that we shall have to address our contemporary existential problems such as global warming, diseases and wars, from the ground up. Inherent in such arguments, is also an explicit statement or implicit assumption that the existential and environmental threats that the world is facing at present, has come about, due to their historical origins in Western ‘civilisation’. For example, in his promotion of a certain appreciation of ‘primitivism’, Aidan Campbell asserts that the Western world is slowly awakening to the idea that there was something immensely valuable in the values and indigenous knowledge systems of the so-called primitive peoples. He avers,

No longer is primitivism solely associated with atrocities and bloodletting. Whereas humanity used to be equated with civilisation, that is, with independence from nature, the meaning of humanity has been transformed into proximity to nature. Indeed, many of the problems currently associated with society – wars, corruption, repression, pollution – are ascribed to the fact that humanity has lost contact with nature. In other words, it is the overcivilised who are now held responsible for the savagery of the world (Campbell 1997:13-14).

Advocates of indigenous knowledge systems are thus sceptical about the assumptions about their knowledge(s) coming from Western ‘civilisation’. Moreover, the appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems are also appreciative of the fact that the privileging of the ‘primitive’ is apparently serving certain emergent needs in Western societies that are emanating from a general prevailing sense of discontent with what was previously celebrated as civilisation (Prozesky 2009: 301; Bujo 2009). Campbell further elaborates on this trend of thought, when he says:

The prevailing mood that privileges a primitivist perspective helps offset any criticism directed against the system for failing to deliver the goods. Indeed, Western society is often indicted for being obsessed with consumption. A sanitised image of the African primitive serves as a role model to reinforce this message of limits preached at Western audiences. Primitivism celebrates weakness and underdevelopment as being more humane than the rugged entrepreneur of the 1980s or the racist thug. Articulating the standpoint of the primitive has become a mark of social sophistication that encompasses everyone from members of the British royal family ... (Campbell 1997: 15).

Through the celebration of the ‘primitive’, there is a global acceptance that indigenous knowledge systems are legitimate knowledge systems that serve people’s wellbeing, and that they should be recognised as being endowed with something to contribute to the plurality of human existence. This global recognition of indigenous knowledge systems goes against the idea of privileging Western knowledge systems, a practice that dominated African societies and other non-African colonised societies. Lotte Hughes expressed this recognition as follows.

In my experience, indigenous peoples have many admirable qualities that are sorely needed in today's world – including spirituality, egalitarianism, a sense of being grounded or centered, a lack of neurosis, wisdom, strength, usually a great sense of humor and perspective, too. They foresaw the global social and environmental crisis generations ago, and it's about time the rest of us paid attention to their vision and example (Hughes 2003: 8).

However, this mode of thought is contradicted by those scholars who conceptualise the current global processes as simply a manifestation of the imperial hegemony of Western knowledge systems and its cultural practices. This trend of thought is pivotal to the proponents of Euro-centric diffusionism. Amongst others, it is central to Theodore von Laue's argument, when he advanced the thesis that westernisation constituted a revolution of the whole world which is evolving towards westernisation. He writes,

For the first time in all human experience the world revolution of Westernization brought together, in inescapable intimate and virtually instant interaction, all the peoples of the world, regardless of their prior cultural evolution or their capacity – or incapacity – for peaceful coexistence .... Robbed of their past freedom to go their own ways politically and culturally, non-Western peoples were subjected to a world order that perpetuated or even deepened their helplessness. Henceforth equality could be attained only in terms imposed by the West (von Laue 1987: 3-4).

Eurocentric diffusionism sees other non-Western cultures as virtually impotent when it comes to contributing to global cultural, scientific and technical knowledge systems. Likewise, Linda Smith, is sceptical about the appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems in a global world that is dominated by America and the West. She observed,

The globalisation of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of civilised knowledge. This form of global knowledge is generally referred to as 'universal' knowledge (Smith 2006: 63).

But the view of the dominance of the West in the creation and dissemination of knowledge is countered by other scholars who see an all-inclusive or inclusionary approach to knowledge as an inescapable reality of the processes of globalisation. For example, Prozesky argued against the idea of disrespecting non-Western cultures in a globalised and multicultural world as follows.

Basing our ideas about right living only on Western ethics might have been the understanding a generation or two ago and earlier, before cultural diversity became as widespread as it is now .... What is no longer acceptable, either academically [and] ethically, is the assumption that the wider world of ethical philosophy beyond the West can simply be ignored (Prozesky 2007: 71-73).

In this way of thinking all cultures of the world, whether civilised or primitive have something to contribute to the generality of human existence. For this reason, indigenisation of knowledge through the promotion of indigenous knowledge systems is a quest for promoting a global inclusionary knowledge.

## **Indigenisation of Knowledge as a Quest for Inclusionary Knowledge**

As shown in the preceding section, those who advocate the respect and cultivation of indigenous knowledges, or primitivism, have argued for the prioritisation of indigenous knowledge systems for the protection of the world on the basis that these knowledge systems represent ideals of the development of humanity's relations with nature – humanity's 'proximity to nature' – and a variety of social and cultural values. So, even if African knowledge systems have been marginalised with regard to intellectualisation and knowledge production, as well as appropriate knowledge dissemination, it is vitally important that they be centrally included in knowledge production systems. For some, this is an ethical issue. Referring to Africa's positioning in this regard, Amina Mama says,

Africa is characterised as the region bearing the most negative consequences of globalisation, a reality that offers a critical vantage

point well-attuned to the challenge of demystifying the global policy dictates currently dominating the global landscape (Mama 2007: 1).

The underlying reason behind Mama's claim that African scholars are busy demystifying global knowledge systems, is that African scholarship has not only been critical of how colonising knowledge has extracted knowledge from Africa – and to certain degrees continue to do this – but that they are at the forefront of identifying issues that should be the concern of scholars internationally. Mama though also criticises African scholars, saying that Africa's contribution to the global knowledge about itself has remained insignificant whilst Western scholars have monopolised knowledge about Africa. In this regard, African scholars are challenged to address this matter. African indigenous systems will remain globally excluded if they are not intellectualised and their knowledge(s) disseminated, by Africans themselves, those born within African cultures. If this does not happen, African scholars will be complicit in the hegemony of Western knowledge about itself; it will participate in 'the internationalisation of global hegemonic thought within African scholarships' which on several occasions manifest itself in the form of 'uncritical reliance on externally generated paradigms, concepts, and methodologies which simplify and homogenise Africa' (Mama 2007: 5). In the final analysis, the implication of Mama's observation is that African indigenous knowledge systems have remained monopolised by Western societies and the African scholars are challenged to address this issue constructively, despite, as Mama avers, the problem of the fact of Africa's precarious economic condition.

This latter point rightly assumes that sub-Saharan Africa has remained in a perpetual state of economic dependence, and that this may be the reason why African scholars have not come to the table to address this matter. The upshot is too, that, in the wide variety of research projects that scholars engage African indigenous knowledge systems and practices annually, many scholars and communities cannot participate on their own terms, because of their economic dependencies – e.g. on donor funding from the USA and the European Union. Sometimes it is the donors who set the agenda on what should be researched and what knowledge disseminated. Any knowledge that is deemed prejudicial to the economic and political interests of the donor will not receive funding (Ake 1994: 17). Often, copyright too, goes to the donors who fund the research (Murove 2013). Obviously such a practice perpetuates the

culture of exclusion in the African academic terrain by virtue of the persistent reality of economic dependency.

Rather than such an approach, we should collectively rather seek cultural interdependencies. Indigenous knowledge intellectualisation and knowledge development, should be sought interdependently, and collaboratively. Such an approach, an approach that relies on the indigenous cultural and knowledge lenses of the people on the ground, implies that there is no single culture that can claim to having the monopoly of true knowledge. It also implies the recognition that universal knowledge systems are at base, contextual, and ethnic in orientation. This is to counter the practice, through which Western colonial knowledge systems got it completely wrong (Masolo 2010: 21).

For us to be in the position to deny the claims to colonising universalism and return to inclusionalty, we have to insist that all human knowledge is relative or context specific. Christopher Miller is well nuanced on the idea of the relativity of knowledge when he said,

... the failure to relativize one's own beliefs is more dangerous than the failure to stay within them. Unless the Western critic attempts to suspend – to hold in at least temporary abeyance – the systematic criteria and judgments that emanate from Western culture, ethnocentricism will persist forever. There is no way to break down intellectual imperialism if Western disciplines are not reconceived as 'local knowledge' (Miller 1990: 65).

A critical aspect of Miller's observation is that when a particular ethnic group universalises its own particular experiences of being in the world, the end result is that of failure to recognise the diversity of human experiences which are usually integral to all human existence. Those scholars who see Western knowledge as a universal of universals are most likely prone to judge those who do not subscribe to such an epistemic orientation as ethnically biased. The notion of the promotion of the cultural relativity of human knowledge, debunks the notion of universal truths that are context neutral, and at the same time enable us to maintain that all knowledge is context specific and is produced, and configured within a particular cultural setting. The other implication is that knowledge is ethnic by origin, whether in orientation, or in application. This claim is also central to the very concept of indigenous



knowledge systems because the salient presumption in this concept is that all knowledge is ethnic in its primordial mode (Russell 1992: 168; Masolo 2010: 26-34).

To talk about inclusionality and ethnicity in this argument, seems to be contradictory. But this should not be the case. Rather, the recognition of the production, as well as the orientation and use of knowledge from independent existences in fact enrich one's experience of being in a world characterised by diversity in human experience. This idea is well articulated by Jürgen Habermas as follows.

The overwhelming evidence of the fragmentation of multicultural societies and the Babylonian confusion of tongues in an overly complex global society seems to impel us toward holistic conceptions of language and contextualist conceptions of worldviews that make us sceptical about universalist claims, whether cognitive or normative. The complex and still unsettled debate about rationality also has implications, of course, for the concepts of a 'politics of recognition' (Habermas 1994: 121).

Central to Habermas' argument for an inclusionary approach to knowledge, is that one has to embrace diversity, and give recognition to each of the multiplicity of worldviews that constitutes the diversity. Each cultural practice and mode of conceptualising the world has a contribution to make to the world of diversity.

Furthermore, in the context of the globalisation of the world, and its continuous shrinking due to world-wide communication systems, our quest for inclusionality and the recognition of diversity and cultural relativism that is entailed in multiculturalism, curtails the hegemony of those knowledges that are being produced from economically powerful systems and institutions. It will also prevent the predetermining of the discourse about the knowledge that has to be deemed as universally acceptable.

Within a world that is also ever more sensitised to multiculturalism, the issue of inclusivity is also an ethical one. Here the normative ethical approach to knowledge requires the valuing and appreciation of the reality of diversity engendered within the multiplicity of our human existence. Whilst there is diversity in our cultural modes of being in the world, and modes of knowledge, different cultures may articulate their experiences differently,

whilst articulating the same meaning about the same phenomenon. For instance, the now notorious perceptions of African religions of being articulated with nature, and therefore superstitious – as we for instance find in the totemism advanced by James Frazer (Frazer 1910: 3) – today, appears to be a spiritual phenomenon that should be supported, in the face of the denigration and exploitation of nature for capitalist gains. Today, perceptions of the oneness of humanity and nature, have become the source of the convergence of thought amongst all the peoples of the world, at least those concerned for the long-time wellbeing of the planet. For instance, Ali Mazrui says:

Of course, the oneness of nature which Darwin was trying to sell to the scholarly world was not of the same kind as the oneness of nature which underlay many totemic belief systems. But the great breakthrough here in nature convergence was the very postulate of a natural unity, even if the basis of that unity differed as between Darwinism and totemism. A whole movement has got under way in more recent times, manifesting a deep and sincere *ecophilia* (Mazrui 1976: 43).

Here the point which is being made by Mazrui is that different cultural modes of thought converged on the idea that human beings share the same origins with all other natural species.

Another example where thoughts from different cultural backgrounds can converge can be discerned from Southern Africa where the dominant approach to ethics is usually articulated in the concept of *Ubuntu* – a Nguni word that means humanness. The main presumption within this ethic is that one's humanity is recognised by recognising the humanity of others, of being a human being in community. In this regard, human existence and ultimate wellbeing are understood in terms of relatedness within the community. In this regard to be thus recognised as endowed with *Ubuntu* one must be compassionate, generous, kind, considerate, and caring, just to mention a few of the virtues related to *Ubuntu*. Similarly, among the peoples of Western cultures, this concept of a human person is well echoed in the ethical traditions such as Virtue ethics, and Utilitarianism, whereby a concern for the wellbeing of the community is highly prized. In the face of the diversity inherent in human ethical traditions, there are sometimes more commonalities than differences.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I argued for the appreciation, and intellectualisation, of indigenous knowledge systems discourse in Africa, with specific reference to the aftermath of colonising knowledges, as well as the fact of the globalised multicultural world, which is dominated by Western knowledge systems. The challenge for indigenisation discourse in post-colonial Africa, is to bring to the fore the importance of inclusionary knowledge on a world scale. In this regard I have advanced three arguments which support the idea that the indigenisation discourse in a globalised world should be seen as an attempt to accompany the realities of globalisation and multiculturalism.

*Firstly*, I argued that the very idea of the indigenisation of knowledge has to be seen as an acknowledgement of the fact that all knowledge is contextual. The idea that knowledge is contextual implies that we should come to terms with the context where this knowledge is created. Social context plays a critical role because it determines the type of knowledge that is created and disseminated. Failure to realise the context specificity of knowledge can only lead to the creation of distorted knowledge as was the case during the era of colonialism in Africa.

*Secondly*, the African post-colonial response to colonial knowledge production, was countered by the glorification of the indigenous personality, as well as the promotion of processes that glorify that which was denigrated by European colonial scholarship. Called ‘primitivism’ by some, the enhancement of indigenous knowledges stand in stark contrast to the usual academic tendency of privileging Western knowledge systems. In the celebration of primitivism there is a tacit advocacy for an authentic knowledge that is rooted in context, as it promotes human wellbeing in harmony with the environment and nature, as that type of knowledge that is inclusionary.

*Thirdly*, the argument for the intellectualisation and indigenisation of knowledge as a quest for inclusionary knowledge, came in the form of an argument which said that in our contemporary globalised world, African scholarship has been marginalised in the creation and dissemination of knowledge – not least about Africa itself. The creation and dissemination of knowledge has remained monopolised by Western scholars, also because of the poor economic resources for researches from within the continent. Rather than participating in the production of the Western hegemony of knowledge, African scholars should engage the intellectualisation and production of local

knowledges, even when there is a dearth of resources. In a multicultural and globalised world, the normative ethical approach to knowledge requires the appreciation of the diverse modes of knowing within our human existence.

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# Reflection in Practice as Source of Values: The Cross-cultural Creation of a Health-care Ethic in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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## Abstract

As a starting-point, in his well-known definition of a ‘practice’, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the ‘reflection’ involved in ‘practice’, is best understood as a dialogue between different partners, whether individuals or groups. Such reflection, aimed as it is at the achievement of excellence in the practice concerned, can (if pursued with rigour and commitment), uncover values embedded in the practice which, however limited the practice (rugby, gardening), have a wider, even universal, scope. When the partners in dialogue have general recognition of one another (religions, countries, professional bodies, political parties), these values can provide materials for a Global Ethic (Parliament of the World’s Religions), that is constructed from the bottom up (the Oregon Plan), rather than by some public authority (the United Nations). This article provides grounds for this view by examining the practice of health-care in post-apartheid South Africa, and the co-reflection of scientific health-care professionals and traditional healers, that are part of constructing a new model for health-care that better serves the needs of all South Africans. This dialogue may uncover values whose scope is wider than that of health-care and which could provide a really humane foundation for a society containing different cultures.

**Keywords:** practice, Alisdair MacIntyre, reflection, values, culture/s, ethic, health-care professionals, traditional healers

## **Introduction**

This article provides grounds for the view that a National Ethic, but, equally, a Global Ethic for health-care practice can be developed from the ground up, rather than from the top down. As a starting-point, in his well-known definition of a ‘practice’, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the ‘reflection’ involved in ‘practice’, is best understood as a dialogue between different partners, whether individuals or groups. Such reflection, aimed as it is at the achievement of excellence in the practice concerned, can (if pursued with rigour and commitment), uncover values embedded in the practice which, however limited the practice (rugby, gardening), have a wider, even universal, scope. When the partners in dialogue have general recognition of one another (religions, countries, professional bodies, political parties), these values can provide materials for a Global Ethic (Parliament of the World’s Religions), that is constructed from the bottom up (the Oregon Plan), rather than by some public authority (the United Nations). This is the main focus of this article. By examining the practice of health-care in post-apartheid South Africa, and the co-reflection, or dialogue of scientific health-care professionals and traditional healers, that are part of constructing a new model for health-care that better serves the needs of all South Africans, this article outlines the possibilities and dynamics of such interaction. It may uncover values whose scope is wider than that of health-care and which could provide a really humane foundation for a society containing different cultures.

## **‘Practice’: The Normative and Reflective/ Dialogal**

I am sure you are all familiar with Alasdair MacIntyre’s well-known definition of those ‘large-scale complex worthwhile activities’ we call practices. Well-known or not, it is much too complex to be remembered. So here it is, in what a mutual friend of ours, Herbert McCabe, referred to as ‘one large-scale complex worthwhile sentence’:

By ‘practice’ I am going to mean a coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partially definitive of that form of activity, with the result that human powers to

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achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended (1985: 175).

McCabe takes as an example of a practice the making and maintaining of a family. (McCabe, incidentally, although not as well-known as such figures as MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, was one of the most powerful influences behind the recent rebirth of Aristotelianism in philosophy. MacIntyre in particular has been deeply influenced by him.) His description of this practice is such a good illustration of MacIntyre's definition that I am going to share it with you:

Having and maintaining a family as an activity of parents is complex and coherent in the sense that it is a distinguishable form of activity with its own pattern to it, and also of course co-operative. And the co-operation is a matter not only of relations between the two parents and their children but also many other agents and agencies essential to family life, like grocers, schools, clinics, and so on. In maintaining a family we are concerned with goods internal to the activity. That is we do not maintain a family in order to realise some good which might have been realised in some other way. In this sense running a family is 'for its own sake'. These goods are realised in the course of trying to achieve certain standards of excellence that belong to running families – making sure that the children are healthy, adequately fed and clothed, educated and so on, that the family 'forms a coherent unity in friendship', that it plays its part in appropriate social activities – hospitality and all the rest. With the result that human powers to achieve these excellences are systematically extended; so that not only do these parents get better at the job, but throughout a section of history the activity of maintaining a family becomes better understood and practised. And finally throughout such a personal life and such a history the idea of what a family *is* and what the goods are that belong to it is gradually revised and extended. To put it simply, by trying in practice to be good parents we (individually and as a society) deepen our notion of what it is to be a parent (1980: 72).

There are two things that this example of a practice brings out very clearly: its normative nature; and the fact that a reflective element is intrinsic to it. These



two things are of course closely connected but let me examine them one by one.

### ***The Normative Dimension***

In saying that practices have a *normative* dimension one is really saying that human life as such has a normative dimension to it. This is certainly what MacIntyre is concerned to show in *After Virtue*. Facts and values are inseparable when it is humanity we are dealing with. The famous impossibility of deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’ turns out to be possible after all. If the ‘is’ is a human ‘is’, the ‘ought’ is already there, ‘built in’, as it were to our human nature. Each of all the sciences is capable of taking humanity as its object of study. But humanity, as well as being a possible object of study is also, in the person of the scientist, the thinking, choosing subject who produces science, deliberates about its procedures and judges its methods. As knowing subjects we cannot but engage in normative activities of a theoretical kind. As choosing agents we cannot but engage in normative activities of a practical kind. Whether in our thinking or in our choosing there is no avoiding our normative nature. We are condemned to value!

It is the fact that all human practices have a built-in normative dimension to them that both provides a space and creates a demand for reflection. For if it is the case that a practice is something that can be well or badly practised there is a built-in pressure in it towards excellence. Think of football, think of cooking, think of anything we do. Embedded in the practice, sometimes hidden, sometimes evident, is its natural standard, waiting to be uncovered, formulated, applied. Thus emerges reflection, not imported, not superimposed, but engaged in, intrinsic to, partially definitive of, the practice.

### ***The Reflective/ Dialogical Dimension***

The *reflection* that is an intrinsic aspect of human practices is thus an essentially critical activity. It is of course concerned to understand the practice in question. But the insight it seeks, it seeks in order to enable it to evaluate the performance according to the built-in standard that has been uncovered. Reflection in practice is thus essentially productive of values. This seems to

me undeniable and is explained by the notion of human beings as subjects and agents that I have just emphasised. What is perhaps less evident is that such reflection has a built-in dialogal element to it.

This is clearly the case in McCabe's example, where both husband and wife are the subjects and agents of making and maintaining a family. But what of a one parent family, or a medical professional? Even there it seems to me a dialogal element is present in reflection on the practice. Since such reflection is always critical, the mental acts involve considerations both for and against some particular detail of the practice concerned. Should one tell the patient the full scope of the diagnosis? Or not? Should one tell them now or when they are feeling better? The either/or structure of one's practical deliberations has a dialogal character to it. One considers reasons for and against, pro's and con's. The very act of examining one's usual practice in a critical way implies that one has taken up a stance over against it. I do not think it is irrelevant that a literary genius such as Plato chose the dialogue form for his philosophical writing. And this was continued, though in a more formalised way in the scholastic disputation of the Middle Ages.

In spite of the fact that a dialogal aspect is always present in critical reflection it is more evident and, I want to claim, more significant when actual different partners are involved. As the old saying goes, 'two heads are better than one'. The truth in this is not merely that two guesses give you double the chance of being right, but rather that an intersubjective agreement is more likely to be objective, avoiding the preconceptions and biases of a single individual. But there is more to the importance of dialogue than this. One can get a hold on what that is by recognising that however trivial (within limits) the practice under consideration is, the values uncovered by reflection, and the effect of the reflection on the reflector, can be very far-reaching indeed, with the whole of human life as their scope. Consider a practice such as football. A particular period of European competition saw a Dutch team, Ajax Amsterdam, evolve a new style of play: 'total football'. This made new demands not only on the skills but even on the character of the members of the team. For instance forwards had to be prepared to play as backs, and vice versa. This required courage and a high degree of selflessness. Only certain players were able to fit into such a team. Few would deny that qualities such as these, necessary for excellence on the football field, are equally important for the whole of a persons's life. So sport is often used in schooling as a source of moral education.

Now if this is true of something like sport, how much more so is it true of such essential practices as making and maintaining a family, health care, the police service, government or religion. In practices like these it is quite clear that the values involved have to do with human life as a whole. In these practices it is much clearer than in the case of sport that to succeed in the practice is to succeed as a human being. Or, to put it the other way round, that in order to be good at things like this you need to be a good person as well. The values involved in being a good policeman have a depth and scope that affects everything you are.

What seems to me to be the case is that the values we can discover by reflection in practice are potentially universalisable not because of the nature of the practice as such but because the practice is a particular realisation of human beings as subjects and agents. And as subjects and agents we human beings are virtually unlimited in the different ways in which we are able to realise those values that are universal because fundamental to all the practices essential to a worthwhile and fulfilling human life. It is this apparent lack of limitation that establishes the necessity of dialogue between different partners in the reflective search for values in the practices in which we are involved. A single source of reflection is not capable of revealing the richness of possibilities inherent in the practice. This is as true of football as it is of health-care. Every practice because it is an expression of our humanity is open-ended, capable of an indefinite variety of expressions, unlimited development. Our existence is historical, continuously developing, and so our reflection can never be over if our practices are to retain their integrity and health.

## **The Practice of Health-care in Post-apartheid South Africa**

We have been swimming in deep waters. I want now to give my reflections more grounding by exploring a particular practice that I am familiar with, namely the practice of health-care in post-apartheid South Africa. What I have said so far has been said in terms of individuals as partners in dialogue. I think one can apply the same argument to groups, organisations, societies, cultures. This is what I propose to do.

It is important to remember that South Africa is the most European country in Africa, including Mediterranean Africa. I use the term European rather than Western since what I am referring to is the kind of culture and

society that developed in Europe during the modern period and has since spread across the world. The backbone of this colossus is the science that developed in Europe at this time and the technology it made possible. It is this science and technology that define the notion of development in our time. South Africa can be said to be the most developed country in Africa. On the other hand, because of apartheid, South Africa is also a country that contains both the Third World and the First World, the North and South, the developed and the under developed, within itself. It is in this way a microcosm of the contemporary global community. For that very reason it is a suitable place to perform a crucial experiment in finding a way of bridging the widening gap in our globalising world between those who are and those who are not 'developed'.

What makes South Africa unique in post-colonial Africa is, first of all, that here the colonists stayed. And then there was apartheid. The result of these two factors was both the powerful presence of Europe and a sharp separation between Europe and Africa. It was a contradiction that could not continue to exist, but also one that produced a heightened consciousness of identity and difference. Later in this paper I will have something to say about the extraordinary ending of apartheid. Here I only want to point out that our present project of 'nation-building' in South Africa is a project of bringing together what apartheid forced apart. People and groups of people, of course, but also cultures and ways of living, ideas, values. In every sphere of life – gender relations, sex and family, education, work, government, religion – the struggle continues to develop connections. Beyond political reconciliation we are hoping for a genuine marriage – what Leopold Senghor called 'cultural miscegenation' – of Africa and Europe that will be a real enhancement of our multicultural humanity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's playful but beautiful notion of a 'rainbow nation' is an apt symbol of our society in which the same light of our humanity shows itself in so many different colourful ways. The project of 'nation-building', if it is to be authentic, must involve the search, within our different cultures, for values that, because they grow from our common humanity, we all can recognise and which can unite us in a humane common life.

I propose now to take as an example of this search, the sphere of health-care in South Africa, and give you some concrete cases of reflection in practice that is also the co-reflection of different partners in dialogue, and which could lead to the discovery of values that can be shared.

## **The Two Main Traditions of Health-care in South Africa**

There are two main traditions of health-care in South Africa, modern European medicine and traditional African medicine. European medicine in South Africa has a predominantly American character. It is scientific and technical. The medical establishment is doctor and male-dominated. Health-care focuses mainly on the curing of acute conditions. It has clear and limited goals with increasing specialisation. Ethical interest focuses almost exclusively on the extraordinary, the moral dilemmas created by technological advances in medicine. Its aims and character are also affected by its concern with rules and law, both professional and legal. In a market economy the practice of medicine has been profoundly influenced by the individualistic and materialist ethos of its liberal/ capitalist setting and its commercial aims and methods. The huge omniscient hospital is its typical embodiment and most powerful symbol.

Traditional African medicine is very different. The most profound difference can be seen in the following statement of a Zulu medical practitioner in dialogue with a European psychiatrist:

Whites have failed to see that in Africa a human being is a single entity, not divided up into various sections such as the physical body, the soul and the spirit. When a Zulu is sick it is the whole [person] that is sick ... (Buhrmann 1984: 32).

Commenting on this, the psychiatrist, Vera Buhrmann, writes,

Western medicine divides illness into the different categories of somatic, psychological and psychosomatic: the Black people do not: they say that 'when part of me is ill, the whole of me is ill', irrespective of what the illness is (1984: 26).

Unlike the germ theory of disease of scientific medicine, traditional African medicine distinguishes between natural and unnatural causes of disease. Natural causes refer to anything that can enter the body, either through one of its orifices or through the skin. Unnatural causes include psychological influences, evil deeds (of self or others), sorcery, the spirits of ancestors. Dealing with these involves a variety of methods from herbal remedies, changes of diet, dancing and drumming, to counselling and prayer.

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Since the ending of apartheid attempts to bring these different traditions of health-care together have been made at many different levels. At the level of the national government, the Portfolio Committee on Arts, Culture, Language, Science and Technology has launched an Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) programme that intends to feed IKS into institutions of higher learning, science councils, government structures, and corporate entities in both the public and private sectors. A particular initiative of government in the field of health-care has been to convert the infamous Vlakplaas farm (which in the apartheid era had been the training school for spies, torturers and other 'security' personnel) into a national centre for healing and reconciliation. Here traditional healers and scientific medics practise side by side, referring patients to each other as they see fit.

Through the Human Sciences Research Council research into these indigenous knowledge systems is being sponsored. A colleague of mine at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal is at present running a research project in IKS that focuses explicitly on the sphere of health-care. He writes that

The assumption that this would be fruitful was based not only on the fact that much of the indigenous knowledge that exists is to do with medicine, but that medicine and health could open up many other avenues of investigation. This in turn was based on the assumption that the world-view out of which IK emerges is an interconnected whole where boundaries between the material and the spiritual, the sacred and the secular, the individual and the community are blurred. It is precisely this interconnectedness of the whole of reality that so profoundly characterizes IK in general and medicine and healing in particular. It is therefore on the basis of the assumption that investigation into the topic of healing and medicine will potentially open up the entire field of IK that our project was launched. And in fact many other topics have indeed emerged. However they have emerged through the doorway opened to them by ideas, practices, traditions, and beliefs around the topic of medicine and healing (Balcomb 2005).

This project involves a large(18 strong) group of traditional healers, diviners, herbalists and religious practitioners, as well as academics from a variety of disciplines including medicine, anthropology, psychology, chemistry and religious studies.

At my own University of Cape Town a group of academics from medical specialisations calling itself 'The Medical Research Council Traditional Medicines Research Group' has been meeting for some years with a similar group of traditional healers and herbalists. Together they have published the *South African Primary Health Care Handbook* (Felhaber 1999). The subtitle of this volume explains the character of the book: '*Combining Western and Traditional Practices*'. It does just that. Beginning with theoretical sections on traditional and Western concepts of disease, diagnosis and treatment, it then covers in a practical way the full range of primary health-care issues, combining the approaches of both traditional and scientific medical practice.

## **Traditional and Scientific Medical Practice: Co-reflection in Practice**

### ***The Dialogue between the European and the African Traditions***

To give a deeper insight into what is involved in this co-reflection in practice of two different health-care traditions I want to look more closely at the experience of an individual who deliberately involved herself in a dialogue between the European and the African traditions as presently existing in South Africa. Her reflections are published in an extraordinary little book *Living in Two Worlds* (Buhrmann 1984). The subtitle explains the title: 'Communication between a White Healer and her Black Counterparts'.

We have already met the person involved, in the dialogue with a Zulu doctor I have quoted. Her name was (she has recently died) Vera Buhrmann. She was an academic at the University of Cape Town, a European-trained psychiatrist and a Jungian analyst. Through a student she was introduced to the Tiso school, a group of Xhosa *amagqira* (indigenous healers) who worked especially with patients suffering from psychological disorders. She became so interested in their work and their methods that she began to spend several weeks each year living with them in their remote country region and participating in their work.

As the patients were suffering from psychological disorders which, as a psychiatrist and analyst, were her special field, she was particularly interested in similarities and differences in the therapies involved. To give you an impression of this, here is her description of the therapeutic milieu:

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... from the beginning the patient is incorporated into the life and activities of the *igqira*'s household. S/he is treated like a member of the family, with the privileges and responsibilities inherent in such a position. The chores allotted to [the patient] depend on his/ her state of health and ability to assume responsibility; these increase with progress. The nature of the patient's duties is naturally determined by the person's sex. The value and importance of work is stressed: 'No-one may be idle' is a dictum. There is constant interaction between the patient, members of the family and other patients and trainees, and on the whole the atmosphere is warm and friendly, with much talking and joking going on. Gradually the patient's sense of isolation, loneliness and being different decreases, and his/ her self-esteem and self-confidence increase. Patients who are restless and violent are given sedation of some kind at night and even during the day.

Such an environment is humane and health-promoting. It has advantages over the hospitals and institutions which the West has to offer. The work with the animals, on the lands, in the gardens, around the homestead and in the homes, is occupational therapy which is natural and meaningful to the person and which s/he shares with the others, sick and healthy. The loneliness and feelings of isolation which are characteristics of all mental disturbances are therefore naturally dealt with in therapy from the outset. There is little that is strange, unknown or frightening; the patient is transferred from his/ her own home to another home, not a hospital; there are no language barriers, the same cultural ideas are shared, even the food is traditional. There is no culture-shock. S/he sees the 'doctor', the *igqira*, going about his/ her ordinary duties as head of the homestead, dressed in ordinary clothing, and s/he gets to know him/ her as an ordinary human being. If the *igqira* is a woman, she also performs her ordinary duties like any other woman who runs a home (1984:42).

As in orthodox psychoanalytic practice, where training also involves analysis, some of the *igqira*'s 'patients' are also trainees. Vera Buhrmann was herself initially in this category though eventually she became a fully-fledged *igqira*.

We have neither time nor space to discuss the details of treatment of the Tiso school, but they involved herbal remedies and physical procedures



together with dream analysis and ceremonies with dancing, as well as the kind of occupational therapy outlined above. In all of this, in the work on dreams as well as in the ceremonies, the role of ‘the ancestors’ is of supreme importance. Indeed, in Buhrmann’s view it is in relation to the ancestors that the contents of the unconscious are revealed for the African patient.

### ***The Similarities and Differences of the Two Different Therapeutic Traditions***

What I want to focus on are the similarities and differences noted by Buhrmann of the two different therapeutic traditions, and then on her discernment of the effect the African practice had on her.

Buhrmann describes the world of Western medicine (and she is thinking particularly of psychotherapy) as ‘primarily scientific, rational and ego-oriented’, whereas ‘the world of the Black healer and his/ her people ... is primarily intuitive, non-rational or oriented towards the inner world of symbols and images of the collective unconscious’ (1984: 15). She quotes with approval Senghor’s distinction between discursive and intuitive reason, applying the former to Western thinking and the latter to African. She acknowledges that she is writing for Western readers and so tends to stress what she feels Western medicine has to learn from its African counterpart rather than vice versa. She is critical of central aspects of Western culture and eager to communicate the strengths of the African.

There is considerable evidence in the Western world that our one-sided conscious ego attitudes need to be corrected. There is also evidence that unconscious forces are at work in a rather destructive way because we are deaf, blind and insensitive to the need of the unconscious to find expression. We all need to ‘listen to the ancestors’ and get to know and understand their wishes.

The African continent is in a somewhat similar dilemma: because of the extreme pressure on its Black inhabitants to develop a Western-orientated society, a Western type of ego-consciousness with Western goals and measures of achievement, they now also have difficulty listening to the ancestors, and even more important, understanding their messages. This leads to anxiety, confusion and a search for identity (1984: 100).

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Ultimately however, she recognises strengths and weaknesses in both and argues for a complementarity between them.

Western culture has the advantage – and it is an advantage not to be scorned – of having developed a relatively conscious and relatively logical goal-directed ego .... Our Black compatriots, especially those with whom I have worked, have the advantage of still living closer to the world of the unconscious, where symbols are still alive and vibrant and where archetypal images form a natural part of their daily existence and direct their behaviour in ways which sometimes seem irrational to us. Their ego-structure and functions are less goal-directed, except when they are gripped by an idea or an activity, when their ego-structure does become goal-directed and the energy which is released under such conditions seems inexhaustible (1984: 100-101).

The complementarity of these two cultures was not simply a theoretical one; it was realised in her own experience.

In my research into the rituals and ceremonies, intuition and feeling naturally took over and thinking was only applied when it came to talking or writing about my experiences and perceptions. My Black mentors therefore unwittingly sharpened my functions of intuition and feeling. They in turn said on more than one occasion: ‘Working with you is a great help, you help me to think and see things deeper’. It therefore seems to me that our natural modes of functioning were complementary to each other, and that something more integrated and less one-sided emerged out of this co-operation (1984: 101-102).

***The Effects of Immersion in the Healing Practices of the Xhosa***

We come now to consider the effects Buhrmann’s immersion in the healing practices of the Xhosa had on her. She lists the chief insights she gained from her experiences as follows:

- Acceptance of the fact that the rational and non-rational parts of the psyche are equally important in the totality of the human being.

- The ancestor concept of the Xhosa, especially as it is conceived of and used by the Tiso school for the purposes of healing.
- The Xhosa attitude to dreams: that these are communications from the ancestors and may therefore not be ignored and that every effort must be made to understand the messages these dreams convey.
- The significance of the *intlombe* and *xhentsa* (ritual healing dances) during which body and spirit find expression and are united in a beautiful and meaningful way (1984: 17-18).

Although her immersion in traditional therapy had such a profound effect upon her, Vera Buhrmann retained her hold on scientific and Jungian medicine. The African insights did not displace but complemented her European education. The extent to which they did this, and the profound effect this merging of complementary influences had on her, is beautifully illustrated by the mutuality, the reciprocity, the near identity, that developed in the relationship between Vera and her Xhosa colleagues.

At the most fruitful encounters I felt that ‘our animals were working together’ and I was aware of the palpable but invisible presence of their ancestors. These occasions consisted of a genuine therapeutic relationship from which both parties derived benefit. Some of the benefits derived are obvious, some so subtle that they defy definition. As human beings we interacted with each other in a unique way and at unique levels – mostly at an intuitive, emotional and even archetypal level. My understanding of and sensitivity to symbolism as expressed in language and behaviour formed a bridge across which energy could flow in both directions. At times, I felt that similar archetypal experiences were stimulated, and each intuitively knew what was happening to the other (1984: 99).

What happened to Vera Buhrmann and Mongezi Tiso, and to the practice of psychotherapy in South Africa, is a good illustration of the critical and creative power of the co-reflection of different partners. And, in a healthy society this kind of co-operative critical reflection is part of the never ending conversation that is the cultural heart of a community. I, as a philosopher, want to take part in this conversation between European and African in South Africa, by extending the reflection more widely and more deeply. I begin in the sphere

of health care but find there values that have a wider, deeper scope.

## **The Ethos Inherent in the European and the African Practice of Health-care**

I begin where Buhrmann left off, by examining the different ethos inherent in each of the European and the African practice of health-care. I am conscious that I am writing for, and speaking to, a predominantly European audience. And although I am born and bred in South African I have inherited and been educated in a predominantly European culture. For both these reasons I am, and will be, more concerned to note the negative aspects of the European ethos in health-care and the positive ones in the African. There is however a more important reason for this: European culture is the dominant culture globally, and increasingly so. And nowhere more so than in the sphere of health-care. So it is only too easy to accept it as normative. I have however discovered in African culture something that Europe has either forgotten or lost and I am eager to bear witness to this. In the end though, all cultures contain both negative and positive elements and I will try to identify these fairly. My ultimate aim is to see whether it is possible to combine the best of both.

### ***The Ethos of European Health-care***

I have already commented on the ethos of European health-care. Here I will add to this a few remarks on health-care ethics itself in the presently dominant European tradition. As one would expect there is a strong connection between the actual ethos of a practice and ethical reflection on it.

Contemporary medical ethics in the European tradition is formed by two main ethical traditions, the utilitarian and the deontological. The most influential school of medical ethics, that of Georgetown, distinguishes four fundamental principles: autonomy, justice, beneficence and non-maleficence. The first two, rooted as they are in the deontological ethics of Kant, are expressions of the abstract rationality of the universalisability of the maxims of one's actions. The second, utilitarian, pair embody an instrumental view of rationality that is reduced in practice to a cost/benefit calculus. All four can be seen as no more than procedural rules for regulating the interests of interacting self-interested agents. Justice is reduced to mere equality of consideration,

autonomy to freedom from interference. Beneficence and non-maleficence are merely cost-benefit calculations. Ethics of this kind is virtually, absurdly, value-free. There is no conception of what human fulfilment consists in, or what the connection between human goodness and good health-care ought to be. It has no concern for the actual quality of life that goes on in this sphere of society, but aims only to provide a set of rules that will enable autonomous self-interested agents, seeking a variety of heterogeneous goals, to interact with each other without conflict within a system set up by 'experts' and administered by 'managers'.

Clearly such a negative assessment is inadequate as a characterization of the whole tradition. I have nevertheless picked out elements which I believe are really there. They are not however the whole story. European medicine has achieved colossal success in the eradication of epidemics and in the treatment of acute conditions. The result of this success has been a shift in the focus of health-care to the management of more or less chronic conditions and to the final years of people's lives. From an ethical point of view however I consider the most significant achievement to be what I will call the patient-centred view of health-care. In a context of increased specialisation, health-care is inevitably a multi-disciplinary matter performed to a greater or less extent by a health-care 'team'. The ethical insight I want to emphasize is that which sees the patient as the leader and director of this team.

This value-laden understanding of health-care is embodied in such notions as 'informed consent', 'confidentiality' and many others. Ultimately however all are rooted in the notion of autonomy I have already mentioned. Of the four Georgetown principles, autonomy is definitely the 'trump'. In the background of this reverence for patient autonomy is the history of modern European culture in general and philosophy in particular. The period that saw the rise of science and technology and secularisation also saw the development of the idea of individual freedom as both the most important fact about human nature and the most important value for human life. This insight finds beautiful expression in the following quotation from Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. God is speaking to Adam:

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is yours alone nor any function peculiar to yourself have we given you Adam, to the end that according to your longing and according to your judgement you may have and possess what abode, what form, what functions you yourself shall

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desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. You, constrained by no limits, in accordance with your own free will, in whose hand We have placed you, shall ordain for yourself the limits of your nature. We have set you at the world's centre that you may from there more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honour, as though the maker and moulder of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever shape you shall prefer (Taylor 1989: 199-200).

Since that time this notion of individual freedom as self-determination has become the foundation of all ethical thinking. Unfortunately it was given its classical formulation by Kant in starkly dualistic terms. According to him, as rational beings we are free from the determinisms of nature of which our bodies are, unfortunately, a part. This dualistic understanding of human nature has its counterpart in the realm of ethics. Here freedom is understood as a radical independence of, amounting to a separation from, others. Individuals are not an integral part of the community; the community is simply an aggregate of individuals. Dualism and atomism go hand in hand. In spite of this, freedom as an ethical notion is in my view a permanent and valuable contribution to ethical thought, but one that requires a more adequate formulation.

### ***The African Ethos of Ubuntu***

I turn now to a deeper reflection on the African ethical thinking that underlies the ethos of health-care practice in this tradition. The central and foundational African ethical notion is that of *ubuntu*, which means 'humanity' as a moral quality of a person or their behaviour. To understand the concept of *ubuntu* it is necessary to say something about the conception of human nature that underlies it. This conception is encapsulated in the saying that *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – a human being is a human being through (other) human beings. This entails, in the first place, that my humanity is both a gift and an achievement. It is not present in the beginning but is progressively realised through my relations with others – or not. Humanity is something which can fail to be developed – hence the normative force of the concept of *ubuntu*. It

can readily be seen that the notion of *ubuntu* is very close to that of health, where health is understood as a quality of the whole person – physical, psychological and spiritual aspects all taken together. In fact that is precisely what we have seen in Buhrmann’s account of traditional healing. Health-care, in the African tradition, is seen as but one aspect of that comprehensive and life-long interpersonal interaction that engenders the exercise, development and flourishing of humanity in individuals. In the sphere of health-care the power for growth in humanity through interpersonal relations is focussed in specific ways – in herbal treatment, surgery, ritual dances, counselling and so on. But at root it is the same personal energy at work through these mediums that is present in sexual relations, family life, education, politics and religion – in every sphere of life.

Two further points need to be made concerning the notion of *ubuntu*. The fulfilment of humanity aimed at and constituted by *ubuntu* is inseparably both individual and communal: the individual with *ubuntu* lives for others, the community with *ubuntu* lives for me. The more I find myself in the community, the more the community finds itself in me. This conception avoids the individualistic character of much European ethical thought as well as the collectivism of socialist and communist approaches that are usually reckoned the only alternatives. That is the first point. The second is more metaphysical.

It is customary in European thought to see morality as a cultural matter and not as the expression of a force of nature. In African thought there is no such division. The universe is seen as a field of force or energy in which humanity is immersed and part of. This field and the energy that constitutes it should not be thought of as either physical or psychic. African ontology is neither materialist nor dualist. The force or energy in question that is responsible for the simultaneous development of individual persons and the creation of community between them, has both physical and psychic aspects, but in itself is something more fundamental. It is for this reason that death is seen neither as the annihilation of a person nor as the liberation of an immaterial mind or soul.

Buhrmann has painted a vivid picture of how an ethic of *ubuntu* will show itself in health-care. It is a predominantly positive picture. And I, in my outline of the concept, have also stressed what I take to be the truth and value contained in it. Here however I must introduce a more critical note, first with regard to the concept of *ubuntu* itself, and then as regards health-care in the African tradition.

### **Critical Notes**

In South Africa the ethic of *ubuntu* is sometimes criticised for being too idealistic. Some of those who make this criticism are innocent – but stupid. What should an ethic be if not an ideal? The fact that Christians are not charitable, and Platonists, does not imply that there is something wrong with charity or justice. And, is it not far better for an ethic to consist in a system of ideals that indicate the direction to take for developing certain attitudes in persons than a system of rules determining behaviour? That conception of ethics has led to the widespread discrediting of ethics in contemporary culture.

Others who criticise the ethics of *ubuntu* in the name of realism are not so innocent. They are the ‘practical’ people – usually politicians or business leaders – who want to do away with ethics altogether. Their ‘realism’ is in reality self-interest, and differs with the differing selves.

A more important criticism is that the ethic of *ubuntu* has passed its sell-by date. It was at home in the rural village life of small communities. It is out of place in the world produced by European science and technology. There is some substance to this criticism. Cultures develop and so must their ethics. There is however no escaping an ethical judgment on these developments. And in making such a judgment on an ethical tradition one is engaging in its development. One cannot escape the absoluteness and universality of the ethical, however limited and particular the perspective from which one speaks. And I judge that there is much in the ethic of *ubuntu* that transcends the limitations of African culture. Presently I will try to show something of what that is.

When it comes to the sphere of health-care the inadequacies of the African tradition are fairly clear. It lacks the resources that European science and technology have made available to the medical profession. But, in addition to this lack there are elements in this tradition that are positively repugnant. They centre on the phenomenon of superstition, a superstitious recognition of evil forces wielded by human persons (witches for instance) and a superstitious reliance on evil practices (ritual murder for instance) to overcome these. There is sometimes also a superstitious fear of European medicine itself.

### **A Health-care Ethic and the Complementarity of the Two Traditions**

I want to conclude this article by giving an indication of the complementarity of the two traditions by showing how they can be combined to provide a better



foundation for a health-care ethic. This is just one example of a deeper complementarity that I think I discern, that is capable of providing a foundation for a truly human unity in the diversity of South Africa and even for an ethic for a multicultural world.

### ***Defining a Health-care Ethic***

As far as an ethics of health-care is concerned, I want to use as a foundation, the African emphasis on health as our flourishing as fulfilled human beings, and the inseparability of this flourishing from certain kinds of relationship with others. When it comes to a definition of what this flourishing consists in and thus of what it is to be a human being, I turn to European thought. I will use the idea of self-determination as the defining feature of our humanity and the criterion of its proper development and fulfilment. I thus hope to combine what is most characteristic of each tradition in a single theory of health-care. I do this, not out of any desire to achieve an apparent peace between two alien forces, but because I consider that both the conceptions I have mentioned are importantly true.

At once an apparent problem appears: is there not a simple contradiction between the self-determination of the European tradition and the other-dependence of the African. How can these two insights be combined in a single view? I admit that the idea of having to rely on a certain influence of others in order to develop my capacity for free action is a paradoxical one. But I do not think it is contradictory, and will presently indicate why. In the meantime I will assume its truth and try to show how one can use it to build an ethical theory of health-care.

I define health in the most general normative sense as follows:

the total condition of persons whose capacities have developed to the point where they have the ability to engage in and enjoy the activities that promote their growth and express their fulfilment as persons.

Health, in this very general sense, thus includes all the dimensions of my being, everything that enables me to achieve personal growth and community with others. It must not however be thought that health in the narrow sense, namely

that which is the concern of nurses and doctors and other health-care professionals, is the biological aspect of my life, simply as such. The proper sphere of health-care, narrowly considered, is indeed the impersonal, unconscious dimension of human life, but precisely insofar as it is capable of impeding or facilitating personal growth and community, the development of my capacity for self-determination in my relationships with others.

Thus from the point of view of the health-care ethics I am concerned to develop, what makes health-care professionals different from those in other professions, such as police, and teachers and ministers of religion, is not that they are concerned with the bodily aspects of persons rather than with personal growth and community as such (like those others), but that they are concerned with the bodily and impersonal aspects of human life insofar as these either facilitate or impede personal growth and community. Personal growth and community must remain their ultimate concern, even as health-care professionals. But they will serve this goal through focussing on the bodily and impersonal aspects of human life.

Having said that the main aim of health-care is personal growth and community I need to make clear that the cure and care of physical and psychic ailments is not simply a means to this end and hence of no importance in itself. Human persons are bodily beings, so bodily health is part of total health. Unlike playing tennis, or golf, for money, there is an intrinsic connection between curing and caring for the sick and promoting personal growth and community.

Because health-care, unlike education, focuses on the impersonal factors in human life, there is always a danger of losing the personal orientation that is central to an authentic ethic. One must remember always that the impersonal and the personal are both part of human nature and of the same human life. The attitude of the health-carer must reflect this. Health-care ethics, just as the whole of an ethics that is true to the ideal of *ubuntu*, must be based on human nature if it is to promote personal growth and community. This means that one cannot regard the human body as a merely physical system, a complex machine that is simply the instrument of a person who uses it. It is the physical aspect of a person. One's attitude to it is part of one's attitude to the person. Seeking to manipulate or dominate the natural physical processes that influence our lives as one might deal with a machine one had invented is bound to undermine the integrity of health-care. Medical science is the attempt to understand these processes. Health-care must put this understanding into practice by attempting to co-operate with and direct these processes to the

fulfilment of the whole person. This goal, though is one that involves freely chosen acts, and is equally natural. Humanity and human fulfilment is not an artificial creation that can only be served by going against the dynamisms of nature. Medical science and technology must proceed within an attitude of reverence and respect for nature, even in its most material manifestations.

### ***Scientific Medicine and the Health-care Ethic***

There is a tendency for scientific medicine, because of its connection with a materialist world-view, to concentrate on the purely physical and chemical aspects of human nature rather than the psychic ones. But if the ultimate aim of humane health-care is to foster personal growth and community then the psychic factors in human life are in fact the more important. Psychologists and psychiatrists do in fact deal more directly with the proper goal of health-care. This is not to suggest that the psychic dimension in health be left to specialists. Rather it must be recognised that there is a psychic dimension to all health problems and to all health-care. This will be especially true of the work of general practitioners, but should be a feature of the specialisations as well.

In this connection we must remember that scientific knowledge, though real knowledge, is always only partial. It is partial, firstly, because it is always changing and usually increasing. But, more importantly, it will always be partial because there is that dimension of our personhood, science is unable to know at all, namely the capacity for thought and choice that makes science possible and judges its results. This dimension is also part of our nature. And although it transcends the observation- and measurement-based knowledge of science we nevertheless have real direct and personal knowledge of it, knowledge we can even make more or less critical and systematic in philosophy, but which is expressed and formulated in a looser way in all the major traditional systems of thought.

This personal and traditional knowledge is especially important for health-care if health-care is to be built on an attitude of reverence and respect for human nature. It is important both positively and negatively. It is important positively for the understanding of health it can provide beyond the reach of science. And it is important negatively because it reminds science of its partiality and ignorance and so encourages an attitude of humility on the part of scientific health-care. This lack of knowledge is especially clear in the case of our understanding of the beginning and the end of human life, of birth and

death, but it is an element in our understanding of human life as such and as a whole.

### ***Ubuntu and the Health-care Ethic***

A health-care ethic that seeks to combine the best of both the European and the African ethical traditions must understand my health as my responsibility as well as that of the community. This is especially true if in fact, as we shall see, this responsibility can only emerge in the relationship between us. I, the patient, am the director and leader of the health-care team. But both of us, me and the team of health-care professionals are responsible for my personal growth and fulfilment and the growth of personal community between us. The ethic of *ubuntu* requires that health-carers are present to those they care for as persons and not simply as functionaries. They have to acquire moral virtues as well as technical skills. They must be committed to those whose health they care for. This in fact is contained in the meaning of the word 'profession'. It means 'vow'. This refers in the first place to the vow made by members of a religious community when they join a monastery or a convent. They take a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience. From then on they are considered 'professed' religious. At 'solemn profession' they take 'final vows', which means they are professed for life. Their aim is a complete commitment. Doctors also take a vow, the 'Hippocratic oath'. And this has a similar meaning, though a more restricted application. And just as professed religious, monks and nuns, are supposed to have a 'calling', a deep inner motivation, in order to sincerely take their vows, so too are those involved in health-care. It can't be 'just a job', a way of making a living, if it is to be an expression of *ubuntu*.

I am going to designate the fundamental interpersonal attitude required by *ubuntu* in health-care as that of 'care'. The quotation marks are intended to emphasize that I use this word in a definite and special sense. In this paper it means what I mean it to mean!

### ***The 'Care' Ethic***

The term 'care' denotes the appropriate personal relation of a person towards a person in need, whether that person be themselves or another. Because we are concerned with health needs we shall focus our analysis of care on this context. In general however the attitude of care is a form of interpersonal

understanding and affirmation, where one of the persons in the relation is seen to be in a state of need of some kind. Unlike the fundamental interpersonal relation of persons that makes us persons, this relationship is thus asymmetrical: one is the carer, the other is the cared for. In what follows I shall assume, unless I say so, that the patient is cared for by others. Because, of course, patients care for themselves, and health-care workers care for each other and themselves. Or should!

Care is an attitude towards a person as a person, namely as a self-determining being. Thus recognition and respect for personal freedom is the moral foundation of health-care. We shall presently see that the effective exercise of one's freedom is dependent on one's empowerment by being known and affirmed by others. So this is a requirement as far as health-care workers are concerned: they must try to gain personal knowledge of their patients as individuals and find in their hearts some way of affirming them as the particular persons that they are. Only then will the patient's participation be characterised by effective freedom. This freedom can then be expressed by what could be called 'informed consent' to the caring relationship. The personal attitude of care will be the medium through which particular items of information and recommendations regarding medical procedures are conveyed so as to really reach and move the patient.

Care is not simply an attitude of a person to a person. Human persons are bodily and social beings. Care in the context of health-care entails the desire actually to do the person good as far as their health is concerned; it is beneficent. The health-care worker enters into relationship with the patient for that purpose, seeking to put themselves at their service to actually improve their health. Such a desire entails the desire to be competent and skillful in the diagnostic and technical aspects of health care. One desires intellectual skills, to know what is best to do. And one desires technical skills, the ability to do it. Care is not to be contrasted with competence.

The desire to promote health, as an ingredient of care, also involves a desire for justice in the distribution of health-care resources, both as regards patients and also for health-carers themselves.

### *The 'Justice' Ethic*

Justice is the virtue of good relationships between persons, not with regard to the relationship itself, but with regard to the plurality of persons involved, even

if only two. There must be some quality of proportion or order (fairness or equality) between persons in relation if the relation is to foster personal growth and community. And this is justice. Persons are of equal, because equally ultimate, value. And this must be reflected in their relationships.

In the world of scarcity, which is the whole of the impersonal and the social order, justice implies equal access to whatever resources there are. For the patient this means being treated on an equal footing with other potential or actual patients, either in general or in relation to a specific illness or medical resource. For the health-carer it means fair treatment regarding work-load and payment. A health-care service animated by the spirit of care as I have defined it would have justice as its guiding light.

Care thus regards the end of health-care, the fostering of personal growth through promoting health. Competence regards the means, which comprise both the science and the technology of medicine, aimed at the maintenance or restoration of the bodily and psychic integrity of the patient. Care is thus the foundation of health care, from which all else follows. It is a total attitude involving the intellect, the will and the emotions. Within it, one can distinguish certain subsidiary virtues of special importance for health-care.

### *Subsidiary Values*

One such virtue could be called the ‘*rescue*’ virtue. This is the willingness to drop all else, including thought of one’s own rights or safety, for the sake of the patient in an emergency situation. Obviously such a refusal to ‘count the cost’ (including the financial cost) must be balanced by a commitment to justice if it is to count as a virtue. But the preparedness for self-sacrifice it involves establishes it as a genuine aspect of *ubuntu* in health-care that can lift the whole sphere of health-care above the merely practical and utilitarian.

An opposite, but equally significant, virtue in health-care could be called ‘*medical modesty*’. Because of the inherent threat in ill-health there is a temptation to make extravagant claims or promises concerning treatment, and to encourage false hopes. Health-care professionals occupy a position of immense power in their field and it is easy to misuse it. Medical modesty brings the health-carer down to the human level and establishes a deeper than merely professional solidarity with the patient. Medical modesty will also moderate the tendency – so very prevalent in commercial health-care – to over-treatment.

The activity that most fully expresses the attitude of care is that which is the active service of the patient's health-care needs as a whole. The nurse is thus the definitive health-care professional. Other functions of a more specialised nature can be fulfilled by workers with more limited competence, but these will only serve the purpose of a humane health-care service to the extent that these workers are also skilled in the practice of nursing and animated by the virtue of care.

Actual health-care practice that approximates to this ethical ideal of health-care is that of the *care associated with the modern hospice movement*. At present, hospice medicine is limited to patients who are terminally ill, usually with some form of cancer. The hospice consists of a network constituted by the homes of the patients centred on a day-care clinic and hospital. The staff consists of a team of medical and other professionals including social workers and ministers of religion. This team 'services' the patients through regular contact in the patients' homes and at the day-care clinic and hospital. To call the hospice centre a clinic is perhaps a misnomer. It is an educational and social centre as well. Patients visit it for a variety of purposes, not only strictly medical ones. There is a library, a chapel, rooms for discussion and other group activity, a cafeteria, and, last but not least, hospital wards where patients stay for stabilisation treatment or, where home care is insufficient or impractical, to die in a milieu of total care.

I have said that hospice health-care is limited to terminally ill cases. It need not be. I see it in fact as a model for all health-care that takes every aspect of the person into account and sees health itself as one of the essential factors in the achievement of personal growth and community.

This concludes our outline of a health-care ethic in which the European and the African ethical traditions play complementary roles. As can be seen I have at times designated this ethic by the African term *ubuntu* in spite of the fact that I see the African and the European ethical insights as complementary. This is because I believe that the African insight that is the foundation of the ethic of *ubuntu*, namely that *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, human beings depend on other human beings for the exercise, development and fulfilment of their human nature, remains true even when the essential feature of our humanity is seen as self-determination. As I have already said, this idea that we are dependent on others for our self-determination appears contradictory. I must now explain why I think that it is not.

## **Self-determination and Other-dependence**

In general it may be supposed that self-determination and other-dependence are opposed. This is certainly true of the physical realm: what is done by one thing or force is not done by another. In the personal sphere it seems otherwise. Two well-known examples suggest this: that of ‘wild children’ (children left to die at birth but growing to physical maturity quite outside all human society) and that of ‘hospitalism’ in babies in orphanages and other institutions. In both cases the absence of other persons, in the first case, and the absence of a caring relationship, in the second, quite prevented the development of those capacities regarded as defining our humanity – conceptual thought, responsible action, personal self-consciousness and self-determination.

These examples suggest the need for certain kinds of relationship with others if our natural capacities, in particular that for conscious self-determination, are to be developed. Phenomenological studies by many different authors go beyond mere suggestiveness and establish the truth of this beyond reasonable doubt. In fact such studies support an even stronger, even more paradoxical, conclusion: the more we are influenced by *certain kinds of* relationship with others the more self-determining we are enabled to be. Our freedom increases in direct rather than inverse relationship to their influence. We are literally empowered to be free.

I think reflection on our own experience can go some way to removing the sharpness of this paradox. Surely we have, all of us, had the experience of being empowered by others to do things we otherwise could not do. With some people, we say, we feel more able to be ourselves. And some of us, I think, have had the experience of affecting others in this way. Further reflection, of a philosophical kind, can, I think, remove the paradox of such inter-personal causality altogether.

If one examines the African conception of persons (that embodied in the saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*) more closely, one realises that the dependence on others involved is quite different from any scientific notion of causality. In fact to call the relationship creative of personal growth ‘dependence’ at all is misleading. One is led to this mistake by the common ‘European’ notion of a thing as a distinct and separate ‘body’. Such bodies (or distinct ‘atoms’) are metaphysically primordial, and relations between them are secondary. For the African ‘relational’ view of persons, persons are ‘present’ in their relationships. Indeed one must think of persons as a complex



of ‘subsistent relations’. The relationship in which two persons meet each other is thus one of mutual ‘transcendence’. Each is present to and in the other and only thus present to and in themselves. If this sounds fanciful I recommend John Heron’s fine essay ‘The Gaze’ (Heron 1970), in which he examines the phenomenon of perceiving the gaze of another, and in particular the experience of mutual gazing: me gazing at you gazing at me. It is the capacity that persons have of transcending their own limitations by becoming present to the thoughts and feelings of another, and also by revealing their own innermost thoughts and feelings to the other, of a real self-transcendence and self-donation, that is the essence of the African conception.

These features of the intersubjective relations of persons reveal a dimension of human nature that transcends the field of scientific investigation and is incompatible with physicalism or any materialist metaphysics. But it is not dualistic either. For the relational view, the strictly personal unity of a human individual subsists through a duality of relationships, a relationship to oneself that consists in self-consciousness and self-determination, and a relationship to what is other than oneself that consists in self-transcendence and self-donation. And the relationship to self is only possible through the relationship to the other, and *vice versa*. Both relations are equally primordial. As a consequence, genuine freedom of the individual cannot be understood as sheer independence. Nor can authentic human community exist without the interdependence of free persons.

## Conclusion

I hope I have done enough in this essay to show how the co-reflection of different cultures on a common practice such as health-care can unearth values that are genuinely complementary because rooted in our common human nature, and that, because of this, the values discovered have a scope beyond that of the particular practice concerned. I have suggested a reason for this, namely a certain limitlessness of our human nature such that no single perspective can exhaust its possibilities. It follows from this that an ongoing conversation between the different cultures and thought-systems of the world is essential if we are to discern in the different spheres of life values that are genuine and genuinely complementary because rooted in our common human nature and so productive of an authentic human coexistence.

## *The Cross-cultural Creation of a Post-Apartheid Health-care Ethic*

I do however wish to make a further, and final, point. It concerns the importance of the African relational view of human nature and the ethic of *ubuntu* it makes possible. It is my view that this ethic, and this alone, provides a framework for authentic human community in a pluralistic world. The African idea that one can only realise oneself, discover one's true identity, in the other, embodies a spirit that is essential for the intercultural co-reflection I have spoken of above. This spirit of openness to the alien, of readiness to assimilate what is foreign, of creative synergy, is typical of Africa. From an economic or political point of view Africa often appears as a kind of 'black hole' in the contemporary international cosmos. Culturally however, it is otherwise. Throughout the twentieth century European culture in its present impoverished form has been taking over the world. Wherever it has gone it has obliterated local cultures one after the other: the Inca culture in South America, that of the First Nation people in the North, Aboriginal culture in Australia, the Maori in New Zealand. No other culture seems able to resist its inexorable advance. In Africa however, to some extent, this has not happened. Indigenous knowledge systems seem to be holding their own. This is certainly the opinion of Tony Balcomb, the scholar to whom I have already referred. He writes as follows:

In Africa it is everywhere – existing alongside, in, or in opposition to, modern forms of knowledge. Westernization, or modernity, has, in many ways, met its match in Africa.

And he concludes that 'one of the reasons for this is perhaps to do with the African way of dealing with the different, the Other, the alien'.

I think he is right. It is the spirit of *ubuntu*. I think it is what we need in South Africa in order to build our rainbow nation. I think it is what we all need, to achieve solidarity in a post-modern world.

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# Can Ethics be Taught?

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## Abstract

The main question of this article, ‘Can Ethics be Taught?’, is a critical reflection on the years I spent in association with Prozesky developing and presenting ethics training modules to a broad cross-section of professional and other groups. It describes the component parts of the workshops, comments on the rationale behind them, and also provides an analysis of both strengths and weaknesses. In a sense this is a critique of the discipline of Applied Ethics, yet at the same time it offers a possible pedagogy for what Prozesky and I would call ‘ethics at the coalface’.

**Keywords:** ethics, ethics training, workshops, strengths, weaknesses, Applied Ethics, pedagogy, integrity, moral/ morality, integrity, authority, culture, religion, case study

The title of this article echoes a question Martin Prozesky and I would frequently hear when conducting ethics training workshops for a variety of groups across the country. Business ethics workshops would often include witty comments like ‘isn’t “business ethics” an oxymoron?’ Humorous at best and cynical at worst, the questions nevertheless raise important concerns, not least the assumptions and prejudices we often bring to discussions on ethics, to say nothing of techniques and approaches to ethics training.

This article, recalling the happy years I spent in collaboration with Martin Prozesky developing and presenting ethics training modules to a cross section of professional and other groups, aims at a critical reflection on my work in developing a pedagogy for ethics training. Describing the component parts of a workshop which I designed, I comment on the rationale behind them,

looking at both strengths and weaknesses. In a sense I am attempting a critique of my own praxis in the discipline of applied ethics and at the same time invite readers to engage critically with the model I present.

Let us begin by putting before us an image. The image is presented in a story told at the very start of the workshop in order to set the tone for the approach I normally followed.

## **Story**

A wealthy and powerful Texan cattle rancher visited South Africa. He wanted to compare his cattle farming methods with those here.

His wanderings brought him to the vast open spaces of the Free State and the Karoo. But he got carried away one day about how things back home were ‘the biggest and best in the world’. He boasted to the South African farmer: ‘On my cattle ranch I have the largest herds of the largest cattle held in vast fields behind the largest fences and the largest gates in the world. But here in your country I see no fences or gates at all, only a couple of old windmills’.

The local farmer listened quietly and then responded with a smile: ‘Ah yes, in your country you build big fences to keep your cattle in. Here in Africa we dig deep wells. And where there’s good water, cattle don’t stray far away’.

This little story contains in essence much of what I want to develop in the presentation. It lays emphasis not on laws and regulations (the fences that keep people and systems ‘in’), but on deep sources that nourish the mind. For me true ethical imagination and all ethics training must lead to ‘deep wells’. In sourcing that well (pun intended) several steps are followed. For the sake of preliminary overview these steps are:

- Reading the moral barometer;
- Drawing a personal moral map;
- Models of integrity;
- Appeal to authoritative sources;
- The contribution of culture;
- The contribution of religions; and
- Case study.

## **Reading the Moral Barometer**

In any interactive workshop or seminar, after introductions and what is termed ‘appropriate self-disclosure’ (more about that later), it is vital in my opinion to get participants to *be* participant as soon as possible. It sends the signal that this will not be a long boring day of listening to lectures. It taps in immediately to collective wisdom and energy. And it also reveals differences of interpretation and perhaps even a few prejudices and stereotypes.

The workshop would begin by trying to establish the level of ethical awareness and practice in the relevant organisation using the image of a barometer, which I would project on an overhead slide or power-point. Explaining that I sought the group’s own analysis of ethos, the culture of ethics (or lack thereof) in its organisation or group, I would also ask that this analysis be situated within a broad national and indeed global context. One may recall here the maxim, ‘think globally, act locally’. It is not enough to simply point fingers at the boss or the company without acknowledging the influence of the national and even the global ethical climate. A barometer is about the weather, changeable as it always is, but using the criterion of measuring atmospheric pressure. Participants would enjoy identifying the high pressures and low pressures of the organisation, and from that estimate the general ethical atmosphere of their workplace.

Sometimes complementary to this exercise and in later years replacing it, I adapted to local circumstances a questionnaire found in Deon Rossouw’s *Business Ethics* (2004). Participants would fill in the questionnaire as quickly as possible (to capture their knee-jerk responses), share their answers with a neighbour, and then we would collate all the scores and work out an aggregate assessment which then became the basis of general discussion. I reproduce the questionnaire here:

**On a scale of 1 – 6 where 1 indicates *total agreement*, and 6, *total disagreement*, please indicate the extent to which ...**

1	You consciously think about ethics and ethical consequences when performing your job	1 2 3 4 5 6
2	You feel equipped to deal with ethical issues	1 2 3 4 5 6

3	There is a general awareness of ethics in your work environment	1 2 3 4 5 6
4	The head of the department is committed to ethics	1 2 3 4 5 6
5	Management is committed to ethics	1 2 3 4 5 6
6	Staff are committed to ethics	1 2 3 4 5 6
7	Ethical role models are present in the institution	1 2 3 4 5 6
8	People actually <i>talk</i> about ethics	1 2 3 4 5 6
9	Ethical behaviour is encouraged	1 2 3 4 5 6
10	The atmosphere in the workplace makes it easy to make ethical decisions	1 2 3 4 5 6
11	Opportunities for <i>unethical</i> behaviour exist	1 2 3 4 5 6

## Drawing a Personal Moral Map

Martin Prozesky would be the first person to agree that attention to conscience is absolutely necessary in the pursuit of ethical wisdom. As he defines it, 'Conscience is the inner voice of ethics, of right and wrong, of good and evil. We can think of it as our built-in guidance system in the search for the good life' (2007:19).

For this next step in the applied ethics workshop, I tried to elicit in participants an examination of the events, situations and personal circumstances that had influenced and shaped their consciences, their moral awareness and transformation. Each of us has a story. So the exercise establishes plurality and diversity as well as commonalities within the group.

As the SANCODE puts it:

Ethical behaviour builds on core moral values while respecting cultural diversity .... Ethics is about personal and individual ethical judgement

.... We regard the moral development of the individual through processes initiated in our homes, in religious settings, and through education and cultural upbringing as essential to moral behaviour in the workplace.

One of my personal ethical principles is never to expect of others what I am not prepared to do myself. This is what I mean by ‘appropriate self-disclosure’. I would start the ball rolling with a personal anecdote.

As a young boy growing up in the 1950s and ‘60s in the capital of apartheid ideology – in Pretoria – I was exposed at an early age to the pain and inhumanity of racism. We were at the dinner table and ‘the girl’ (it is necessary for the sake of this narrative that I retain the racist terminology of the time) came in to inform us that ‘a boy’ (note her own use of the terminology!) was at the kitchen door looking for my father. My dad went through, while, peeping through the kitchen latch, the rest of us watched and eavesdropped. There was a black gentleman, well-dressed in suit and tie. He introduced himself as Doctor Fabian Ribeiro whose priest had referred him to a ‘sympathetic’ attorney (my dad). I will never forget my father’s response: ‘Would you do me the honour of coming in my front door?’ at which he led Dr Ribeiro round the house and in through the front door to the lounge. In time Dr Ribeiro and his wife Florence became close friends of ours. One day Fabian came to the house, agitated and upset. He explained how he had come across a motor accident with people bleeding on the side of the road. He got out to assist, explaining that he was a doctor. But suddenly he found himself punched all over the face and sworn at (in words that those of us who lived through that era will no doubt remember). His comment is something that has stayed with me my whole life: ‘Is a white life not worth being saved by a black doctor’s hand?’

I would tell this story to highlight how personal experience contains within it elements of the learning curve, or the development of conscience. The wonder of the narrative model is that it always encourages reciprocity. In no time others are telling their stories!

This exercise is eminently related to my opening story about fences and wells, namely, that ethics is about tapping into sources before it’s ever about putting up fences. In this instance, what exactly are we tapping into? By telling their stories, participants are sourcing some of the values and principles that make us fully human; that enable us to answer with ever greater maturity the question: Who am I?



The question, ‘Who am I?’ is fundamentally an ethical question. It raises deep issues about what it means to be moral, how we can develop the kind of self that makes ethical choices and what human values we want to live by; or perhaps fail to choose and allow ourselves to be pushed, without respect for freedom and responsibility, without respect for conscience, in the direction that others want us to go, with negative consequences. The opposite can of course be equally true: not to be pushed by parents and teachers but *liberated* by them because of their mature approach to the formation of the young.

Thus in answer to the question, ‘Who am I?’ – while I can say truthfully that I am someone’s son or daughter, someone’s cousin or uncle, someone’s niece or nephew, a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession, I can also say, in virtue of personal integrity and the development of conscience, that I am my own person. One thinks of the wisdom of the Jewish mystic, Susha, who is reported to have said: ‘When I die, God is not going to ask me, why were you not Moses, why were you not Isaiah, but, why were you not Susha?’

The journey to becoming an ethical person flourishes with one’s own embodiment of consciously chosen positive values. This step of the workshop aimed at facilitating expression of this.

## **Models of Integrity**

Lest the above exercise degenerate into a celebration of narcissism it is quickly complemented with an examination of recognised models of integrity, whether historical or contemporary. What I specifically ask participants here to do is draw out the experiences of suffering, adversity and challenge that have helped shape the integrity found in one prominent individual. Nelson Mandela would come readily to mind for most, but I would immediately suggest that they choose someone with whom they are more familiar, either personally (often a parent was chosen) or through reading or study.

Sharing the stories would lead naturally to the emergence of a kind of narrative ‘collage’ of the characteristics of integrity. The advantage of this is to see ethics pertaining to human beings per se – to people of flesh and blood – and not simply to a study of academic theories, as important as they may be but always as secondary to lived experience.

In affirming this step on the journey towards a greater appreciation of ethics, I wonder if the African respect for ancestors can also teach us something

here? This respect has been described somewhere as ‘solidarity in memory’. In the solidarity between the dead and the living, those who remain behind remember among their ancestors both those who were victims of suffering and oppression as well as those whose lives were lived in relative peace yet who worked tirelessly to ensure the best future for later generations. Their collective lifetime experiences are passed on as wisdom to their offspring. In Africa it is precisely in this solidarity in memory with the ancestors that moral norms can be found.

But remembering for edification is not limited to the dead. Those who are still alive are also included in this remembering, especially if they have helped to shape the present in which we now continue to live and work. Elderly people can be fountains of wisdom and moral integrity.

It is in recounting the lives and stories of the living and the dead that we are able to drink from the deep well of moral integrity. It is important to keep the stories of saints, heroes and prophets alive if we are to construct a moral regeneration appropriate to our present reality. The Letter to the Hebrews in the Christian Scriptures states: ‘With such a cloud of witnesses on all sides around us, we should never let go of the hope that we have’ (Heb. 12:1)

Since by this stage of the workshop it has been established that ethics pertains primarily to the personal – both in autobiography and biography – it is now appropriate to explore written and other authoritative sources which are also helpful for building up a culture and a climate of ethical goodness. Person before systems. Yet words of wisdom have their authoritative place.

## **Appeal to Authoritative Sources**

This subtitle may suggest that we’re now going to start building ethical fences. On the contrary, the image of the windmill and the well remains in place. The operative word in this subsection’s title is still ‘sources’. The first written source I would present to participants is the South African Constitution. However, I would immediately add an important qualification: the source of its ethical contribution is not in the letter but in the process, i.e. the origin and spirit of the Constitution.

There is an old story told of a couple of tourists travelling through Ireland. They got lost along the road, and stopped to ask a farmer for directions. He responded: ‘Well if I were you I wouldn’t start from here!’ We can

appreciate the humour. We know very well that as human beings we can only start from where we are.

The exercise of examining and drawing on the South African Constitution would be to consider its *own* starting point. We need to remember its origins. We need to remember what problems and aspirations the Constitution sought to address, and what vision it encapsulates for our society. In short, what are the values and norms encapsulated in the Constitution which our society cherishes and intends to uphold?

The operative word is 'intends'. Intention is one of the key ingredients in any ethical discourse. We retrace our historical steps from the birth of our new democracy, back to the efforts to bring about a peaceful solution to that struggle, back again to the suffering endured by millions in the struggle against apartheid. This is what we mean by the starting point of the Constitution, by its original intent. Not the long hours which lawyers and writers put into drafting the wording of it, but the living witness and stories of countless South Africans who wrote the Constitution with their tears, their sweat, their blood, and their good will. In this sense the Constitution is for us a 'source' for ethical reflection. Its personal dynamic is perhaps best captured in the immortal words of Mandela at his inauguration as president in 1994:

Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long, must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud. Our daily deeds as ordinary South Africans must produce an actual South African reality that will reinforce humanity's belief in justice, strengthen its confidence in the nobility of the human soul and sustain all our hopes for a glorious life for all.

The 'Preamble' to our Constitution is clear in its affirmation of moral values: justice, honour, respect, unity in diversity, healing, improvement of quality of life. To quote a few lines:

We ...

... honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;  
... respect those who have worked to build and develop our country;  
... believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.

The first chapter of the Constitution is founded on the following values (italics my own):

- *Human dignity, equality, advancement of rights and freedoms;*
- *Non-racialism and non-sexism;*
- Supremacy of the Constitution and the *rule of law*; and
- A system of *democratic* government to ensure *accountability, responsiveness and openness.*

Ethics is all about values, and, for the social beings that we are, it is about shared values. What else is our national South African Constitution, but the gathering together of a vast array of ideals, values, hopes and dreams of all the people of this country?

One could describe this gathering together of values and ideals in terms of ‘the common good’. By definition ‘the common good’ is the shared values or goods of a political association. Philosophers describe common good as the sum-total of those conditions of social living, whereby human beings are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their full potential.

As a guide, the notion of the common good helps us to discern the concerns of our society, from environmental problems to the social make-up that is necessary to sustain our communities. The ongoing challenge within South Africa, in response to the diverse needs of all her people, is related to an understanding of the common good. One of the problems is to find values held in common by conflicting parties. I have suggested in this section that the shared desires expressed in our Constitution are a valuable starting point, precisely because that starting point *itself* has deep foundations. It is a nourishing well from which we may drink.

The ethical spirit of the Constitution is captured well by Martin Prozesky when he says that our Constitution engages in ‘a renewed, shared quest for greater well-being, based on a renewed conscience, [and] a renewed ethic that is effective’ (2007:30).

By way of concluding this section, admittedly I have only used the Constitution as an example of an authoritative source. However, my principal interest in developing the above reflections has been method rather than content. Recall my affirmation of ‘original intent’. In the methodology that I propose the primary focus is not on raw text but rather on extrapolating the personal and social dynamic contained within the words of the chosen

authoritative source. The same approach thus applied when the workshop drew on other texts such as the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*; the *King Report on Corporate Governance*; the SA Moral Regeneration Movement's *Charter of Positive Values*; the SANCODE and other ethics codes or vision statements. Unless texts deemed authoritative for good ethics are seen to be written in 'blood, sweat and tears', they will not be worth the paper they are printed on.

There are other wells wherein to source good ethical values: culture and religion. To these we now turn.

## Culture

Martin Prozesky refers briefly in his book, *Conscience*, to the role played by culture in shaping conscience and ethical behaviour, yet he is quick to point out the ambiguities of culture. I agree with him. In my earlier workshops I was probably rather naïve and idealistic in my attitude to culture and its place as a source of ethical wisdom. In particular, post-1994, I had unwittingly romanticised 'African culture' in the belief that a return to its more ancient roots would suddenly produce a new moral society. So, for example, I would promote concepts like 'ubuntu' and 'seriti' which, while remaining valuable sources, I had undoubtedly treated superficially.

This is not to denigrate the crucial contribution of anthropology to ethics. I still want to affirm the historical roots of culture, but for me now there are certain 'riders' to which I will return in due course. But first, a brief journey into the importance of culture in doing ethics in an African context.

If ethics in general is about the strengthening, growth and well-being of life, then in Africa moral action is about the growth of life of the whole community. Where for instance a Western approach may be considered 'conceptual' in Africa it is probably more 'consensual' – striving for consensus. Thus, for example, traditionally the first responsibility of community leaders is to guard the common welfare and to promote the growth of life. But the ethical community in Africa is not restricted to the earthly community. It also includes the invisible world of the living-dead. As Bénézet Bujo states:

The ancestors play an important role in shaping morality. Their task is not exhausted through passing on (physical) life which they did in

their earthly existence. They are still responsible that their offspring remain brave and strong. In addition, the ancestors have set up moral directives for the welfare of their children. These directives reflect the ancestors' experience; they give wisdom and life (1998).

At stake here is the importance of the communal dimension common to all African cultures as a vital source for morality. The human and social sciences have clearly indicated the role that our entire social context plays in the formation of our moral principles and behaviour. All of us owe some allegiance to various groups within our society and this in turn helps to shape moral values – for better or for worse. The praxis of ethics is to focus on the 'for better' part of that statement! The question before us, quite simply, is how the very best of culture and cultures can enhance and regenerate moral values in our society. This step of the workshop aimed to affirm that.

I stated earlier, however, that there were riders to this. Indeed, in this regard I find inspiration in the pastoral exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), a document in which the pope shows a remarkably balanced approach to culture, affirming it yet at the same time pointing out its shortcomings. For example, the pope draws attention to the culture of individualism which not only permeates Western countries but which, thanks to modern media and entertainment, has reached even to most remote areas of other continents. From his own perspective on the 'prevailing culture', Pope Francis sees that 'priority is given to the outwards, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional. What is real gives way to appearances'. Tragically, he says, this often marks a hastened deterioration of people's cultural roots adding the disturbing words: '... and the invasion of ways of thinking and acting proper to other cultures which are economically advanced *but ethically debilitated*' (e.a.).

Pope Francis points to Africa as an example, re-affirming his predecessor John Paul II's lament about attempts to make the African countries 'parts of a machine, cogs in a gigantic wheel', without any 'respect [for] their cultural make-up' (1995:52).

Pope Francis adds another dimension: the loss of a sense of the transcendent, which for him 'has produced a growing deterioration of ethics' and 'a general sense of disorientation' (EG 64). Significantly, the pope does not suggest that the 'transcendent' to which he refers must necessarily be the God of Christianity. Indeed, he has shown through his gestures a profound

respect for people of other faiths or no faith at all. At his first gathering with journalists, for example, instead of the traditional opening prayer he suggested that they all keep a moment of silence, acknowledging that some may not only not be Christians like himself but may in fact be without any faith.

But let us return to his reflections in *Evangelii Gaudium*. He says something which in my view is eminently pertinent to the principal concern of this article.

We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data – all treated as being of equal importance – and which leads to remarkable *superficiality in the area of moral discernment*. In response we need to provide an *education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values* (EG 64 – e.a.).

Apart from the influence of media and entertainment on the development of a corresponding global culture, Pope Francis also refers to the role of the modern metropolis city, where in their daily lives people must often struggle for survival. ‘New cultures are constantly being born in these vast new expanses .... A completely new culture has come to life and continues to grow in the cities’ (EG 73).

Francis does not exclude the rural areas, as I have already pointed out, stating in the same paragraph that these too ‘are being affected by the same cultural changes, which are significantly altering their way of life as well’ (EG 73).

If I may use one of my favourite expressions again: the operative word. In the paragraph above it is ‘changes’. It is operative because it indicates the exact issue that has challenged me out of my idealising of culture in relation to ethics. No longer do I simply see culture in a romantic way as fixed and as a perennial source of ethics. It is something that is forever changing and today globally. Perhaps we need to draw on a bit of evolutionary theory here. How is culture changing? Where is it changing? Into what is it changing? I have suggested that Pope Francis has provided some useful guidelines. Earlier on I suggested that culture is a source of ethics. I now submit the need to acknowledge that culture is in turmoil and in our times is increasingly marked by individualism and superficiality. Yet understood in a differentiated way it remains a necessary source for ethics.

## **Religion**

On the question of religion and its potential as a source of ethics I defer to my mentor, Martin Prozesky. He has made a profound contribution on the role of religions in human history to the discussion of ethics, insisting always on including the term ‘comparative’ – as he did even in the name of the ethics centre he established at UKZN (‘The Unilever Centre for Comparative and Applied Ethics’). Martin has contributed enormously to the value of comparative religion in ethics. But he also notes ambiguities and paradoxes. In his book *Conscience* he has two sub-sections, one entitled *Religion: Blessing and Curse* (2007:27) and one entitled *The Value and Limits of Religious Motivations* (ibid. 67).

Religion in the broadest sense has undoubtedly played a vital role in the development of ethics and spirituality. This is not to deny its potential, through abuse, for fomenting conflict and division as well as apathy. A perfectly valid question often raised by critics of religion is the following: ‘Do we have to be religious to be moral?’ Or framed another way: ‘Do we have to believe in God to be good?’ It is sometimes argued that ethics precedes faith. Human beings, for millennia before they came to any form of belief in a divine being and authority, of necessity had to find ways and means of getting on with each other, of establishing the ‘ground rules’ of social living. In the history of humanity, religion is a relatively recent phenomenon. Social mores existed long before its advent.

Now I’m not trying to put myself out of a job. (I am after all a Catholic priest!). I am merely trying to put the question of religion in proper perspective in relation to ethics. Morality is not and can never be the exclusive prerogative of the religions – the churches, the temples, the synagogues or the mosques. Morality belongs to society as a whole. It belongs to humanity as a whole. I want to suggest that the role religion plays is that of ‘midwife’ – bringing to birth and nourishing moral norms and values rooted in the human heart.

Take South Africa as a small example. Gone are the days when one branch of Christianity – a certain limited Calvinist interpretation – imposed itself through legislation and other ways on the majority of the people, whether it had to do with allowing us to have television (banned until 1976) or fishing on a Sunday. Instead, our Constitution celebrates religious pluralism and diversity. We now have the possibility of mutual enrichment and open dialogue.



A clear example of this was seen at the ‘Morals Summit’ in November of 1999, a national event that brought together politicians and religious leaders in South Africa for commitment to a common code of conduct in religious and political leadership. On that occasion the head of the Jewish community, the late Chief Rabbi Harris, remarked that to his knowledge nowhere else in the world had it be known for religious and political leaders together to meet in such shared commitment to promoting the common good of our society. The advantages of the public witness of religious leaders in dialogue with each other cannot be overestimated.

A final word on the potential role of religion. Mahatma Ghandi, a Hindu, could comfortably quote from scriptures other than his own. It is told that on one occasion, during his travels by train around India prior to independence, he was met at a station by a vast crowd waiting for a word of encouragement from him. He took out his pocket edition of the Christian gospels and read the Beatitudes from the sermon on the mount of Jesus Christ. Afterwards he exclaimed: ‘That is all I have to say’.

## **Case Study**

I am a firm proponent of the case method in applied ethics. It certainly gets energy levels up in group work, but it also serves the important task of relating theory to real life situations. I was introduced to the case method by Robert (Bob) Evans who has written a book on it. I still have my notes from his workshops and draw on them now. For Evans, case studies are one way to capture past occurrences with a view to assist in resolving present ethical dilemmas and choices.

Ethical decisions are made on a number of levels. Individuals follow gut-level intuitions and muddle through situations reactively. This is fine if the individual is caring and the situation is uncomplicated. Mostly, however, making ethical choices is both difficult and complex. There are often conflicting facts. There is the difficulty of abstract reasoning. Application of relevant norms is tricky. Intersecting problems and relationships are noticed. There are always exceptions to the rule. Most challenging of all is the complexity of human relationships!

Case study can help provide some critical distance. As Bob Evans would say, cases help sort out the choices and give the opportunity to move down the path from the identification of norms through the maze of intersecting

facts and exceptions to the selection of the best alternative.

In my workshops I would always provide a broad selection of cases. But the following one always provoked the most discussion and debate:

A Nazi Gestapo officer during World War II approaches the Mother Superior of a convent orphanage and asks her if there are any Jews among the 400 or so orphans (there are in fact dozens of Jewish children among them). She says 'No'. Is she lying?

To my consternation some participants would say that she was wrong to lie, that lying is unethical in all circumstances. Never mind that those Jewish children would be captured and sent to their deaths! However, most participants would argue that the value of human life is higher than simply telling the truth to a man representing an evil system. In ethics one must often choose the greater good (protecting life) over the lesser good (in this case telling the truth). To my delight, however, some participants saw hidden nuances in the case. In the ethical imagination, nuance is often very important. They argued (from the notion of intention) that *de facto* the Gestapo officer was asking: Do you have any Jewish orphans *for execution*? She replied truthfully by saying, 'No (I don't have any Jewish children for your gas chambers)'.

How important are the parentheses! They provide the key to interpreting the case. Using this as a model, the participants would then examine other cases and even present cases of their own.

## **Conclusion**

Keeping to the title of this paper the question remains: Can ethics be taught? What I have shared from my experience conducting ethics workshops is, I suppose, an affirmation that indeed it can. However, I leave the final word to Martin Prozesky. Not only have I been inspired by his passion for ethics, and his passionate teaching of ethics (which means that for him, ethics *can* indeed be taught). I also see in him a model of integrity that speaks louder than words. The Epilogue to his book *Conscience* is more than simply Martin's academic condensation of the values which he believes will give rise to greater global flourishing. I submit that it captures Martin Prozesky's embodiment, in his own person, of the very things he proposes:

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- Be actively concerned for the well-being of all whom you affect;
- Resist the pull of selfish desire;
- Care especially for the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, and the innocent;
- Live honestly, respectfully, justly, and with integrity;
- Seek always to understand;
- Enfold sexuality with love, faithfulness, responsibility, and respect;
- Use freedom kindly;
- Protect the earth and all living things;
- Add beauty to the world; and
- Live as friends.

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### Comment:

The references that follow have been consulted mainly in terms of their respective approaches to comparative and applied ethics. My article, I readily concede, has not attempted to engage with pressing ethical issues, be they economics, sexuality and gender, medical ethics, environmental concerns, politics and other topics. My primary focus has been foundational ethics, and, in this paper a methodology for a pedagogy of ethics.

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# Theology Before and After Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963)

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## Abstract

Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963) may be judged as a bombshell that blew the roof off the church, not because it introduced original thinking, but because it brought to unsuspecting people in the pews some knowledge of the developments that had been taking place for quite some time in academic theology. It initiated the turbulent sixties from which time onwards the slow decline in church allegiance began to accelerate in the Western world. The thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, which Robinson summarized in his book, were themselves simply the twentieth century version of the radical changes in theology made necessary by the advent of the post-Enlightenment world, and which had been set in motion in rather different ways at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Since the Enlightenment brought to humans the freedom to think for themselves – Bonhoeffer labelled this phenomenon 'Humanity's coming of age' – so the theological enterprise gradually changed from being the exposition of divinely revealed dogmas to the human exploration of religious experience. In retrospect, Robinson's book is to be judged a significant marker in a process of ever-changing theological thought.

**Keywords:** J.A.T. Robinson, Post-Enlightenment World, humanity's coming of age, theological thought

Fifty-five ago this year Bishop John Robinson published his little book *Honest to God*. It has been republished in its original form, recently. This book sold

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more quickly and widely than any book of serious theology in the history of the world. I dare to suggest that that record may never be surpassed. Before long its publication had reached a million copies and it was available in 17 languages. Thus no theological book was read so widely as this little volume in the whole of the 20th century. Why was that so?

In some respects it remains a puzzle to this day. It was not because the book was saying anything strikingly new. Those of us engaged in theological teaching at the time found little that was fresh in the book. As we saw it, this book was basically a summarized rehash of the thinking of three theologians whom many of us had been reading and absorbing for some time. We joked that that it had taken an illness to force John Robinson to take time off from his busy ecclesiastical schedule to catch up with his reading.

*First*, he sketched Paul Tillich. Tillich had written two popular and widely read books – *The Shaking of the Foundations* and *The Courage to Be*. The first two volumes of Tillich's massive 3-volume *Systematic Theology* were published in the 1950's, and Robinson quoted from them. In his search to find a satisfying way of understanding the meaning of 'God' he fastened on Tillich's definition of God as 'the ground of our being'. This showed, as Robinson said, that theology is *not* about a particular Being called God but about the ultimate questions posed by our very existence or being.

*Second*, Robinson turned to the impact of Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose letters from a Nazi prison provided a rich collection of seed thoughts that many of us were then mulling over. In particular Robinson was fascinated by Bonhoeffer's new assessment of Jesus as 'the man for others', rather than as a divine figure.

*Thirdly*, but much less prominent, was the influence of Rudolf Bultmann. His demythologising of the New Testament had become known to scholars outside of Germany only after World War II. Then Robinson added a chapter on 'The New Morality', writing with approval of an article by Joseph Fletcher. But Fletcher's book on *Situation Ethics*, which was to cause a stir not unlike that of *Honest to God*, was yet to be written, appearing only in 1966.

Thus Robinson was pulling together the thoughts of a number of theologians who were then at the leading edge of Christian thought. If he had done this in a simpler and more lucid manner than was present in the originals, that would perhaps explain the sudden and widespread interest. But *Honest to God* is not a particularly easy book for the theologically illiterate to read. Some of us were critical of it at the time just for this reason. To us it seemed a bit of

a hotch-potch. Its critics claimed it was woolly and revealed many inconsistencies. Even Robinson himself later said that if he had known it was going to be read so widely he would have written it in a much more accessible style.

So why did it become a runaway bestseller? In small part it was due to a set of chance events surrounding the time of its publication. Not long beforehand, Bishop Robinson had achieved widespread public notoriety over his appearance in a celebrated court case where he publicly defended the publication of the unexpurgated text of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Thus the name of Bishop Robinson was already being bandied about in the public arena and this meant that the journalists were on the alert for anything unusual. So the public press chose to announce the arrival of Robinson's little new book with these words on the billboards – 'Our image of God must go'.

The public impression created from the very beginning was that Robinson was making a break with Christian orthodoxy on the basic issue of the reality of God. Certainly that is made clear on p.13 of the preface where we read, 'Whatever we may accept with the top of our minds, most of us still retain deep down the mental image of 'an old man in the sky'. Certainly, if we keep talking of and praying to, 'Our Father in heaven', how can we avoid having this image of God?

But Robinson was not denying the reality of God but calling for 'a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms' and, for such a recasting, he judged that 'the most fundamental categories of our theology – of God, of the supernatural and of religion itself – must go into the melting'. Yet he was not the first to call for such a radical reconstruction, as we shall presently see. So why the stir?

What *was* new about this book was that it was written by a bishop. Theologians may question and explore, but bishops are expected to be the authoritative guardians of the faith. Moreover it was written in a personal style in which Robinson confessed his own difficulties with orthodox Christian doctrines. He judged them to be expressed in thought-forms and language that had long become obsolete in the world outside of the church. He guessed that his book would surprise some and so he concluded his short preface with these words

What I have tried to say, in a tentative and exploratory way, may seem to be radical, and doubtless to many heretical. The one thing of which

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I am fairly sure is that, in retrospect it will be seen to have erred in not being nearly radical enough.

Those last words have certainly proved to be all too true.

I conclude that it was the personal and public way in which a bishop (already suspected of being a maverick) openly confessed his own doubts that caused this book to ring bells with hundreds of thousands of church-going people. What came over in the book was Robinson's honesty and frankness about his own theological concerns. Many felt so relieved that a bishop was experiencing the same problems as they did with the traditional formulations of the faith.

By the same token the book brought forth a torrent of criticisms, much more than even Robinson had expected to be the case. The Anglican journal, the *Church Times*, commented

It is not every day that a bishop goes on public record as apparently denying almost every Christian doctrine of the church in which he holds office.

What we in theological colleges tended to overlook was the fact that what was already familiar to us was like a sudden blast of cold air to those who had no inkling of what had been going on in theological faculties in the previous few decades. Theology was normally published in hardbacks and in theological jargon that prevented the laymen from having ready access to them. In *Honest to God* some of this was put in a nutshell and published as a paperback. Some of Robinson's critics even complained that, by publishing it as a simple paperback, Robinson was making available to untheologically trained minds the weighty matters of theology they were not yet ready to understand.

So the book gave rise to widespread debate, and within six months the publisher, David Edwards of the SCM press, had published a second book – *The Honest to God Debate*. This put together a selection of the thousand letters to Robinson, many extracts from hundreds of reviews along with articles by David Edwards, David Jenkins, John Macquarrie and Alasdair MacIntyre. The latter, an Oxford philosopher, concluded that Robinson had become an atheist like himself and believed Robinson's desire to restate the faith in modern terms was 'a desperate attempt that cannot succeed'. He thought Robinson's



book simply reflected the changing face of religion in UK. His concluding words were, 'The creed of the English is that there is no God and that it is wise to pray to him from time to time'.

Yes, the book did reflect the changing face of religion, not only in UK but in the whole of the Christian world. One of the reasons it became such a best-seller is that it appeared just at the right time. When we now turn to look at *Honest to God* in its historical context we can see its importance as a marker in an ongoing process. In this respect it was the first of several related events that characterized the decade of the 60's.

This was the year in which Martin Luther King made his epoch-changing address – 'I have a dream'. In 1966 the front cover of Times Magazine drew the attention of the world to the 'Death of God' theologians – Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton and Paul van Buren. In 1966 the Jewish 'Death of God' rabbi, Richard Rubenstein wrote his *After Auschwitz*. Also in 1966 Joseph Fletcher published his *Situation Ethics*. This caused a stir reminiscent of *Honest to God*, and was followed similarly, but in 1968, by a volume documenting the response *The Situation Ethics Debate*.

In the decade of the turbulent 60's was 1966, the year in which we in New Zealand had our own widespread theological debate on the Resurrection of Jesus, culminating in the notorious 'heresy trial' of 1967.

So the '60's proved to be a critical turning point for Western Christianity. As one churchman prophetically remarked, 'Things will never be the same again'. The decline in church attendance began rapidly to accelerate. It was as if *Honest to God* had blown the roof off the church. But though some put the blame on Robinson, and others like him, *Honest to God* was not the cause but only a significant marker in a transition which had started much earlier. Let us now turn to the broader picture of the changing face of religion.

We must go as far back as 1800 or, more specifically, 1799. (See my 1991 booklet, *Religious Trailblazers*, chapter 1.) 1799 was the year in which a rising theological star published a book which caused a stir in Germany not unlike that of *Honest to God*. It was called *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. The latter term referred to the leading lights of the Enlightenment, thinkers such as David Hume, who were subjecting all religious claims to rigorous rational criticism and who were rejecting all appeal to divine revelation.

Written by Friedrich Schleiermacher, this book in its day was much more radical and challenging than *Honest to God*, and yet, instead of being

condemned by critics from within the church. Schleiermacher was hailed as the one who salvaged Christianity from its rationalistic, atheistic critics of the Enlightenment. He was a hospital chaplain at the time he burst into print (anonymously at first) but, before long he was appointed to a Chair of Theology, first at Halle and soon after to one in the newly established University of Berlin, a chair he held until his death.

He was a very popular teacher and preacher who was so highly admired that nearly the whole of Berlin turned out to honour him at his funeral, when he died at the age of 66. His thinking dominated Protestant thought throughout the 19th century, including my own theological teacher John Dickie. Dickie spoke of him as the most creative Christian thinker since the Reformation. Not surprisingly Schleiermacher became known as 'The Father of Protestant Liberalism'.

The widespread approval enjoyed by Schleiermacher while he lived tends to disguise the radical change in religious thought that he pioneered. Indeed, he did not himself appreciate or understand just what he was doing and certainly did not foresee all that his new method would lead to. He was much more of a revolutionary than he intended to be. It was left to others, such as John Dickie, to point to what they referred to as his faults and weaknesses. But Dickie was not nearly as critical as Karl Barth and even warned us against Barth and his revival of what was called Neo-orthodoxy. Karl Barth complained, and perhaps justifiably so, that Schleiermacher's new theological method heralded the end of Christian doctrine. He wrote, 'The question as to how Schleiermacher did not realise that he was destroying Reformation theology is a mystery which cannot be solved'.

Even Schleiermacher retreated somewhat from some of the more surprising statements in his first book when he came to compile his magnum opus – *The Christian Faith*. It is in his first two books, *On Religion* and a little known work *Christmas Eve*, that Schleiermacher, perhaps unintentionally, led theology in a new direction. Only very slowly did that new direction begin to show itself. It was not at all apparent while the momentum of church life carried on as it had in the past. It was still not apparent when I was a theological student in the thirties and forties. That is why the events of the sixties, including *Honest to God* was felt to be such shock – a virtual theological earthquake – for the very foundations of theology were being shaken.

Most of the people in the churches were completely ignorant of how western religious thought underwent a revolution at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a result of two seminal thinkers in Berlin – Hegel the

philosopher and Schleiermacher the theologian. Though very different from each other, they opened up the way for three further pioneer thinkers – Strauss, Feuerbach and Marx. Marx became a communist and militant atheist. Feuerbach came to understand religion as a human phenomenon, even though most important and one on which our very humanity came to depend. Strauss became the pioneer of modern New Testament study and this led to Bultmann and then to Robinson. Tillich became the 20th century equivalent to Schleiermacher in the 19th century and so to Robinson. In the meantime Karl Barth re-established orthodoxy as Neo-orthodoxy by returning to what obtained before Schleiermacher.

But what if one were unaware of those seminal first 50 years of the 19th century? My theological education as late as the early 40's left me in complete ignorance of them, apart from Schleiermacher. And even John Dickie emphasized the faults of Schleiermacher even more than his strengths. If even theological students were left in such ignorance, it means that in the early 60's most people in the pews knew absolutely nothing of the 19th century and what it had led to, until *Honest to God* suddenly came as a bomb shell. For most church people there seemed now to be only two alternatives – traditional Christianity and unbelief (atheism). Robinson appeared to them to be in a no-man's land and moving on the slippery slope towards atheism.

Let me now sketch three ways in which Schleiermacher triggered off the theological changes that led to the bombshell dropped by Robinson. These three features also describe the situation which became more widespread after Robinson and which obtains today.

*First*, Schleiermacher shifted the base on which to engage in the theological enterprise. Traditional theology started from God and the truths which God was believed to have revealed. It was theocentric. (So also was Barth's neo-orthodoxy.) Schleiermacher's new theology started from humankind – from what we experience of the divine. It was anthropocentric. It was basically a shift from the study of divinely revealed truths (Dogmatics) to the study of personal religious experience. It was a shift from the objective to the subjective. (We have a good example of this in Bishop Jack Spong.)

The reason why such a radical shift did not seem to make much difference to begin with is that Schleiermacher and his appreciative supporters were so immersed in Christian orthodoxy that it permeated their minds and thinking as well as their hearts. Yet it was already leading Schleiermacher to make statements such as the following from *On Religion*, which even today may surprise.

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Religion answers a deep need in man. It is neither a metaphysic, nor a morality, but above all feeling .... Dogmas are not, properly speaking, part of religion: it is rather that they are derived from religion.

Then he said,

Belief in God is not necessarily a part of religion; one can conceive of a religion without God, and it would be pure contemplation of the universe.

It did not take long for Feuerbach to realise the consequences of what Schleiermacher had done. He studied for a short time under Schleiermacher but lost interest in preparing for the ministry and turned to philosophy and particularly to Hegel. But, by adopting Schleiermacher's anthropocentric basis for philosophy, he turned Hegel upside down; yet he never acknowledged his debt to Schleiermacher or seemed to be aware of it. He had probably read Schleiermacher's first book though he never says so. There he would have read:

Belief in personal immortality is not necessarily a part of religion .... The desire for personal immortality seems rather to show a lack of religion, since religion assumes a desire to lose oneself in the infinite, rather than to preserve one's own finite self.

It is interesting to find that Feuerbach's first publication, and at the age of 24, was *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*. Perhaps even this was due to the influence of Schleiermacher. But his seminal work was *The Essence of Christianity*. Here he took Schleiermacher's new anthropocentric base for theology to its logical conclusion. He asserted that theology (the study of God), when properly understood for what it really is, is *anthropology* (the study of humanity). Theology is the study of the human condition, of our highest human values, of our hopes and our aspirations. As Feuerbach saw it, the supernatural world acclaimed by Christian orthodoxy was largely the projection of humanity's inner world of ideas and values on to a cosmic backdrop.

That is why Schleiermacher, perhaps unintentionally, opened the way to the study of religion as a human phenomenon. There is a direct route from him also to Rudolph Otto and his seminal book *The Idea of the Holy*. Schleiermacher opened the way for the rise of the disciplines of The Psychology of Religion and

the Sociology of Religion. It also led to Don Cupitt and the Sea of Faith Network.

*Second*, Schleiermacher's switch from a divine starting-point to a human one took theology out of the hands of the authoritative experts – priests and theologians – and democratized it. Theology became a 'do-it-yourself' exercise in which everybody could participate, drawing upon their own inner experience. This is best illustrated by a little known book written by Schleiermacher himself, entitled *Christmas Eve; A Dialogue on the Incarnation* (1806).

In this he describes a homely fireside scene at which a gathering of friends (five women and four men) discuss what the celebration of Christmas means to each of them. They were no experts but ordinary people expressing how they thought about their own religious experience. Moreover, at a time when theology and even group discussion was still regarded as a male preserve, we find it is the women who initiate the discussion.

The women interpret the Nativity scene in the light of their feelings and experience as mothers. One claims, for example, that she regards Mary as a representation of every mother, who sees her own child as an eternal divine child in whom she looks for the first stirrings of the higher spirit. When the men subsequently take over the conversation, it moves to a more philosophical and, at times, impersonal level. Leonard, for example, is even said by his friends to be the 'thinking, reflective, dialectical, over-intellectual man'. He is aware that historical study of the Bible is already introducing uncertainty as to how much is really known about the historical Jesus. He doubts whether the organized church is at all in accordance with what was the intention of Jesus.

Ernst counters this scepticism by seeing Christmas as a universal festival of joy. Its continuing significance rests on what Christians have found to be vital in their own Christian experience and does not depend on whether the biblical story of the birth and life of Jesus is historically true.

In contrast to both, Edward the host is more speculative and mystical. He notes that in the Fourth Gospel there is no mention at all of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem. Rather it affirms that the Word was made flesh – that Word that was with God and *was* God. The significance of Christmas for Edward is that,

what we celebrate is nothing other than ourselves as whole beings, viewed and known from the perspective of the divine....What else is humankind than the very spirit of earth, or life's coming to know itself in its eternal being and in its ever changing process of becoming?

(In 1806, and before the idea of evolution had spread, that was surely a most radical thought!).

Joseph, who arrived later in the evening, is a simple, naive and pious Christian who is rather shocked to find the men arguing almost heatedly on such an occasion. He reacts strongly to the coldly rationalist approach of Leonard and tries to restore some cheerful harmony to the evening, leading the party to end with some singing. It was no doubt quite deliberate on Schleiermacher's part to associate harmonious fellowship with the women, and intellectual discord with the men, just as the little story ended, not with statements of *belief*, but with the *feelings* engendered in a fellowship celebrating their common bonds.

Schleiermacher's little book of 1803 is a fascinating parable of what the theological scene was to become. It uncannily sketches the theological scene in the post-Christian world generally and of the Sea of Faith Network in particular. Today there are no more leading theologians to whom we gratefully turn for the authoritative answers to our questions about the meaning of life. Paul Tillich was perhaps the last creative theologian. There have been a few voices after Tillich, such as John Cobb, John Macquarrie, Gordon Kaufman, and Don Cupitt. In this 21st century academic theology of the traditional style still continues but it is no longer at the leading edge of thought, as it was once, when it claimed to be the Queen of the Sciences. Theology is being marginalized into non-existence. Karl Barth was right in declaring that Schleiermacher's new theological method heralded the end of Christian doctrine.

The *third* way in which Schleiermacher's switch from a divine starting-point to a human one led to the modern situation is that it opened the way for dispensing with the word 'God'. Curiously even Schleiermacher himself saw this when he said:

Belief in God is not necessarily a part of religion; one can conceive of a religion without God, and it would be pure contemplation of the universe.

But to most people then and, for a considerable time thereafter, the idea of 'God' was so axiomatic that it seemed to be indispensable. Even Don Cupitt, as late as 1980, said in *Taking Leave of God*, 'God is a myth we have to have'. Yet, only four years later John Macquarrie said in his Gifford Lectures, *In Search of Deity*,

There was a time in Western society when ‘God’ was an essential part of the everyday vocabulary. But in the West and among educated people throughout the world, this kind of God-talk has virtually ceased. People once knew, or thought they knew, what they meant when they spoke of God, and they spoke of him often. Now in the course of the day’s business we may not mention him at all. The name of God seems to have been retired from our everyday discourse.

In 1999 Don Cupitt made a study of our everyday discourse and he discovered that, as the word ‘God’ ceased to be in use, it was replaced by the word ‘life’. Life has become theologized. He found more than 150 life idioms being commonly used today, many of them quite new such as ‘Get a life!’ He concluded that now that theology has been democratized (thanks to Schleiermacher) it is no longer the academic theologians but ordinary people, speaking out of the experience of living, who have been at the leading edge of ‘theology’. He called this *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* (1999).

## Summary

The theistic image of God had to go. It was too small, too human, too personal, and too objective. ‘God’ remains as a symbolic term referring to all that transcends us, providing unity to the universe we live in.

*Honest to God* was a significant marker in the process by which Western culture moved from its traditional Christian base to its current non-theistic and post-Christian stance. It started with Schleiermacher but only since the 60’s of the twentieth century did it lead to the increasingly rapid decline of the churches. The nature of this transition is particularly visible in the ‘Progressive Christian Churches’ and the Sea of Faith Network. Just as the Enlightenment gave us the freedom to think for ourselves, so, in the realm of theology we in the West are mostly becoming ‘do-it-yourselfers’ today.

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# **‘O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: let the whole earth tremble before him’ (Psalm 96:9)**

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## **Abstract**

My main question in this article is: Is there a place and a future for persons who still hold to the centrality of Christ, or of Jesus of Nazareth, in their lives, but who are agnostic about what traditional Christianity would hold to be central points of dogma or even about the existence of what Cupitt and others have called an ‘objective God’? My view is that the liberal theology which dominated the 1950s and 1960s has given way to more conservative and indeed near fundamentalist views in both Protestant and Catholic Theology. It is to be noted though, that within both evangelical and catholic circles, there is some evidence of a swing back to more liberal views. Most people in the Western world have however lost any link with the church or with institutional Christianity. Yet, according to polls, a surprising number still claim that they ‘pray’ and believe in a ‘higher power’. Movements such as the Sea of Faith, or Progressive Christianity attempt to hold on to Christian imagery and cultus while leaving open the question of whether the concept of God is any more than a human construction. Attendance at Cathedral-type worship where dignified ceremony and beautiful music leave the worshipper free to place his or her own interpretation on the words is steadily increasing. Given this state of affairs, my question is: Does this signify a new form of religious belief, more fluid and less linked to institutional dogma? Following James Fowler, my view is that the direction that the most mature form of faith, is that which acknowledges ambiguity and unknowableness in religious belief. Robert Ellwood also suggests that the Western post-Christian world is moving into what he calls the ‘folk-religion’ stage where persons may follow many different religious beliefs and practices simultaneously in a syncretistic way

without believing any of them in a literal sense, or alternatively believing them all, despite difference and incongruity. Is this the future of religion? Is there a future for a type of Christianity which still reads the scriptures, practices the liturgies, tells the stories but does not necessarily believe that Jesus is God incarnate or indeed that there is any God? These are the issues the chapter addresses.

**Keywords:** agnostic, dogma, God, Liberal Theology, Protestant Theology, Catholic Theology, Sea of Faith, Progressive Christianity, cultus, ambiguity, folk-religion, incarnation

Hugh Mackay, an Australian novelist and social researcher, being interviewed about his book, *The Good Life* (Mackay 2013), described himself as a ‘Christian agnostic’ and said ‘I suspect there are millions of us including many regular churchgoers’ (Rowbotham 2013). He describes the good life as one which is ‘... characterized by goodness, a morally praiseworthy life, a life valuable for its impact on others, a life devoted to the common good’ (Mackay 2013:i).

Mackay does not say in the interview that his commitment to the good life is necessarily undergirded by his ‘Christian agnosticism’ but the two seem to go hand in hand for many. This chapter will explore the phenomenon of Christian agnostics – that is, persons whose ethical and spiritual roots and foundations lie in the historic Christian tradition but who are agnostic about much or all of Christian dogma. It will ask whether Mackay’s assertion that there are many churchgoers who are at heart agnostic is correct, and whether this is a situation that is likely to be tenable in the long run. Is there a place and a future for persons who still hold to the centrality of Christ, or of Jesus of Nazareth, in their lives, but who are agnostic about what traditional Christianity would hold to be central points of dogma or even about the existence of what Cupitt (1984) and others have called an ‘objective God’?

Martin Prozesky, in an article in the local Pietermaritzburg paper *The Witness* (2013), and commenting on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of John Robinson’s *Honest to God* (1963), suggested that Robinson’s belief that the church would best survive by letting go of traditional expressions of doctrine has been proved wrong. Prozesky suggests that instead, liberalism within the church has declined and authoritarian traditionalism is on the increase.

*'O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness ...'*

The situation is, of course, a little more complex than Prozesky could cover in a newspaper article. Traditionalism takes a number of forms; conservative evangelicalism, which is certainly the dominant influence in the Church of England at present, and Pentecostalism, which conservative evangelicalism rejects! Prozesky is certainly correct in his view that the Christian liberalism represented by *Honest to God* (1963), *Soundings* (Vidler 1962), and *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Hick 1977), has waned considerably in influence and that more conservative and traditional views within Catholicism and Protestantism have become the major influences within Christianity.

Yet there are signs that this influence may be waning. While in the Roman Catholic Church the traditionalist views of Pope Benedict VI seemed to offset the advances of Vatican II, the views of Pope Francis seem to be less rigid. Within English evangelicalism voices within evangelicalism like those of Robin Parry (alias Gregory MacDonald 2008) and David Wright are questioning some aspects of evangelical thought. The considerable influence in America of conservative evangelicals like Jim Packer is being brought into question by a raft of new writers such as Clark Pinnock (1990) or Rob Bell (2011).

The waning of conservatism does not mean that liberal theology is coming back into fashion. Many people in Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and even North America, rather than turning to traditionalism, have voted with their feet and no longer attend any church or have any links with 'organized religion' (the same may not be true of Eastern Europe or Africa for different reasons outside of the scope of this chapter).

Yet is this move away from Church the same as secularism? Are these persons now unmoved by Christian symbolism, Christian imagery, Christian liturgy, and the influence of Jesus of Nazareth? Or have they become, as McKay describes himself, Christian agnostics? Richard Dawkins himself, aggressive and self-confident atheist as he claims to be, said in a recent Cambridge Union debate with Rowan Williams that while religion in his view was 'redundant and irrelevant' he was glad to be a 'cultural Anglican'<sup>1</sup>. For those of us brought up in a Christian culture, our language moulded in that of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, Christian poetry, Christian art and Christian

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<sup>1</sup> *The Telegraph* 1 February 2014. Dawkins is an English biologist, and the well-known, and controversial, author of *The God Delusion* (2006).

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music inscribed in our memories, those echoes may still speak to our innermost being although we may find the literal dogma behind them untenable.

It is generally conceded that less people attend church services as each year goes by. A study commissioned by the Church of England noted that attendances have dropped by an average of 1% per annum since the 1930s (Church Growth Research Programme 2013, drawing on Brierley 2005: 2)). Recent Church of England statistics suggest that the decline may have leveled out but the majority of those living in England do not attend church. However, a YouGov survey conducted in England in 2011<sup>2</sup>, with a representative sample size of 64000, suggests some puzzling statistics. 70% of those polled said they had been brought up as Christians, but only 55% described themselves as Christian now. 35% described themselves as very religious or fairly religious, and 34% said they believed in a God though only 20% thought that God ever intervenes in the world. Only 11% said they attended a place of worship monthly or more, and 59% said they never attended. Yet 43% said that they prayed!

This suggests that a considerable proportion of those living in England (and it is likely that a fairly similar situation applies elsewhere in the ‘Western’ world) have a grounding in Christian belief and quite a number still see themselves as Christian, but do not attend organized worship. There are anomalies! Only 20% believe that God intervenes – but 43% pray. 35% say they are at least fairly religious but only 11% worship in church with any kind of regularity. The survey also suggests some degree of muddled thought.

We do not, of course, know what they might have meant by ‘praying’. Did they mean prayer in an emergency such as the sudden diagnosis of a dread disease or prayers to assist when the car keys are unaccountably missing – or did they mean something more meditative; an occasional sense of the sacred, the transcendent, a ‘Someone’ or ‘Something’ providing an undergirding purposefulness, love, thankfulness in life. Are these ‘muddled’ people our Christian agnostics?

A further interesting trend is that although ordinary church attendance in the Church of England has been steadily dropping, attendance at services in English Cathedrals (i.e worshippers rather than tourists) has been steadily

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<https://yougov.polis.cam.ac.uk/sites/youngov.polis.cam.ac.uk/files/Reliigon.pdf>

rising by around 3% per annum since 2000<sup>3</sup>. A columnist in the London *Independent* ascribes this to a desire for anonymity (or more negatively to a desire not to get involved). However, the Church Growth Research Programme suggests the reasons are more complex. Cathedral worship generally involves beautiful music in the context of uplifting buildings and art. The liturgy is often that of the Book of Common Prayer. Weekday services (which have shown the greatest increase) do not usually include sermons. Worshippers are not expected to join Bible Study groups or indeed to express their own personal beliefs at all. Could it be that the increase in attendance is because for some people cathedral-type worship offers an opportunity to be inspired by the tradition, to find the sacred, while allowing each individual to place his or her own interpretation on the words, the art, the music regardless of authoritarian church doctrine. Could many of these be 'Christian agnostics'?

James Fowler (1981) famously described what he called *Stages of Faith*. Building on Piaget's (1954) concept of a child passing through stages of cognitive thought from infancy until adolescence until the child is able to think logically in abstraction, Fowler suggested that in their search for meaning, people pass through a number of stages in their religious thinking, well beyond childhood and adolescence into mature adult hood. Fowler discerned seven stages, the exact details of which subsequent critics have questioned. However, essentially Fowler is describing a life-long process. While first of all, as an infant, a child develops a sense of indifferentiated trust in the world and in people, the child gradually learns the religious tradition of his family and society. Initially the child has a poor understanding of this tradition, with very anthropomorphic ideas about God. In early teenage years the tradition is held to in a very conformist way but now the young person is subconsciously aware of dissonances between the received tradition and the reality of his or her life experience. Gradually, however, at least in the ideal, the maturing person develops a view about life, morality and God which makes personal sense to him or her and which is logically coherent. Nevertheless, further maturation of thought leads to the recognition that in fact reality cannot be rendered wholly logical in such a tidy way, and there is an acknowledgement of paradox, a recognition that the concepts, images and symbols of faith are only partial. 'Truth' is complex and not susceptible to being reduced into what post modernists would call a single Grand Narrative.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre>

This is a somewhat simplistic summary of Fowler's thought, and it is not my concern here to judge whether Fowler is correct in perceiving these stages and in extending to adults Piaget's concepts about the development of cognitive thought in children. This has been widely debated; but the point which is of relevance to this discussion is Fowler's thesis about what he perceives as the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> stages, the stage of 'conjunctive' faith, usually where the individual faces up to the contradictions and paradoxes of what he or she had previously assumed to be religious 'truth', and the stage of 'universalizing' faith in which all religions are seen to be partial expressions of a transcendent and ultimately unknowable truth in all its fullness, this being the basis for treating all people with universal principles of love and justice.

Does this mean that the mark of a religiously mature person – or in this discussion the mark of a religiously mature Christian – is that he or she recognizes that the Christian tradition is only a partial expression of truth to be seen alongside of other equally partial expressions, and that what really matters is not one's dogmatic beliefs but that one lives following universal principles of justice and peace? For many people in the post-modern world this is indeed a description of what is meant by religious maturity and comes close to the quotation from Mackay with which this chapter began. Does religious maturity mean a kind of post-modern rejection of any Grand Narrative as holding the final truth, an acceptance that there are many narratives each of equal worth (or non-worth) and that the only Grand Narrative which is of universal truth is that of the Golden Rule?

Is this a sufficient description of religious maturity? Of course a religiously mature person would be one whose life is (to quote Mackay again) '... characterized by goodness, a morally praiseworthy life, a life valuable for its impact on others, a life devoted to the common good'. But is the religiously mature person one who has outgrown the religious tradition and left it behind as just one Grand Narrative among many? Has the idea of the 'common good' become a Grand Narrative in itself? Or does the religious tradition in some way undergird and support an ethical consciousness in a unique manner?

Another writer on religious stages is Robert Ellwood, only he prefers to use the phrase 'Cycles of Faith'. His book of that title (Ellwood 2003) is largely an expansion of the book which he wrote earlier following a visit to Cape Town and Natal (Ellwood 1988). Ellwood's question is whether religion will survive, and in what form, in the future.

We live in a Western society which largely assumes that religious faith

is generally dying. Is this in fact true? Ellwood points out that not everyone believes that the sea of faith is ebbing away, to use Cupitt's famous phrase based on the Matthew Arnold poem. Some people think that truly religious believers are just as numerous now as they ever were although more people in earlier generations may have espoused religious belief in a superficial way. Others, following the general post-Darwinian belief in evolution, believe that religious faith, too, is evolving as humans gradually become more spiritual.

Yet it cannot be denied that less people than previously feel the need for religious institutions or external religious structures. Ellwood suggests that while even 50 years ago religious leaders in Western society were seen as influential, important and on a par with persons who were important in a more secular way, this is no longer the case. Though religious belief and practice certainly continue to exist, religious institutions and religious leaders have become marginalized in that society. 'Can Christianity, or any organized religion, maintain itself in a pluralistic, computerized age', he asks (Ellwood 1988:13). Certainly evangelical Christianity and Pentecostal Christianity thrive still in other parts of the world such as sub-Saharan Africa, but is this only temporary while these cultures move from the pre-modern to the modern to the post modern?

Basing his comments on five great world religions, i.e. Buddhism, Chinese religion, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, Ellwood suggests that most 'great religions' pass through five stages or cycles, though not simultaneously because the respective dates of the founders differ so much. Each phase lasts around five centuries.

There is the **Apostolic** stage, covering the lifetime of the founder and the first few generations of followers. In this stage the new religion is precarious, often persecuted, dwelling 'within the womb of an older spiritual culture' (Ellwood 1988:64). Yet the new religion, while socially and politically marginal, is quickly perceived by the growing number of followers to provide more congruency with their actual living conditions than the older culture with its gods and its ritual. The older culture slowly ebbs away as the new religion takes root.

As the number of adherents grows, we come to the **Imperial** stage, or the **Wisdom** stage. The new religion becomes the dominant religion in the society, often imposed by societal leaders. But in order to be a state religion it has to make many accommodations to meet the spiritual expectations of a wide cross-section of society and in order to be compatible with ruling philosophies.



Ritual, or what Ellwood calls cosmic and metaphysical world views, become more important than the historical life and teaching of the founder.

Then there is the **Devotional** stage. In this stage the system-making program implicit in the previous stage reaches its climax but is assimilated by the ordinary people, simplified and sentimentalized. Within Christianity Ellwood offers the example of Francis of Assisi, or the growing intense devotion during the Middle Ages to the Virgin Mary. Yet the differing personal devotional patterns and paths lay the foundation for splits which lie ahead in the next stage.

This is the stage of **Reformation**. The religion splits into factions. There is further simplification of the religion, but essentially the stage of reformation is a stage of reaction to a world that has changed since the foundational and imperial stages. Within the Christian tradition that meant adapting to new political realities, the rise of the middle class, the rise of nationalism. It is a turbulent and contested stage but it brings a new vitality to religion for a period.

As religion is increasingly laicized and popularized the control exercised by the religious hierarchy over the tradition and the teaching is progressively weakened. Thus the foundations are laid for the fifth stage, that of **Folk Religion**. This is, in Ellwood's view, the terminal stage of a great religion, though it may continue to linger on for some centuries. Religious attitudes, practices and institutions are preserved in families and local communities but have little rapport with the major social structures (Ellwood 1988:44).

In Ellwood's view, Chinese religion and Buddhism as the older of the five Great Religions are the exemplars of folk religion, but Christianity and Hinduism are now entering that stage. Islam is many years younger and is really in the Reformation stage.

Ellwood illustrates his concept of folk religion by referring to Robert Redfield's concept of Great and Little Tradition (Redfield 1956 quoted by Ellwood 1988: 118). Great Tradition is highly literate, engaged in scriptural exegesis and interpretation, its leaders are highly educated in the same universities and to the same level as the secular societal leaders.

The Great Tradition takes a long perspective and values institutional stability. It tends in fact to emphasize the historical rather than the cosmic aspects of the religious world view, to prefer intellectual sophistication to unbridled feeling, to mistrust of charismatic

*‘O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness ...’*

personalities and to value interaction with the society’s ‘mainstream’ cultural and social life. It loves excellence in religious art and architecture and those who patronize such excellence (Ellwood 1988:119).

The Little Tradition on the other hand does not greatly value the institution as such, tends to compartmentalize religion and civil society without emphasis on meshing religious views with ‘mainstream’ cultural life. It is mostly non-literate, centred around festivals and family ceremonies, valuing the miraculous and mystical. It takes its symbols, its stories, its festivals from the Great Tradition but without the philosophical underpinning or the firm religious hierarchy, and places its emphasis on personal devotion developed in a personal way.

Ellwood concedes that modern Christianity in its emergent folk religion form is not non-literate, but it is anti-academic. Those aspects of Christianity which are presently dominant are indicative of a move towards folk religion. ‘The emergent vitality of evangelical, Pentecostal and conservative Catholic forms of Christianity and the diminishing of liberal Christianity are sure signs of the tradition’s passage from Reformation to Folk Religion styles’ (Ellwood 2003:146).

Folk Religion, then, according to Ellwood, is a religious style which picks stories, myths and symbols as well as festivals from the Great Tradition but is not bound by the rigidity nor the authority of the Great Tradition. It emphasizes the personal, the miraculous, the charismatic rather than the philosophical. Individuals will feel free to interpret the scriptures and the Grand Narrative in their own way, with not too much regard for logical coherence. It is consequently, as we have noted, somewhat anti-academic.

The important thing, however, about Folk Religion is that while the Great Tradition may become moribund, the Little Tradition can continue to flourish long after the Great Tradition has died. Being less interested in philosophy or academic study, and being largely on the margins of political decision making, it is more or less impervious to fashionable views of the ruling elite.

Ellwood therefore believes that the widespread belief that Western society is becoming more secular is an oversimplification. Christianity as Folk Religion will persist for a long time. It will not command respect from the ruling elite, or necessarily result in full church pews. But religious rites to

celebrate family occasions and rites of passage, popular religious festivals with the associated stories, belief in angels and spirit guides and the like, prayer in illness or drought or disaster, will continue for some generations at least. Television evangelists will continue to draw large audiences. Angus Buchan and preachers like him will draw crowds.

For modern popular Christianity as for folk religion, religious communication from scripture, testimony or preacher is *essentially* miraculous, experiential and charismatic. The words of the Bible are miracle-producing charms, not historical texts whose exegesis require persons of elite education; the revivalist or TV preacher is a shaman evoking an Other World of miracle and meaning, not a lecturer whose words require reasoned reflection (Ellwood 2003:150).

Yet we might ask, why this is the case. Why do many people still hold to religious beliefs and practices, albeit beliefs which may be a ‘hodge-podge’ of beliefs only loosely connected to the scholarly Christian tradition. Is it because they feel disempowered and directionless in a complex and dangerous world, or is it, as Otto famously said, that humans long for the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the sense of something beyond ourselves which evokes awe and draws us in? We note that Ellwood mentions both ‘miracle’ and ‘meaning’. These two words seem to me to cover two quite different concepts. Are people looking for *miracles* in a world where they feel disempowered and insecure? Or are they looking for a *meaning* beyond the immediate world of sensory and objective experience? Perhaps these are two different searches, for two different classes of person.

I want to differ somewhat from Ellwood. I recognize, as we all must, the ‘Little Tradition’ of which he speaks, the often inchoate, sentimental, miracle-seeking religion which picks and chooses bits and pieces from the Christian tradition with little heed to logic or congruence. Ellwood is surely right in suggesting that in this form Christian belief and practice is likely to persist for a long time, rather than the secular non-religious outlook which some have said is the future of religion. Yet in Ellwood there seems to be a certain patronization of this and of what he terms Folk Religion, a simple religion for simple people.

*First* of all, we must take care not to conflate evangelicalism and the kind of Folk Religion described above. Not all evangelicals are anti-academic

or afraid of deep scholarship even though their views may not currently command respect from academic theology and philosophy. Though I do not agree with them, I would not presume to patronize Tom Wright or Alvin Plantinga, who understand theological scholarship and philosophy better than I.

*Secondly*, there are groups calling themselves ‘Christian’ which are highly literate, highly sophisticated, fully in touch with the modern world and its complexity, who can no longer ignore the dissonance between traditional theology and the modern experience of life but for whom the Christian symbols, images and rituals still speak. These are not simple people seeking a simple religion. Nor are they seeking miracles. But they are seeking meaning, and in their view the Christian tradition offers concepts and images which contribute to their search for life’s deeper meaning. They do not believe some, or perhaps any, of the traditional dogmas. They are Christian agnostics.

They are indeed varied. Some attend church – like the Cathedral worshippers to whom we referred earlier in the chapter, people who find that the beauty and the imagery of Christian music, ritual and literature still speak to them of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. They are agnostic about core Christian beliefs, but if the beliefs are taken as images, poetic attempts to encapsulate that which is beyond encapsulation then they still speak to them of the sacred.

Some have become secular Christians. Their emphasis is less on worship and the experience of the sacred in church worship but on ethics. Following Don Cupitt (1984), there is the Sea of Faith movement with its annual conferences in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Those within the movement come from many backgrounds – Church of England vicars, Quakers, Unitarians, persons with no ecclesiastical connection but who still regard themselves as Christians. They do not believe there is a personal God, or at least are not sure that there is a personal God, but they are not ‘merely’ secular for the tradition still moulds them and gives shape and purpose to their longing for justice and love. Related to the Sea of Faith movement but having an independent origin there is the considerable following in New Zealand of Professor Lloyd Geering (recently made Professor Sir Lloyd Geering).

There is the Progressive Christianity movement who declare that,

By calling ourselves progressive Christians we mean that we are Christians who ...

1. Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life;
2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey; ....
- ....
6. Strive for peace and justice among all people;
7. Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth;
8. Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.

These movements do not seem to me to be the same as Ellwood's folk religion. They do seem to fall into the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> 'stages' of religious faith that Fowler described. It is tempting to say that this is the face of religion in the future – a highly ethical world view, tolerant of differences in the perception of 'truth' yet reaching out for that sense of absolute truth of which at present we only sense as shadow. But can they last, with any connection with Christianity? Or is the search too intellectual, too cerebral, to meet the situation of most people?

I suspect this is the case. Those increased numbers attending Cathedral worship (though I number myself among them) are a small minority. Those attending Sea of Faith conferences, in my experience, are mostly middle-aged to elderly people with a background in church membership and worship, and will probably not be replaced by a younger generation without this background. In future, 'Christian' agnostics will become simply agnostics. Yet the itch, the longing, for a reality beyond the merely secular will persist. A Folk Religion version of Christianity may meet the need for many for a while. But the future shape of religion remains uncertain.

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# ‘What makes you think Theology is a subject?’

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on a topic, that is captured in a question that Richard Dawkins raised in 1993: ‘What makes you think Theology is a subject?’ My view is that this question is a symptom of how Theology is under attack from many quarters today – from the fearful believers who see it as a threat to their faith, to the secularists who see it as a threat to truth. Foremost among the opponents is Richard Dawkins. Outraged by a donation to Cambridge for the study of theology, he contrasts the usefulness of science with the uselessness of Theology. The question though, is: What is Theology? In this chapter, I draw a distinction between Confessional Theology and Critical Theology. By Confessional Theology I mean the affirmation of an exclusive point of reference by which all other claims to authority and knowledge are judged. Thus Christians ‘confess Jesus Christ is Lord’, and Confessional Theology is the rational articulation of the Christian Faith from within the circle of Faith – the convictions, experiences, and hopes grounded in the story of Jesus and characterized by commitment and involvement. However, there are ways in which both scientists and theologians, and the two types of Theology, can go wrong.

**Keywords:** Theology, Richard Dawkins, science, Confessional Theology, Critical Theology, Christian Faith

It’s not so very long since proposing Theology as an academic subject could provoke passionate indignation. To quote,

What has Theology ever said that was of the smallest use to anybody? ... If all the achievements of theologians were wiped out tomorrow, would anyone notice the smallest difference? ... Even the bad achievements of science ... work. The achievements of theologians don't do anything, don't affect anything, don't achieve anything, don't even mean anything. What makes you think 'theology' is a subject at all? (Dawkins 1993).

Before they run for cover Theology teachers may justifiably pause to examine more closely this outburst in which we may recognize the familiar voice of Professor Richard Dawkins. On this occasion he was reacting to the news of a recent endowment of a lectureship in Theology and Natural Sciences at Cambridge. But he speaks for many, as the continuing debate has shown, though its failure to distinguish between religion and theology, and different kinds of theology leaves gaps that need to be filled. I suspect that there may still be some in this University (i.e. Oxford), who think much the same way as Professor Dawkins. At worst they think Theology is a meaningless or even harmful non-subject, which ought to be put down, or at best left in an outhouse for a few odd people to study and teach for old time's sake.

The issue I want to address now is Theology at Oxford. For a start I would like to draw a distinction between 'Confessional theology' and 'Critical theology'. They are certainly not unrelated, yet distinct. By contrasting confessional and critical theology I do not wish to imply that the latter is rational and the former is not, but that they both use reason but in different ways. 'Confessional Theology' on the one hand focuses on a particular object of commitment and devotion – Jesus Christ in the case of Christianity. Christians are those who 'confess' 'Jesus Christ as Lord'. Confessional Theology employs reason to give coherent expression to the convictions, experiences, and hopes that are grounded, in the story of Jesus Nazareth, and which give shape to Christian life. It is a task undertaken in the belief that that story points to the mysterious reality on which the ultimate meaning and goal, not only of human existence but of the cosmos, depends; not only so, but that through that story and the person it is about, a way is opened into relationship with that ultimate reality that empowers all life.

The character of confessional theology is commitment and involvement. Maybe that is why it can spread such alarm in a secular



society, where, though ideals of freedom of thought and speech are cherished, commitment of any kind is often suspect, and where religious commitment above all is too easily assumed to mean blind fanaticism.

In contrast to Confessional Theology, Critical Theology is characterized by detachment rather than by commitment. As such it is the often unrecognised ally of philosophy and science – at their best in being rationally motivated – in its championing of free thought and speech, in its readiness to subject every belief, tradition, document, formulation, institution, experience, and conviction to critical examination. It will not swallow scientific theories uncritically, but will acknowledge the valid insights of the physical, biological, and human sciences. In doing so, Critical Theology shares with scientists a passionate concern for truth. So what's gone wrong? Why are we at odds? I suspect we are both to blame. Christians, and that can include theologians, profess to worship the God of truth. Therefore they should have nothing to fear from truth from whatever quarter it is disclosed. So why they are so frightened so much of the time?! One reason may be the fact that Christians, like everyone else, have to use the language and ideas of their age to express their convictions and make sense of their beliefs. The danger lies in mistaking the ship for its cargo, the provisional conceptual framework for the ultimate truth it carries.

When science in its search for truth, not simply for things that work, shatters the inherited framework, a fearful Christian faith digs its heels in, mistakes itself for science, and ends up as bad theology or unworkable science, or both – unworkable, because untrue. It is then all too likely to mistake its obstinate resistance to new insight, for faith, and to dismiss openness to new understanding, as surrender to trendy fashion. A theology reacting in this way betrays itself and deserves its scornful repudiation.

Of course; it's unfair to criticise the abstraction 'theology' for every misconception held by theologians down the centuries about evolution, or the origin of the universe or causes of disease, when there was no-one at the time able to offer plausible alternative views, and scientists themselves hadn't even evolved! It is fair, though, to criticize those who cling to ancient misconceptions in the name of the Creator in the face of what scientists have discovered about the creation – discoveries validated in many cases because they have led to things that work.

But if theologians have at times gone wrong, so have scientists – some at least, including those secularists who look to science and to human

reason alone as the way, the truth and the life. That is one fault for a start, when science mistakes itself for theology and pronounces upon ultimate questions far beyond the remit of its own methodology, as, for example, Nobel Prize winner, Jacques Monod did at the end of *Chance and Necessity* (1971). That is when science becomes pseudo religion. In its enthusiasm to consign heretics to the flames, or at least the rubbish dump, it is sometimes on a par with intolerant, triumphalist religion at its worst.

Scientists are at fault too if they mistake what theology is and castigate it for not being natural science – it isn’t and isn’t meant to be. They are at fault again if they fail to distinguish between confessional theology, which rests on shared axioms of faith, and has its place in a community of faith, and critical theology, which is willing to examine and test even its own axioms in the open arena of intellectual inquiry. They are at fault if they lazily mock out of date theology while celebrating the latest findings of science, or if they make no effort to distinguish fearful or bad theology from good theology. Good and bad theology ought to be as carefully distinguished as good and bad science.

One of the responses to the original letter I quoted came from Nicos Mouzilis (1993), Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics. He wrote,

... To compare science to theology in such a manner is like trying to prove that a hammer is more effective in making chairs than a lily.

He continues,

This constitutes an excellent example of how intelligent people can portray a total lack of imagination when they, tread into a discipline that is qualitatively different from their own.

But then the question is, What is qualitatively different about theology? What is it meant to be or do? Here I approach it as a University discipline, but also as more than that. To go back to its roots, Theology is the study of *theos*, God. Before the critics run off complaining ‘There’s no such thing as God and therefore no such subject as Theology’, I beg them to pause and hear two pleas in its defence.

First I would say, whether God is real or not, the fact remains that belief in God, more particularly, the Christian God, has shaped our history, our culture, our values. A critical examination of the origins and development of Christianity is a valid undertaking in any University, not least at Oxford.

There's force in this argument; it's the reason why quite a few people who are not religiously committed undertake the study of Theology. The defence of Theology as virtually a branch of history was a useful survival strategy in the heyday of logical positivism. 'God-talk' might be deemed strictly meaningless, but no one could deny that 'God' had been 'talked', and the critical historical, scientific investigation of when and how this had been going on could pass muster even in a secular university. Recognition of the importance of this wider context explains why the Faculty of Theology at Oxford has recently changed its title to the 'Faculty of Theology and Religion'. It explains why at the same time, this approach gave scope for the religious minded not only to acquire the intellectual skills proper to any Arts degree, but to pick up quite a bit of what they needed to know as the background and basis of the Christian faith.

But the weakness of this defence lies precisely in its reductionism, in the danger of categorizing Theology as just one subject among others, and very much a minority subject, which can take its place alongside other disciplines. This would be a disaster because though it is another arts subject, it is qualitatively different.

Here I make my *second* plea. Theology is not just history; it answers to something which other subjects do not answer to. Whether we think God exists or not, human beings do have a sense and taste and yearning for the infinite. They do ask why there is something and not nothing, and what is the meaning and purpose of life. Theology is the context in which such questions are raised and addressed, whether from a confessional or critical point of view. Each has its own perspective: both stand to gain from respecting each other rather than aiming to dominate or eliminate the other.

Not long ago a young woman in her first year said to me 'I can't understand why so many people aren't aware of their spirituality!' Or is the problem rather that so many people dare not admit their spirituality? because it's unfashionable, perhaps, or because they have been taught by those who are sure that nothing can be real or true which is not open to laboratory experimentation, or simply because it has been hitched to some folkway

thinking – an old man in the sky, for instance – so that if that goes, it must go too. But if the yearning for spiritual reality, for depth in life, is there, but denies a transcendent perception as its object, it is all too likely to break out in alternative bizarre and even dangerous ideological forms.

Cults are one example, especially when they isolate themselves from the world, as in the tragedy at Waco (cf. Docherty 2001). Modern day pilgrimages are another, like those to Elvis Presley's house, with its candlelight vigil on the anniversary of his death. David Lodge in the *Sunday Times* saw this as 'an expression of a human longing for transcendence ... which if diverted from orthodox religious traditions, will manifest itself in heterodox or secularized forms'. Such longing of course, neither proves nor disproves the reality of the object of longing.

Many of these secularized alternatives to religious traditions are relatively harmless, but many are not. There are various movements today which witness to some valid truth or good, but when they attempt to fill completely with their partial truths the spiritual vacuum left by God's expulsion, they become unhelpful, or even damaging, if not violent and destructive. One might think here of certain Animal Rights or anti-abortion, or ecology extremists. Whatever truth or value they stand for, often courageously, they betray, when they claim to be or to have the absolute truth.

There will be more causes like these and they will not be harmless. The shallowness of individualist consumerist culture will definitely in future lead more and more people to search for depth and meaning, for something worthy of total sacrifice and commitment. Without forms of worthy social interaction, and caring assistance, they might become victims of a variety of forms of powerful absolutes, which may not serve their best interests, nor that of community, society, or the world at large. So, in whose name can false absolutes be exposed and judged? Science has no means of fending them off. Indeed, it often helps create them. A science that worked, and produced some of the most significant electronic, mechanical, and industrial advances our world has ever seen, served the false gods that produced Auschwitz-Birkenau with its cynical slogan of 'Arbeit macht frei'. Science as such cannot expose or refute false gods, any more than theology can unravel DNA or explain the Big Bang. Their tasks are different, and remain different even if they meet in some exceptional individuals.

It might still be argued that we do not need Theology to fend off false absolutes, because critical philosophy since the Enlightenment, has succeeded very well in doing this by relativizing improper claims to final truth and value, both inside and outside Christianity. I gladly give credit where it's due, but though relativism is an excellent weapon against false gods, it offers no answer to the persistent question of transcendence, and no pathway towards a deeper understanding in which all life and experience may be comprehended. If God-talk is in fact transcendence talk or depth talk, then the loss of all God-talk, true or false, under the dead hand of relativism means the loss of transcendence, the loss of depth, the trivialisation of everything because nothing is allowed to count more than anything else, which means in the end nothing truly counts at all.

Relativism itself can become a false god, an absolute, but absolute relativism is not only difficult, but impossible, a contradiction in terms. It merely serves as a cloak under which hidden absolutes lurk with more or less capacity for good or ill, depending on the unacknowledged influences that have shaped them. In a Christian society these may in some measure have worked for good, though certainly not to perfection! In a post-Christian society we cannot assume that hidden absolutes will be shaped by goodness or work for humanity's good. Rather, these absolutes themselves, especially the hidden absolutes, in conflict, should be put under scrutiny and collectively, and interactively engaged and responsively studied.

Hidden absolutes are in fact the support and privilege of individualism. Communities need the support of shared absolutes and ideals, as our society is just beginning to realise in a bit of a panic. In the wider world, the collapse of Communism as the key to wholeness and meaning in communal life has left the field open not just to individualism, as the West naively hoped, but to other communal absolutes, from street gangs to terrorist movements to horrific nationalisms. Whether we believe God exists or not, there is a spiritual energy that flows through human life, which, if it flows into the wrong channels can be appallingly destructive. Just wishing it wasn't there or ignoring it, or, even trying to crush it through force, will not remove or tame it.

Oxford colleges are not yet the places where the worst turmoil is likely to be witnessed, but the young men and women being educated there

will go into a post cold war world which is potentially even more dangerous – where they may experience the collapse of values and the fragmentation of society, or alternatively, be met with powerful claims to their lives and allegiance, where either way they are likely to be involved in decisions or in actions provoked by the pursuit of transcendence or the claims of professed absolutes, or by the random violence of those who have lost hope.

Critical theology is the context in which questions of the meaning of transcendence, the experience of depth, and the claims of the ultimate are raised, talked about, tested and explored. As a subject it certainly requires many skills and a lot of basic spadework in history, languages, literature, philosophy, and psychology and sociology. But, it does not stop there, because human beings do not stop there. They ask, What does it mean for me? Where do I go from here?

The best defence against false, fraudulent, dangerous theologies is not science, or even psychology or sociology, but a critical, historically aware, questioning theology which engages with the world we all inhabit and does not hide from it, but which also takes spiritual yearning seriously and does not simply try to explain it away or dismiss it with contempt, or abandon all hope of moving nearer to its object.

Critical theology in the Christian tradition dares to face up to questions of ultimacy, and to examine its own foundations ruthlessly, more ruthlessly perhaps than any other discipline. It can be assisted in this task by those who are not personally committed to the Christian faith, and by those who stand in different traditions of it. Despite the traditional hostility to theology of both kinds, Confessional and Critical, in some quarters, exciting new ways of doing Theology at Oxford are opening the door to theologians of either sex or of any denomination or none. It would be tragic if colleges chose this moment to close their doors, whether as a result of financial worries – which we all face – or simply due to out-of-date misguided ideas over what Theology is.

As an example of wrong thinking on this score, I can mention a remark once made to an undergraduate reading Philosophy and Theology. She told me that her philosophy tutor had asked her, 'How can you bear to do philosophy alongside a subject which doesn't let you think for yourself?' That remark betrays culpable ignorance, even if there do

exist some kinds of so-called theology elsewhere that might incur the charge. I do not want to over-romanticise theology as a subject. Like any other it is hard academic grind much of the time, but it does make you think, and it makes you think at some point about what is of ultimate importance. That is its distinctive quality.

The alternative to bad theologies is not no theology, but good, critical theology, because the questions and issues will not go away. And this country, and the world at large, needs good Theology, not just in its Churches, but in its universities, schools and public life. And, what would an academic curriculum look like that left no room for human beings to engage with the deepest issues they encounter? Where an ephemeral Utilitarianism had driven out all talk of the spiritual and eternal? There need to be undergraduate and graduate theologians not only engaging with the subject, but in their colleges testing and being tested by their friends in every other subject, testing every claim to ultimacy in relation to every discovery of science, and against every new perception of truth arising through the human mind or spirit. Dare we add that the same should be happening in every Senior Common Room too?

If that happens in our various educational institutions, then not only our theologians but all our students may find more point and meaning in what they are doing here in Oxford and be better equipped to unmask and resist evil, and to recognise and bring good to effect, which is a far cry from seeing religion as merely a handmaid to middle-class morality. It is time theology came out of the closet into which an impoverished secularism and scientism have tried to squeeze it, and where it has sometimes tried to hide itself; it should rather be given and be ready to accept its qualitatively unique place in a modern university.

It may be that out of the study, analysis, and critical questioning of the Christian tradition in particular, some people will arrive at the conviction that it is the bearer of the truth that can satisfy the deepest yearning of the human spirit and heal its wounds. They may want to go on to try and articulate its meaning and implications in terms of Confessional Theology, whether inside or outside the University. But Confessional Theology can never afford to leave Critical Theology behind, because without it, Theology isolated from the world, sinks into superstition.

*'What makes you think Theology is a subject?'*

Confessional Theology itself does not claim perfect knowledge, nor does it peddle instant certainties. Rather, it springs from the faith that has the courage to accept doubts rather than repress them. Repressed doubt is the high road to fanaticism. Christian faith by contrast is open to new truth and new life wherever it is manifested. It shares with science a faith in the rational structure of reality, but believes that the life giving truth about ourselves and our world flows ultimately through and from the person of Jesus Christ, in a way that does seem to work and achieve quite a lot, and is not at war with the truths revealed by science. Those who believe that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, cannot easily suppose that those who are passionately concerned for truth, are far from God.

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# God and Universities

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## **Abstract**

In this article, ‘God and Universities’, I argue that the exclusion of God from contemporary academia did not come about because of evidence or argument. Rather, it is due to the fact that the scientific adherence to the treatment of the objective world as self-contained, was increasingly applied to everything. Also the limiting of acceptable thinking to topics falling within one academic discipline or another had no place for continuing a discussion of the topic. The self-assurance of academia is beginning to weaken. The exclusion of God as a causal factor, is part of the exclusion of purpose including human purpose. This leads to implausible explanations that are assumed to be needed but rarely explicitly defended. If the evidence for the importance of subjective experience is allowed, the door will be opened to changes that eventually could reinstate God.

**Keywords:** God, university, objective world, purpose, subjective experience

## **I**

My interest in this article, is to address the social occurrence of belief in God in relation to real reasons to believe or disbelieve. But, global culture consists of so many subcultures, and there are so many parts of the world where the situation is different, that I am limiting my generalizations to the university. Although the cultures of universities also vary, there is also some commonality around the world. Generalizing about this can be meaningful even if there are many exceptions.

The university culture of which I speak is not limited to university campuses. A high percentage of people in government, in professions, and in industry have been trained and socialized in universities. They also partake in

that culture, although in some cases it is more mixed with other influences than what one encounters among the permanent denizens of universities.

My first generalization is that God is excluded from the culture of universities. There are very few places where one would find support for a claim that the adequate explanation of some event or phenomenon required the inclusion of God among the causes. At the heart of the scientific method developed during the Enlightenment is the view that the natural world is self-contained. The formulation of this idea very intentionally excluded any role for God in what happens in the natural world.

By the twentieth century the exclusion of God became equally systematic and exhaustive when the topic is human history or the explanation of human experience. One might think that the increased acceptance of religious studies in the academy over the last two or more decades, was an opening for God (cf. Prozesky 1992). But the study of religious experience has gained a larger place in universities at the price of accepting university norms. The university study of religious experience must be value-free, and that is a code for being free of any belief that God might play a role.

In some philosophy departments there are still courses in which arguments for the existence of God are considered. And, there are still some professors who support God's existence. But I think it safe to say that the culture of the university cuts against this position and that it is disappearing. The arguments are now generally only of historical interest, not ways of responding to urgent questions.

But, are not schools of theology also part of the university? In some instances, yes. Is not God affirmed in these schools? In some instances, yes. This is the last significant exception to my generalization. But it is not as significant as those outside the schools of theology might suppose.

Most of the professors of most of these schools fully accept the university norms. Although various beliefs about God are discussed in courses in Bible, church history, and history of religions, university norms are rigorously followed. In these courses, God plays no role in explaining historical events. The one place where there is likely to be discussion of God and what God does is in systematic theology or church doctrine. Even here, many professors prefer to avoid direct statements about God, or what God does. In many cases, the talk is more of the impossibility of really knowing anything about God than of God. What until recently was understood to be 'theology' cannot be understood as an academic 'discipline'. Its confessional

character is not acceptable. Accordingly, ‘theology’ tends to be reshaped into conformity to the norms of an academic discipline or else dropped from the curriculum.

I have been speaking of schools of theology that are part of modern research universities. The pressure there is to conform to university norms. There are also schools of theology in church schools that do not aspire to recognition in university circles or are entirely free standing. Some of these are more closely tied to conservative Christian communities than to university culture. My generalizations about universities do not apply to them.

## II

For many centuries higher education in the West was understood to be in the service of God and God’s church. So the current situation reflects a change that is quite drastic. Even a hundred years ago it took some courage in many universities explicitly to announce that one was an atheist. Today, it takes the same kind of courage to announce that one is a theist. If one went on to say that one believed that the activity of God should be included as an explanatory factor in one or another academic discipline, one’s job would be in jeopardy. Atheists are no more tolerant of serious theists than theists, when they were dominant, were tolerant of atheists.

Some people suppose that the university culture is shaped by research into the evidence. There is some connection, but remarkably little. I see no reason to think that the evidence of physics or psychology or history is less favourable to belief in God now than then. What has brought about the change?

My judgment is that the deepest change has been the increasing identification of knowledge with the results of research within the bounds of academic disciplines. These had long since been defined in a way that excluded God. But as recently as a century ago, university faculties and the wider public generally agreed that in addition to this form of research there were other types of topics, such as the relation of facts and values, which were also important. The assimilation of evolutionary theory had given rise to speculations about how life, and specifically human life, can come into being that were distinct from the results of research in biology. Whereas the academic discipline of history provided detailed information, it seemed important to locate ourselves in the vast sweep of that history to discern the direction in which humanity was moving.

By no means were all who concerned themselves with inclusive theories led to affirm a role for God. But many were. Theists like William James<sup>1</sup>, Henri Bergson<sup>2</sup>, and Alfred North Whitehead<sup>3</sup> were taken seriously by university professors as well as thinkers elsewhere.

This is to say that for a long time the climate of universities allowed for serious discussion of larger questions and for serious efforts to achieve inclusive visions even when these efforts included talk of God. Indeed, many supposed that discussions of these sorts played a major role in departments of philosophy. Accordingly, we must look further to understand their radical exclusion today. I believe the final step in this process centres around the theory of evolution.

As recently as a hundred and fifty years ago, almost everyone in the West, in universities as well as elsewhere affirmed God. Despite the exclusion of God from an explanatory role in science, the study of the physical world confirmed its wonderful complexity and richness. That this world could not have come into being on its own seemed self-evident. Accordingly, the idea that God created the world and the laws on which it operates was the default position of university culture.

Among those who affirmed a creator of the world, there was a marked difference between two groups. There were those who thought that once the creative act was completed, God played no further role. Others thought that God continued to act in the world, and the Christians among them pointed especially to Jesus' resurrection as an act of God. The two groups are sometimes distinguished as 'deists' and 'theists'. Many scientists preferred deism, since it keeps God out of the world they studied, but theistic views were tolerated as long as God's actions were limited to historical events.

Evolutionary theory struck a deep blow at this idea of a divine Creator. Darwin himself remained a deist, believing that the occurrence of evolution required a certain kind of order that it could not itself explain. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/collection.php?cpk=1162>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://www.questia.com/library/philosophy/20th-and-21st-century-philosophy/henri-bergson>; and Khandker (2015), <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0259.xml>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.questia.com/library/philosophy/branches-of-philosophy/philosophy-of-science/alfred-north-whitehead>.

theory took on a life of its own. It gained great power by incorporating Mendelian genetic theory. Its great successes in explaining the coming into being of complex forms of life from simple ones, led to confidence that all the wonders that had been attributed to a Creator could be explained as the working of random mutation of genes and natural selection. The Creator was superfluous, and the insistence of some on pointing to phenomena they thought could be explained only by appeal to God served only as a stimulus to further research. The fact that some believers in God resorted to political opposition to evolutionary theory turned them into enemies, and in the minds of many in university circles, science and religious belief became opponents. Clearly this hardened the exclusion of God.

Since discussion of God was part of a nondisciplinary speculative discourse, the latter also fell into disrepute in universities. There was increasing conviction that efforts should be concentrated on manageable topics. Theories should be floated, only when there were ways of testing them in laboratories or by statistical studies. Classical forms of philosophy seeking comprehensive visions fell into disrepute.

Since reliable knowledge was now understood to be limited to the achievements of the disciplines, and since asking questions about reality in general was disapproved, there was an increasing sense that there is no reality beyond what the academic disciplines study. Of course, new disciplines could be added, but these dealt with limited bodies of data that were recognized as worthy of the same sort of attention as the older disciplines.

All along there were efforts, mostly outside the university to show that one need not choose between God and evolution. These proposals were developed by those believers in God who agreed that the world we know came into being through evolution.

Some accepted the exclusion of God from the world of science, affirming God only in the world of value. Others discerned the hand of God in directing evolutionary developments toward increasing complexity. Some pointed to the more basic laws of the universe as favouring the emergence of life.

These writers were read widely by the general public and provided a basis of continued theistic belief in progressive Protestant circles. The criticisms of the growing university culture were not refuted. Indeed, they were rarely discussed in the university, since the issues were already settled. There was no need for God, and introducing God into the equation was unacceptable.

Whatever the critics noted as limitations of present scientific theory would be overcome by further research.

### III

In my view the tide that narrowed and rigidified the climate of universities is now beginning to turn. It is true that the dominant university culture is still publicly advancing. The remnants of faculties that had broader concerns are being replaced by disciplinary scholars. But I think that inwardly confidence in the university ideology is eroding. I believe its difficulty in enforcing its orthodoxy is increasing and that it cannot much longer silence the questions of which it has been so contemptuous. This erosion of conviction has many facets, but I select just two.

The orthodoxy I am criticizing excludes a role not only for God but also for any kind of purpose in the explanation of events. There is an inherent absurdity in this exclusion, because it is quite evident that the exclusion of purpose was, and is, a quite purposeful act with widespread ramifications. But I will not dwell on this inherent contradiction.

The exclusion of purpose or 'final cause' from nature at the outset of modern science made a lot of sense. The great weakness of the Aristotelian science of the medieval world was that investigators were too quickly satisfied when they could see 'why' something happened or existed. The heart is 'explained' by the need of an organ to pump blood through the body. In one sense this is, indeed, a valid explanation, but its result was to block inquiry into how this happened. Science could advance significantly only by turning attention to efficient causes. The results of this shift were vast and overwhelming.

However, the fact that much more and much better research could be done by seeking efficient rather than final causes does not necessarily mean that there are no final causes or purposes in the natural world. Denying their existence in sand and gases is one thing. Denying their existence in living things, including human beings is quite another. Indeed, neglecting them in the study of animals on the basis of *a priori* denial of their existence is a *very* different matter. Yet this step has followed.

I will illustrate what I take to be the fragility of the now dominant position from my own experience with evolutionary biologists. The standard theory of evolution is carefully formulated to eliminate purpose. There is random mutation of genes that leads to diverse phenotypes. There is natural

selection of phenotypes. The mutation and the selection are wholly nonpurposive.

However, in fact, it is quite clear that the behaviour of living things also affects evolution. This is true of unicellular organisms as well as monkeys and humans. Lynn Margulis (Sagan 1967; Margulis 1998) demonstrated that the emergence of the nucleated cell, perhaps the single most important step in evolution, took place by symbiosis. In this case, mutations follow on evolutionary change caused by the behaviour of organisms. Also, it is clear that learning new ways of procuring food, and copying others who procure it in this way, can affect evolutionary development. Again, gene change follows from evolutionary development. What is astonishing is that most evolutionary biologists continue to state, at least for the general public, that random mutation of genes is *the* engine of evolution. Animal activity is systematically omitted from the theory. This omission continues even though some of these biologists are engaged in purposefully changing the course of evolution by manipulating genes.

Clearly, science has adopted a metaphysics that controls what evidence it will attend to and what theories it will advocate. The denial that scientists have a metaphysics simply serves to avoid thinking about it. The uncritical acceptance of an extremely dubious metaphysics plays a major role in the contemporary climate of universities.

The second illustration I have chosen is parapsychology. According to the metaphysics that is part of the culture of the university, there cannot be any parapsychological phenomena. And, to hold as true, or believe in any of such potential, or related data, does not fit the university system. On the other hand, given the intensity of public interest, for a while, a number of universities in the United States, had separate institutes for research in this broad field. These institutes collected a vast amount of evidence. But now, I understand, all but one have been closed.

Even when research was tolerated and evidence was collected, there was no openness to allowing parapsychology to play any explanatory role in other disciplines. There the standard metaphysics ruled intact. But as time passed, the existence of scientific research in parapsychology became an embarrassment. It was ended. It had always been ignored, but ignoring a field of study is easier when it does not exist on the campus. Today, admitting to belief that there are parapsychological phenomena, or that belief in such, endangers one's status on a university campus.

Modern scientists love to ridicule the Aristotelian scientists at the

Papal court because they refused to look through the telescope. Galileo knew that what they would see, if they looked, would contradict their metaphysics. They refused to examine evidence that their metaphysics was wrong. I have no desire to defend these scientists. However, contemporary scientists are at least equally guilty of refusing to take into account the vast amount of evidence that their metaphysics is wrong in many ways. This has been going on for a long time.

#### IV

There is another price that has been paid in exchange for the great achievements in gaining new knowledge. This is the price of relevance to the major issues facing human kind. There is a disconnect between the organization of inquiry around such issues and organizing it around particular bodies of data. Humanly important problems rarely lie within the province of individual disciplines.

The standard university response is to propose interdisciplinary work. This is certainly needed, and I would not want to discourage it in its still marginal role in universities. But it is far from a panacea. Each discipline can provide interesting information that should be taken account of, in dealing with the problem. But some of the information that is typically needed will not fall in the domain of any of the disciplines.

Perhaps more important, none of them are geared to guiding the transition from being well informed to solving real-world problems. In so far as this transition is taught in universities, this occurs in professional schools. But many of the problems of the world do not fall in the province of a profession.

To test these generalizations we could identify a list of important human problems. Today, one such problem is the growth of poverty around the world. Suppose we approach a modern value-free research university and ask for guidance in reducing poverty. There would be many obstacles. *First*, we cannot appeal to the idea that helping to reduce poverty is a proper goal of the university. That expresses a particular set of values, and the university is not committed to any such values. The university will commit to such a project only if it is well-funded by an outside source. Since more money is in fact available to fund projects that benefit the wealthy, major research that might lead to support of redistribution is rare.



*Second*, if one did have the money to pay for research, one would probably be directed to the department of economics. There one would be told that the goal of the economy is to increase market activity. The distribution of wealth is not a concern. However, economists do have statistics on these matters and some are willing to discuss the effects of various policies on distribution. This would certainly be relevant. But if the inquirer had had experience in the real world, she or he would know that there are cultural, psychological, and sociological dimensions of poverty that are not captured in statistics about distribution.

I will not pursue this example except to say that although students of culture, psychology, and sociology would also provide interesting statistics, the totality of these statistics would be only marginally helpful in the development of programs to reduce poverty. Putting the producers of these statistics into the same room so as to have an interdisciplinary discussion would do little to improve the situation.

Fortunately, there are individuals in all these fields who are themselves genuinely concerned to reduce poverty and who, because of this, have transgressed the boundaries of their disciplines in order to develop genuinely useful ideas and proposals. But this occurs despite the culture of the university, not because of it. If one doubts this, one should read the book by a leading educator, Stanley Fish, addressed to university faculty, entitled *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2008). ‘Saving the world’ is not what the university pays them to do.

## V

In Section III, I gave reasons for regarding the contemporary university climate as intellectually irresponsible. Scientists often like to point out the intellectual irresponsibility of religious people who, they think, simply take doctrines ‘on faith’. But they take at least equally on faith the basic metaphysics associated with modern science. Their methods of enforcing orthodoxy are similar to those of some religious groups, but today they are practiced more by the disciplinary guilds than by religious organizations. Heretics are denied jobs and, if already employed, fired or harried out of the guilds and thereby out of the university. They cannot publish in guild-controlled organs. They are either ignored or pilloried. However, it is my impression that this tight enforcement of orthodoxy is weakening. The story of two heretics gives me hope.

The one I know best is Herman Daly. While teaching in economics at Louisiana State University he began to publish critiques of the goal of economic growth adopted by almost all economists<sup>4</sup>. His alternative proposals caught the attention of some readers, and he attracted graduate students. Since he had tenure he could not be fired, but his colleagues began systematically failing students who came to study with him.

As is typical in dealing with heretics, there was little effort to show weaknesses in his arguments or to defend the orthodox view. The true believers closed ranks and closed their ears. He had no choice but to resign. Of course, no other department of economics would hire him. Indeed within academia he was subject to erasure. Occasionally, other economists referred to his ideas (negatively, of course), but they avoided mentioning his name or providing a footnote.

Nevertheless, I am presenting the experience of Daly as the beginning of a move toward an improved situation. From the beginning, he had support from the emerging environmental community. This led to a position at the World Bank. His writings were ignored by economists but read widely by environmentalists and to some extent in the wider community. He was honored with the Right Livelihood Award and other international recognitions.

More relevant to the issue of the climate of the university is that economic orthodoxy has loosened. Economists have to some extent recognized limitations in their orthodoxy. Some have joined in efforts to work with environmentalists. The heir apparent to Daly's leadership role in ecological economics teaches in a department of economics and has not suffered a comparable ostracism from the community. Economic orthodoxy still reigns, but somewhat less confidently or rigidly.

My second example, Rupert Sheldrake, is more dramatic. He was a well-known biologist in England. While living in South Asia, he broke from the dominant mentality of Western universities and began to see that the causation of events, especially those involving life, is much more complex than scientists had allowed. In 1981 he published *A New Science of Life: The*

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. amongst others, his *Steady-State Economics* ([1977] 1991); with John B. Cobb Jnr, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* ([1989] 1994); *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development* (1996); and, with Prugh and Costanza, *The Local Politics of Global Sustainability* (2000).

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*Hypothesis of Formative Causation.* This book shocked orthodox biologists. *Nature* editorialized that it was a candidate for burning. Few tested his theories, but many rejected them out of hand. He became *persona non grata* in university circles.

However, he was well received in other segments of society, and he pursued the rich field of study opened up by his inclusion of forms of causation rejected by mainstream biologists. He even extended his research into physics. He now offers a comprehensive new science<sup>5</sup>.

Recently he stirred up a widely reported controversy. He presented a harsh critique of the dominant form of science in a TED talk<sup>6</sup>, which was subsequently posted. Representatives of academic orthodoxy were appalled and demanded that it be removed. TED did so<sup>7</sup>.

The good news, from my point of view, is that the story does not end there. If it did, it would be just one more indication of the growing power of scientific orthodoxy. But this time other scientists came to the support of posting Sheldrake's paper. They were opposed to the kind of orthodox censorship that has become commonplace. This new openness of scientists to the publication and discussion of heretical ideas is gaining ground. More scientists are protesting the doctrines and the methods by which they are circumscribed.

## VI

Can we imagine a deep change in the university climate taking place in the relatively near future? I dare to say we can. I believe that there are a very large number of scientists and scholars in other disciplines who really believe that their task is to gain knowledge rather than to defend an outdated orthodoxy. If it becomes widely recognized that universities and their academic disciplines have put orthodoxy above evidence, there could be a scramble to get on the other side. I also believe that many people in academia like to think that what

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<sup>5</sup> Amongst others, cf. his *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God* (1992).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.google.co.za/search?q=What+is+a+TED+talk%3F&oq=What+is+a+TED+talk%3F&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.4143j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TerTgDEgUE>.

they do, benefits humankind and have not fully appreciated the fact that, because universities and academic disciplines are free of other values, money reigns. Their work is for sale to the highest bidder.

I think that these facts about the present role of universities are becoming more and more evident to persons within universities as well as to external observers. It is not impossible that faculties will engage in study of their own institutions, a topic largely absent from university curricula. And it is not impossible that they will insist on changes.

A *first step* might be to examine the ideas of heretics on their merits rather than reject them simply because they are not orthodox. For example, scientists might take up proposals of Rupert Sheldrake that they perform certain experiments. If the result is that they show Sheldrake to be mistaken, they can continue to reject his ideas. But if Sheldrake's predictions are supported by the outcome, surely some scientists would accept the need for rethinking long-held doctrines. That would change the climate of the university.

A *second step* might be for universities to agree that the healthy survival of the human species is a value so widely held that its adoption should be permissible. Many climate scientists have rejected the objective value-free stance and are campaigning for policy changes. I believe that, as more and more professors in various fields recognize the profound threat to humanity of the course of events to which universities now contribute so generously, some will be sufficiently distressed to call for changes. They might suggest that a few students be helped by the faculty to shape their curricula with the goal of contributing positively to the human future.

A *third step* might be to build on the first two and reconstruct the university quite fundamentally.

## VII

But what about God? God's place in the university is my topic. The changes I have mentioned do not directly affect the exclusion of God.

My argument thus far has been that what has excluded God from the university is its dominant climate shaped by limiting knowledge to value-free disciplines controlled by an unexamined metaphysics. I have suggested that the power of the dominant climate to restrict thought in these ways is weakening. I even claim that change is beginning to happen and that its pace may

accelerate. Would this end the exclusion of God? My answer is that it would, but that this change would probably come only later.

If the university acknowledges the existence and efficacy of purposes, this would involve the reality and importance of subjects. We could affirm that we live in a community of subjects rather than in the congeries of objects now assumed. The analysis of subjects would lead to recognition of profound interrelatedness. Would this open the door to a role for God?

It is obviously possible to affirm the subjectivity of living things, and even of quanta without introducing God. But it is noteworthy that one of the reasons for going to great lengths to exclude purpose altogether at the outset of the modern period was to deny a foothold to God. Since purpose is not characteristic of machines, the mechanical model will play a more limited role. That means that the existence of purposes opens the door to questions about what else besides the material forces from the past participates in bringing entities with purposes into existence. If the existence of purpose cannot be explained by the preexisting physical world, how is it possible?

The affirmation of purpose need not lead to such questioning. One may simply stop with the fact. Or, one may answer that it is an emergent phenomenon, and stop with that. But the door is opened, and if one does ask, one theory may be that the aim to realize value that seems characteristic of all living things, or the emergence of purpose in the ongoing process of evolution, derives from a cosmic aim to realize value. If there were no prejudice against affirming subjectivity in the universe as a whole, this would be a very natural theory.

However, since the prejudice against God is much stronger than the prejudice against animal and human purposes, any talk of God will remain marginal. Indeed we can expect that those who seek to open the university climate toward the acknowledgment of subjectivity and purpose will strongly emphasize that this does not lead to belief in God. This denial may be an essential part of their strategy.

What would happen if the vast evidence for paranormal phenomena were taken seriously? This would not only reemphasize the importance of subjects but also make clear that their relations do not depend on contiguity. We would learn that our experience is not shaped simply by the physically contiguous events in the brain but also by the more remote past. The universe is as much mental or spiritual as physical. The bias in favour of the data of sense experience would end.

Clearly, such an understanding of the world is very different from the one that dominates the university. It encompasses all the evidence rather than a selection. And, it provides a context in which the reality of cosmic mind or spirit fits rather comfortably. Nevertheless, because of the prejudice against God, I would not expect God to be an accepted part of the enlarged world-view.

My sense is that for several generations atheists felt secure in their views and believers in God found themselves on the defensive. This climate has certainly weakened the liberal churches. But I am suggesting that pride may come before a fall. The atheists have been so confident that they have felt secure in supporting insupportable policies of refusing to look at evidence and of affirming an incredible world view. For the most part the university culture allows them simply to ignore their failures. But the tide on some topics is turning. We are asking whether that turn will eventually allow the return of God.

I believe that to some extent atheists are already on the defensive on this topic as well. We noted that Darwin thought God was responsible for establishing the basic nature and structure of things in such a way that evolution could work. In his case, this was rather vague. However, science has come a long way, and the result does not show that the world we have is readily understandable or is what could be expected without any controlling purpose at work. On the contrary, the fact that the world supports life at all is truly remarkable, depending on an almost unbelievable set of improbabilities.

No one has attempted any causal explanation of the constants in a scientific sense. That each is what-it-is is seen as a matter of pure chance. Yet if any one of them had been even a little different, life would not have been possible. The probability of any one of them being what-it-is is very small. That all are just what they are is almost infinitely improbable.

Darwin would not have been surprised. This is just what he expected of God. So it would seem easy for scientists to say, the most likely explanation is that this expresses the divine purpose that there be life. However, the university culture is not open to that hypothesis. The only allowable explanation is that this truly remarkable circumstance is a matter of pure chance. One can hardly imagine any other topic on which such an explanation would even be considered.

Some scientists do try to reduce the incredulity that this explanation is likely to arouse outside the university culture by another kind of speculation.

If there have been an infinite number of universes, then the fact that one of them has these almost infinitely improbable features is no longer improbable. And of course since that is the only universe on which there is life, it is the only one on which questions of this kind can arise.

This speculation is possible, but in my judgment, highly improbable. We have come to accept very improbable theories from scientists, and the idea that there have been multiple universes is now widely agreed upon. The one theory of multiple universes that is sufficiently plausible for us to pay serious attention to, is an argument that derives from Big Bang cosmology. Although the Big Bang theory is itself not fully established, I will formulate the argument for infinite universes in its terms.

In these terms it is reasonable to suppose that the Big Bang that initiated this universe with its particular constants was preceded by the Big Crunch of a preceding universe. Hence we have at least two successive universes. Does this justify extrapolating to an infinite number?

To do this we must assume that every previous universe arose in a Big Bang and ended in a Big Crunch. This is, of course, possible. However, we should recall that cosmologists are not sure that our universe will end its expansion and turn toward the Big Crunch. For this to occur there are certain requisites that may or may not characterize our universe. Yet the theory of infinite universes requires that in every case in the past those requisites were met. That is, of course, possible.

This would mean that all the trillions of past universes were very similar in crucial ways. That, too, is possible. The laws that govern this universe may govern all universes, and they may all have the character that leads to a Big Crunch followed by another Big Bang. I am prepared to grant the plausibility of an infinite succession.

The basis on which this theory gains plausibility is that the universes are quite similar. If they varied much, one of them along the way would have just kept expanding forever and brought an end to the series. On the other hand, the reason for bringing this theory up was to show that if there have been an infinite number of universes each of which has a chance set of constants, the one highly improbable set that makes life possible would eventually occur. We have, then, the supposition that the most fundamental laws of the universe would be profoundly different in successive universes, but that the conditions that produce the Big Crunch has been present in all. The improbability of such a combination is overwhelming.

My point is not that this theory is impossible. Much happens by chance. But I doubt that such an extreme improbability would be put forward with a straight face for any other purpose than to exclude God. I regard it as a defensive act. It is a sign that if one is open to the possibility of a spiritual being operative in the universe as a whole, then one will find that the extreme improbability of alternative explanations justifies the belief that this spirit has purposefully established the fundamental laws of the universe so as to make life possible. One may also view this spirit as explanatory of the purpose that pervades living things.

I personally judge that the Cosmic Spirit, God, aims at the increase of value, and that every entity derives from God the aim to achieve what value is possible for it. I find this understanding existentially meaningful and even empowering. I would like to see universities also dedicate themselves to the increase of value (1) in the lives of their students; (2) by orienting thought and research to the common good; and (3) by seeking wisdom rather than supporting outdated metaphysics. I believe that such universities would serve God whether they acknowledged this or not. And, in the long run I believe that acknowledging and even celebrating this fact would strengthen them in this service.

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# Martin Prozesky and ‘Well-being’: Retroactive and Proactive Perspectives on Religion and Ethics in the Social Transformation of South Africa

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## Abstract

This article primarily outlines the discursive threads in Prozesky’s ‘Implications of Apartheid for Christianity in South Africa’ in the book he edited, *Christianity Amidst Apartheid: Selected Perspectives on the Church in South Africa* ([1985] 1990); his first book, *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: An Explanatory Theory* (1984); and his latest book, *Conscience: Ethical Intelligence for Global Well-Being* (2007). This is under three headings: Apartheid as Heresy; Explaining Religion; and Conscience Ethics. We conclude with some appreciative and critical reflections, that we believe, can take Prozesky’s life-long project, further. This is positioned in the social transformation paradigm.

**Keywords:** well-being, apartheid as heresy, explain religion, conscience ethics, religion and social transformation

## Introduction

It is through Smit’s friendship with a former colleague of his, that he was introduced to the work of Prof. Martin Prozesky and Process Philosophy in the

early 1990s. The colleague, Alrah Pitchers, then lecturing in Systematic Theology, was doing his PhD under the supervision of Prozesky on the much-contested Christology of Hans Küng. His critique of Küng, was that he should have supplemented his focus on Hegel's notion of 'becoming' by using or drawing on results of especially German New Testament scholarship based on the application of the historical-critical method, with process thought. (This was in the midst of the so-called Third Quest of the Historical Jesus.) Then in the early 2000s, we had occasion to interact with Martin as a fellow member of the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa when we joined. It is at this point that we started to sporadically read some of Martin's work, and also prescribed some of his work in the then recently founded University of KwaZulu-Natal (2004), Howard College Campus in Durban (cf. esp. Prozesky 1990a; de Gruchy & Prozesky 1991; Prozesky and de Gruchy 1995). At the joint conference of 2009 at Stellenbosch, we suggested the idea of a *Festschrift* to him. And, as they say, the rest is history.

As one of the most significant scholars of Religion and Ethics in South Africa, we found Prozesky's work as indispensable for the teaching of the religions in the pluralist religious and moral/ ethical framework we introduced at Howard College in 2004<sup>1</sup>. So, for many – both colleagues and students in the then Faculty of Humanities – it was a breath of fresh air to offer Comparative Religion modules that include the study of all the major religions, especially African Religion, (African) Christianity, Hinduism (in South Africa), and Islam (in South Africa), critically reflecting on the challenging socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic issues we face in our postcolonial and especially post-apartheid contexts, and, that, on an equal footing. The phenomenal, progressive growth of enrolment in the modules and student rationales for enrolling for the modules, and their evaluations testify to this fact<sup>2</sup>. To our mind, Prozesky has, through his just over fifty years of

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<sup>1</sup> Previously, only contemporary Jewish Studies was offered for some years, at this campus, but that was closed in the late 1990s due to a dearth of students. No courses, to our knowledge, in 'Religion' and 'Ethics' were offered at Howard College campus, in the then nearly one hundred years of the existence of the previous University of Natal.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Smit & Vencatsamy (2012) for an overview of both statistical enrolments of a representative sample of modules, student rationales, and evaluations, 2005 – 2010.

scholarship, opened the way for us, to walk this road, and to continue to add to the continuously growing scholarship about the religions in Southern Africa, but also more broadly speaking. This, in brief is also the background to why we have decided to bring together this Festschrift in honour of Prof. Martin Prozesky. We think that the work that he has done, has shown an important part of the way in terms of which we need to continue to grow our study of our still very young disciplines of Religion and Ethics in Southern Africa, but also more broadly speaking in Africa, and globally speaking.

Since a full assessment of Prozesky's thought and work is still outstanding, we shall, in this concluding chapter of the Festschrift, only briefly reflect on three topics central to his thought and publications: Apartheid as Heresy; Explaining Religion; and Conscience Ethics. To some extent, these consecutive topics reflect his intellectual 'journey' – a conceptual metaphor he uses himself (cf. Prozesky 2000). Originating in boyhood experience, and brought to maturity in his progressive quest as he lived through and critically reflected on 'Religion' and 'Ethics' in some of the most significant phases of South Africa's socio-political history, they represent important topics in his *oeuvre*. And, in some measure, they provide some background information towards charting the future of the study of Religion and Ethics together with him, for us, in our African context, and we shall conclusively say something about this<sup>3</sup>.

### **Apartheid as Heresy**

Even though he grew up in a Christian home that was severely critical of apartheid, and also valued his local Anglican parish priest who was outspokenly critical of apartheid and apartheid Christianity, it was through his own intellectual endeavours that Prozesky carved out his own intellectual niche for a critique of the system of apartheid, but especially the partially Christian founding, supporting and defending of it (cf. Prozesky 2000a).

In his paper, 'Christianity and Apartheid: From Christian Deicide to Socio-Political Salvation in South Africa' at the conference on 'Salvation and the Secular', in 1985, in Pietermaritzburg, Prozesky not only reflected on the Christian religious connection to apartheid but also on the 'cause' of this

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<sup>3</sup> At this point, we plan to develop these thoughts further in other publications.

connection (Prozesky 1990a:125)<sup>4</sup>. In our assessment, it was the decision of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (W.A.R.C.) that declared apartheid a heresy in 1982, that provided Prozesky with the opportunity to quite definitively address both these issues<sup>5</sup>. He says as much.

*Firstly*, as part of its declaration, the W.A.R.C. declared the ideology of apartheid, ‘a sin’, that its ‘moral and theological justification ... is a travesty’ and that [the S.A. white reformed churches] ‘persistent disobedience to the Word of God, [is] a theological heresy’ (cf. World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1982, in de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983:170). It further elaborated that it regarded apartheid as ‘sinful and incompatible with the Gospel’ in relation to the fact that:

- (a) it is based on a fundamental irreconcilability of human beings, thus rendering ineffective the reconciling and uniting power of our Lord Jesus Christ;
- (b) in its application through racist structures it has led to exclusive privileges for the white section of the population at the expense of the blacks;
- (c) it has created a situation of injustice and oppression, largescale deportation [‘forced removals’] causing havoc to family life, and suffering to millions (de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983: 171).

At this meeting, the W.A.R.C. concomitantly also suspended the membership of the white Nederduitse Gerformeerde Kerk (NGK/ Dutch Reformed Church, DRC) and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, until such time that the following changes have taken place:

- (a) Black Christians are no longer excluded from church services, especially from Holy Communion;

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<sup>4</sup> The paper was subsequently published as ‘Implications of Apartheid for Christianity in South Africa’ (cf. Prozesky 1990a). We quote from this publication.

<sup>5</sup> The W.A.R.C. was established in 1970, and met every four years. (Presently, it is called the World Communion of Reformed Churches.) This decision was taken at its third meeting in 1982 at Ottawa in Canada.

- (b) Concrete support in word and deed is given to those who suffer under the system of apartheid ('separate development');
- (c) Unequivocal synod resolutions are made which reject apartheid and commit the Church to dismantling this system in both Church and politics (de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983: 172).

In Prozesky's appreciation but also critique, of this declaration by the W.A.R.C., he says that it has only dealt with the 'effects' of apartheid. In the words of the W.A.R.C., this means it only focuses on the *effects* of 'irreconcilability' in apartheid that renders the 'uniting power of ... Christ' 'ineffective'; its leading to 'exclusive privileges for the white section of the population at the expense of the blacks'; and that its 'injustice and oppression, and largescale deportation [forced removals]' causes 'havoc to family life, and suffering to millions'.

Similarly, for Prozesky (1990a), apartheid more generally is 'a system of unjust domination, exclusion and disadvantage' and can be characterised by the fact that,

the position of black people has been legally and practically inferior to that of whites by every significant measure – access to economic power, the vote, citizenship, education, health care, life expectancy, work opportunities, income, freedom of movement, prospects of improvement and even places of worship and burial (Prozesky 1990a: 126).

The most 'simple and valid definition' that can be given to it is, he says, that,

*apartheid is a legalised injustice which whites who identify strongly with Christianity have imposed by force on blacks in South Africa, the majority of whom are their fellow Christians (e.i.o.; Prozesky 1990a: 127).*

For him, this is also the 'truth' and 'present and past condition' of white apartheid Christianity in South Africa (Prozesky 1990a: 123).

Staying within Christianity, for Prozesky, as for the W.A.R.C., the effects of apartheid need to be evaluated in terms of the 'criterion' Jesus and

therefore Christianity itself propounds and advocates, in its ‘central message’, namely Christian ‘love’. This is central to ‘the life of God, in the example of Jesus, and in the path Christians commit themselves to walk’ (Prozesky 1990b:124). In their ‘creating, legitimating and supporting’ apartheid morally and theologially though, the majority of white Afrikaner Christians have de-legitimised Christianity. Prozesky (1990a:126) says:

[It is] incompatible with the commitment to love one’s fellow human beings as oneself, because none of its basic features involves real equality and well-being for all South Africans.

This finding of the evaluation of white Afrikaner Christianity’s support of apartheid, in his words, means that apartheid is in fact a ‘*killing off in some people the capacity to find God real*’ ... a ‘deicide’ (e.i.o.; Prozesky 1990a: 125).

*Secondly*, and turning from the white Afrikaner Christian relationship to the ideology of apartheid and its combined ‘*effects*’, Prozesky argues that this state of affairs – also evident in the various involvements of Christianity in the two world wars, the state church’s support of Nazism in Germany and the development of nuclear weapons amongst others – is the result of a ‘*cause*’ that can be located within the ‘*contradictions*’ within orthodox Christianity itself. He then develops arguments on these contradictions concerning the following issues (cf. Prozesky 1990b: 128ff; cf. also 1985:61):

- Christianity’s inadequate social impact;
- Contradictions and defects within orthodox doctrine – i.e. both the propounding of the ‘love ethic’ and ‘salvation’ are not universally inclusive;
- Erosion of Christian credibility in the matrices of meaning – it discredits itself in practice;
- Insufficient critical realism – like some other religions, it finds itself in divine revelation, which contradicts a focus on human realities;
- An unrealistic concept of religion – that at least some part(s) of religion must be ascribed to human creativity; and

- Ecumenical disunity – Christianity does not propound a unified minimum system of Christian essentials, based on a love-centred religious philosophy.

For him, these are the 'causes' within Christianity itself, that serve as the sources that create the inhuman 'effects' of the devastating systems such as we witnessed in apartheid<sup>6</sup>.

Reflecting on the religions' importance for building an ethic for post-apartheid South Africa, especially Christianity, since it represents three quarters of the total population of the country, he proposes the developing of an ethic that provides 'equal rights, opportunities and safety for all' (p. 122). Such an ethic would 'transform' South Africa into 'a post-apartheid society with equality and well-being for all' – '*values which promote the greatest egalitarian well-being of all our people*' (e.i.o.; Prozesky 1990a:124, 126f). This would lead to 'national political salvation' (Prozesky 1990a:141).

## Explaining Religion

Parallel to Prozesky's growing up critical of apartheid was also his consciousness of the diversity or plurality of religions. He grew up in a place with a large Jewish community in which he was to find his best friend. As student, he encountered fellow Hindu and Buddhist students, and as lecturer in Zimbabwe (since 1969) he experienced sustained contact with black African people as equals, in the form of the Shona people (cf. Prozesky 2000a). So, it is understandable that Prozesky would study (and advocate) religious pluralism. As he says, the ['strained'] 'religious diversity' of the world is a fact and does not need elaboration 'for we all know that the world is home to many kinds of religion' (Prozesky 2000b:180).

Given the plurality of religions, a curious matter, though, is 'why' there are religions. If we can answer this question, it would also answer the reason or reasons for why we have this plurality of religions, but also the

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<sup>6</sup> Prozesky (1986b) uses the same kind of argument, but see too the next section. To this publication, cf. too Nürnberger's (1986) response, defending the then established Christian theologically-inspired 'National Initiative for Reconciliation'.



diversity of religious orders, denominations, or what we may call religious tradition streams, trends or threads, within these religions. This was the question that he addressed in his book, *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: An Explanatory Theory* (1984), and his article ‘A Critique of Traditional Theistic Religion’ (1985b) amongst others (cf. especially Prozesky 1986a; 1988). So, for him, the plurality of religions is intricately linked to the question of why the religions exist in the first place. In this section, we shall briefly address these two issues.

*Firstly*, in the second chapter of his book, ‘Religion in Global Perspective’, Prozesky compares some of the main world religions in order to come to an understanding of the ‘planetary representations of the most important, recurring characteristics of religion’. In a short piece, as part of this chapter, he also addresses the notion of ‘The Plurality of Religious Traditions’. Central to his analyses and findings, is that even though variously stated, believed, and practiced, in the religious traditions – and also despite the historico-chronological transformations they underwent – the notion of ‘well-being’ – whether as a transcendental belief or a real-life expectation or experience – is central to all religious traditions on planet earth (Prozesky 1984: 23 – 50). Similar to his thought that informs and underlies this whole chapter, and this for his argument on the ‘what’, ‘data’ or ‘*explicandum*’ of the ‘plurality of religious traditions’, he identifies the following features or ‘fundamental or essential properties’ of ‘*all*’ these religious traditions (e.i.o.; cf. Prozesky 1988:304f). He says that,

... being religious includes participation in a specific tradition of ideas, actions, artifacts, roles, associations and institutions which express, facilitate and embody the believer’s contact with or progress towards a superior order of reality ... (Prozesky 1984:60).

In a different publication, and saying that we need to keep an ‘open mind’ about the ‘definition of religion’, he also describes the religious traditions in terms of Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘family resemblances’. In terms of this perspective they all for example involve ‘the use of mythology, ritual, belief in an invisible world, and so on’ (Prozesky 1988:308). Explicating this more explicitly, he outlines the ‘characteristics’ of ‘religion’, as follows: 1) the ‘benefit’ religious traditions have for people – e.g. ‘divine help with their problems’; ‘comfort’ in providing ‘meaning and purpose’ in life; ‘certainty in

the face of insecurity', 'healing', 'enlightenment', 'salvation'; 2) believers' 'sense of invisible, highly effective power at work in human experience and nature'; 3) that there is 'another order of reality [divine reality], more powerful, worthy and durable than mundane existence'; 4) that people 're-organizes their lives' in the light of their experience or 'felt presence' of this other worldly reality – in 'faith'; and 5) that all religions evince a 'cumulative tradition' through time (cf. Prozesky 1986a:30f). All these are experienced or are responses in the face of the 'dissatisfaction and misery' of the human condition (Prozesky 1986a:35; cf. also 1988:305). As such, and this is repeated oft by Prozesky, this makes the manifestations of religion, human products (or at least partly so), and therefore subject to change – as has happened in history – and is required in the period of the transformation of apartheid Christianity to something else (Prozesky 1988:39).

On how his view of the plurality of religious traditions – together with their comparative differences and transformations through history – in the world impacts his main argument for seeking a reason or reasons for the 'explanation' of religion as such, he says:

An acceptable explanatory theory of religion must reflect these variations and say why human beings with their common, planetary quest for well-being and their common vision of a transcendental dimension none the less embody that quest and vision in such different systems or doctrine, ritual and institution (Prozesky 1984:61).

*Secondly*, the main question that Prozesky was asking, was not only regarding the 'plurality' of religions, but 'why' there is a phenomenon such as religion, in terms of the 'characteristics' outlined above – to 'explain' religion in terms of its cause(s). In order to proffer an '*explicans*' for the '*explicandum*', Prozesky turned to natural scientific Philosophical reasoning.

Science, he argues, uses 'logical explanations' based on 'deductive reasoning'. As such, it explains data in terms of the 'laws of nature'. In the case of the humanities and religion though, where we do not deal with the laws of nature, we use 'inference', and make 'inductive generalisations' (1984:70; 1988:306). And if we use this approach, with regard to explaining why there are these 'characteristics' or 'properties' of religion, we can answer why religion or the religions, exist. In the light of science, we have to produce 'the most probable inductive inferences' (1986a:33; 1988:306). He says:

The explanatory quest thus [requires] ... a systematic, general theory made up essentially of the following components: one or more pervasive, fundamental regularities of human nature and of the cosmos at large, of such power and kind as to cause people to manifest whatever constant or recurrent properties we may find in the religions of the earth (for example, a ubiquitous concern with salvation, blessing, enlightenment and deliverance); plus an identification of the circumstances of history and culture which result in those regularities producing *religious* effects, plus an identification of the factors which are responsible for the various levels of differentiation in religion, whatever these may be judged to be (Prozesky 1988:307; cf. also 1986a:34).

For his explication of 'human nature' and 'the cosmos at large' he draws on Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophical Cosmology. He identifies and discusses as main features, 1) the variable experiences of human finitude; 2) human sentience, or our capacity to feel pain and pleasure or seek happiness á la Aristotle – that we respond with producing 'religion' and 'culture' in the face of 'discomfort', 'vulnerability', 'uneasiness' or 'anxiety'; 3) human creative responses by developing 'life-enhancing values', produce 'knowledge', invent 'concepts' [and we may add rituals and sacrifices] – all those human responses, that produce a 'betterment' of human existence as they struggle against 'dissatisfaction and misery', in their quest for the 'reduction of suffering'; and 4) the impact on humans of the environment, as constituted by 'everything that exists' – fellow human beings, and nature (Prozesky 1986a:34 - 37).

It is in the light of this explication that Prozesky then answers his question of the 'why' of religion, or the 'explanation' for the existence of something that we call religion. He says that central to the emergence of all human knowledge (including the production and experience of religion), is human cognition – to move from 'ignorance to knowledge', from the 'unknown to the known' – and that this forms part and parcel of the human 'learning process'. Central to this process is the production of knowledge and learning (also in religion and the developing of religious traditions) through our use of 'anthropomorphism', the human predisposition or inclination to explain the 'unknown by means of human and social or other familiar models'. In the face of the human experience of finitude and sentience, humans create [but also change or transform existing] knowledge. He says that the creation of

knowledge and learning,

... yields a ... picture of humanity as constituted by its creative struggle to promote conditions in which misery is reduced and satisfaction is enhanced, but always within the limits of available knowledge, productive effort, ability to endure suffering, and realism in the assignment of values to things (Prozesky 1986a:36).

Such production of knowledge in the face of misery, Prozesky calls 'a basic fact about the way we are as persons'. He continues that he names this, a 'drive', or a 'desire', i.e.

... a drive to maximise well-being, a drive whose expressions are permanently restricted by our human finitude, but also permanently fuelled by our discontent it engenders. The search for an explanation of religion is largely a search for an adequate *explicans*, and I know of none more suitable on factual and logical grounds than this drive, though other factors are also involved [such as those arising from the environment] (Prozesky 1986a:36f).

For Prozesky, then, and this in the broad ambit of the 'naturalistic theory' of knowledge, the human 'drive to maximise well-being' or the 'desire for well-being', or for 'meaning in life', in the face of 'misery', constitute the '*explicans*' or ensemble of 'causal factors' for the '*explicandum*', the primary 'cause' or 'explanation' of religion (Prozesky 1988:307). In the case of religion, and given the strong religious commitments that characterise religious people, he labels this 'drive' or 'desire', the quest for 'ultimate well-being'. This 'drive' or 'desire', in his reasoning, in principle answers all the why-questions of religious existence and religious experience – in all its manifestations, both transcendental understandings, and this-worldly real-life experiences. It also calls forth the 'dedication and seriousness of purpose that characterizes religious faith with accompanying re-organizations of [people's] lives to conform to the perceived will of the gods' – conversion and faith (Prozesky 1988:38). From this it also follows, that 'religion ... is our creation, therefore it is freely criticisable' and 'if defective, as all our creations to some extent are, it can be changed or relinquished'. This perspective on religion, so Prozesky argues, then also 'creates scope for transformation' (Prozesky 1988:39).

‘A Critique of Traditional Theistic Religion’ (1985b), uses the same argument to discredit the ‘traditional theistic religions’, those who believe in a ‘God’ beyond time and space. In his mind, he has ‘serious reservations about its value in our continued path to knowledge and well-being’. Talking personally about his ‘standpoint’, he says:

My priority is *human well-being* here on earth and in whatever subsequent existence, if any, lies ahead: and the highest goal I can conceive and strive for is *a condition of maximal well-being for all*. This gives my investigation an underlying religious orientation because *religion is humanity’s search for ultimate well-being* (e.a. Prozesky 1985b:56).

We shall not rehearse the argument here. Suffice to say, that he explains, the notions of ‘revelation’, the cosmic ‘forces’ that affect us, the ‘soteric’ functions of the concept of God, as well as the notion of ‘salvation’ in terms of his objective, viz. to ‘offer a picture of traditional theism as humanly-made and not divinely given’. All these notions constitute particular knowledges that the religions produced over millennia. They are also accompanied by certain practices – we may add, that materially manifest in systems, structures, institutions, rituals, attitudes, and behaviour. These diversity of knowledges and practices, also how they relate or not to secular ideology, show that,

... religious concern is inseparable from *cognitive considerations* .... But goals and insights on their own are powerless. There must also be *action* in ways that foster that goal. Thus *a religious priority* turns out to be *incomplete* without *cognitive and practical components* ... (e.a.; Prozesky 1985:56).

Apart from using the ‘naturalistic theory’, Prozesky also uses the notion of what we could call ethical ‘practice’ and as such, the ethical dimensions of the traditional theistic religions against them – i.e. in terms of the paradox or contradictions between that which they proclaim cognitively, and that what they ethically practice<sup>7</sup>. For instance, and pointing out that there is a new developing ‘contemporary global awareness’, he says:

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<sup>7</sup> We have seen how this argument plays out in his critique of white Afrikaner Christian apartheid above.

... theism is scientifically irrelevant and has sometimes been a nuisance; as modern Western history so grimly proves, it can coexist with policies of great national and individual wickedness; conversely, moral excellence is widely achieved without belief in God. Its traditional rational defence is rejected by virtually all except some whose belief never depended on it anyway; and most important of all, a mature spirituality can and does exist without it<sup>8</sup> (Prozesky 1985b:55).

This critique of theism was continued in his *A New Guide to the Debate about God* (1992), where he focused on 'The Case for the Believer' and 'The Case against the Believer', cross-religiously. John Hick (1993) reviewed and criticised Prozesky in terms of his own experientialist view of the existence of 'God' – i.e. 'religious experience'. Prozesky (1995a) countered, pointing out that his own 'evidentialist approach' to religion, is used by the experientialists themselves, where they distinguish between acceptable and 'delusory' religious experience – whether in the form of experiencing Hick's notion of 'the Real' theistically or non-theistically, the forms of the '*personae* and *impersonae* of the Real' (Prozesky 1995a:55, referring to Hick 1989:233ff)<sup>9,10</sup>.

## Conscience Ethics

As is evident from the two previous sections of this chapter, Prozesky has, in his academic life, developed experiences from his boyhood – experiences of

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Prozesky's (2006. Esp. p. 132ff) definition of secular spirituality and his assertion that the 'core value of the ethical and spiritual vision' he is exploring, is: 'Active concern for the wellbeing of all'.

<sup>9</sup> In recognition of the tremendous contribution Hick made to the study of Religion, Prozesky published an article in 2012, where he acknowledges the significance of the knowledge Hick produced and its international significance. He also raises five critical points from within the context of African traditional ethics (Murove 2009) and his own explanatory theory of religion (1984).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also Prozesky's (1994) five point response to James Moulder's critique of *A New Guide to the Debate about God* from a 'logician's' perspective. Similar to his argument about 'religious experience', he also rightly criticises Moulder's argument for his 'apophatic' or 'logico-mystical' theology.

the critique and rejection of apartheid, and an embracing of religious plurality. As he says, his notion of ‘conscience’ that he developed later intellectually, was already embedded in these early experiences – that ‘[apartheid] injustice is deeply wrong, and that all people deserve to be treated equally, caringly and fairly’ (Prozesky 2000). His intellectual journey, brought him too, to not only foundationally question the existence of (traditional) theism, but also at least the claims of divine revelation, inspiration and origins of religion as such. ‘[M]ostly with a sense of feeling the way ahead in the dark and being without a map for the journey ahead’, in mid-life, he moved intellectually, as he says, ‘from creed to conscience’, and disciplinary speaking, from Religious Studies into Ethics Studies.

Whereas creed and conscience were previously a ‘harmonious unity’ for him, he found it necessary, in the light of his intellectual endeavours and the conclusions which he arrived at through his studies, to come to a point to ‘deny creed in order to make room for conscience’ (Prozesky 2000). Intellectually, Whitehead’s implicit Philosophical Anthropology and Process Philosophy more generally speaking, were important partners on this journey (Prozesky 1995a; 1999). It also profoundly impacted his own development of process ethics, the main outcome of which, so far, is his *Conscience: Ethical Intelligence for Global Well-Being* (2007)<sup>11</sup>. For Prozesky, and in order to comprehend the discursive significance of *Conscience*, process thought provides an important alternative (and superior) starting point to develop a global ethics, i.e., supplanting the three global grand narratives that proved to be ‘problematic’. These are:

- the liberal political and economic tradition – market sovereignty – with its advancement of individual sovereignty, and exaggerated emphasis on the individual, on the satisfaction of individual material interests, and personal profit (Prozesky 1995a:54; 2000: 187f; 1990:1f; 1999:2);
- the Marxian worldview or Marxism-Leninism with its materialist and collectivist conviction and concomitant suppression of private

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<sup>11</sup> Even though there are only limited references to Whitehead and Process Philosophy in *Religion and Ultimate Well Being*, in our estimation, process thought is nevertheless present in Prozesky’s work since 1979 when he briefly reviewed *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, by John B. Cobb and D.R. Griffin – either explicitly, or implicitly sometimes.

- ownership of the means of production, and specific rights such as the freedom of speech and assembly (Prozesky 1995a:54; 1990:4f); and
- theism, with its subjection of individual responsibility to divine sovereignty and the obedience ethic, which reduces both human liberty and moral responsibility (Prozesky 1990:2-4; 1995a:54; 1999:3,7).

These grand narratives are problematic because of their convoluted notions of 'human existence':

Egocentric individualism, a problematic materialism, harm to egalitarian ideals, to the quest for human liberty and to nature; dualism, and a subtle undermining of the ideal of human responsibility by certain long-standing and pervasive theological notions (Prozesky 1995a:54).

Further, in describing the framework in which he develops his progressive process ethics, what we may call the global cultural trajectories that process ethics responds to, Prozesky lists five what he calls 'cultural trends or forces'. He then briefly discusses:

- the *hegemony* of the market as the *de facto* Grand Narrative of our time;
- the universal quest for *egalitarian liberation* that contests all forms of domination and subservience;
- the experience of *cultural plurality* vis-à-vis systems that propound cultural uniformity;
- the experience of *deconstructive postmodernity* that affirms difference and rejects the modernist project of creating a totally ordered world system; and
- *secularisation*, which rejects any claim of grounding ethics in any form of religion, and the experience and themes of which are prevalent in societies, in their this-worldly lifestyle, globally, whether we want to acknowledge it or not (e.i.o.; Prozesky 1999:2f; 1984:66).

These cultural trends, Prozesky (1999:3f) argues, have not only 'eroded' the obedience ethic of theism, but also caused a 'confused and contested ethical



situation around us’ – a ‘sense that ethics is vanishing and that nobody knows how to prevent its demise’. To some extent, and including the wide variety of new illiberal absolutisms and fundamentalisms that exclude, reject, marginalise and exploit in the world, we can say that as forces impacting and pulling in different directions, they have caused a certain global ethical vacuum where there are no common ethical systems shared between people, nations and countries, that uphold a generally and globally recognised and accepted ethic. It is in this globally-experienced trans-cultural and trans-religious, hiatus, that we see Prozesky sensing the importance and developing of his process ethics, and his ethical notion articulated with ‘conscience’. Together, his related publications form his ‘project of reconstructing and enhancing a mature, post-obedience morality in our time’ or to ‘reshape ethics amidst contemporary global realities’ (Prozesky 1999:12ff, 4). For this, third part of this article, then, we reflect on Prozesky’s linking of his process ethics to Whiteheadian thought (cf. Prozesky 1995a; 1999), and then explicate some of the main tenets of his *Conscience* (2007). The latter is not intelligible without the former.

*Firstly*, if the paradoxes and contradictions within the theistic religions – evident in the discrepancy between ‘creed’ and practice, or more broadly, theology and ethics – are indicators of ‘deicide’, then an uncompromising foundation without any inconsistencies need to be developed, in order to ground ethics. Some pointers in this direction are provided by the centrality of the notions of ‘creativity’ and ‘inner or essential relatedness’ in Whiteheadian thought. He regarded what we in short hand may call, cosmic creativity – which includes human creativity and human freedom of choice – as the ‘ultimate metaphysical category’, the ‘universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact’ (Whitehead [1929] 1969:21,25, in Prozesky 1995a:54). This captures the notion of ‘becoming’ central to his process thought. Faced with different options in reality, humans choose what they think would provide the greatest ‘good’ (or ‘beauty’), the greatest ‘enjoyment’ for them, or the greatest ‘self-realization’, and then act accordingly. If such a choice, or choices and judgements, are valorized in experience, in practice, then humans will continue to make similar choices, and enact them, which, in our understanding, means a cumulative advancement of the self’s benefits, wellness, comforts, security, concerns, or what Prozesky throughout his works inclusively calls, ‘well-being’. This human quest for well-being, Prozesky calls ‘valorizing agency’ (cf. Prozesky 2000:183), and since all human beings – whether they want to know it or not – effect their choices in practice, this leads to both a diversity

inherent in the well-being people experience, as well as the well-being they produce through the systems and structures they create – human beings' conditions of possibility so to speak. In process thought, such diversity is the outcome of cosmic creativity, and human liberty, and to be welcomed and appreciated, and not avoided, ignored or rejected.

Further, if this creativity also applies cosmically – as Whitehead's metaphysics contends – then it is not only human lives that change and transform continuously, but also the cosmos, as such. And this is where Whitehead's notion of 'inner-relatedness' comes in. If humans continuously seek to maximize their own individual well-being cumulatively, such well-being will only be experienced as fully as possible if they act in such a way that their actions would also maximally seek, impact or facilitate the maximal well-being of *all* others, i.e. both humans and the environment, or cosmos. On the contrary, if humans seek their own well-being selfishly or egoistically, this will result in neither their own or others' well-being, nor that of the cosmos. The choice between these two options, and their cumulative qualitative improvement of the quality of life of people – or not – is then in effect a choice between goodness, virtuousness, decency, kindness, honesty, integrity, security on the one hand and evilness, wickedness, mercilessness, cruelty, and selfishness on the other. In terms of the social ethical outcome of the choices one makes according to process thought would then exclude any form of discrimination on the basis of race, class or gender, or any other 'essentially divisive view of the human condition' (Prozesky 1995a:56).

In terms of the interrelated social ethics that derives from Process Philosophy, Prozesky adds 'truthfulness and effective action' to 'goodness'. Concomitantly, he then postulates three moral rules. These are:

- well-being can only be maximal – as we all want it to be – when it is fully [cosmically] inclusive and thus ethical;
- truthfulness [will assure] true and lasting well-being;
- effective action [will assure] well-being that is brought about [or produced], as we all want (Prozesky 2000:185f).

All-inclusive, or holistic, maximal well-being will then come about through the cumulative and continuously increasing of wellness of not only people, but also nature. For its ethical choices for the good in the human lifeworld,

personally, but also socially and systemically (or structurally), Prozesky (2000:186 - 190) argues that people would seek the 'common good'. This needs to be the case in not only politics and economics, but also religion. In African culture, the inclusive and holistic ethic of *ubuntu* captures this ethos (Prozesky 2009a). And for ethical choices concerning their environments and nature, people should conserve, protect, maintain and sustain their ecosystems. In process thought, environmental or ecological ethics, therefore form an integral, ontological part of the quest for human well-being (cf. Prozesky 2009b). Murove (2009) has developed this notion in African context, with regard to the Shona concept of *Ukama*, that represents human 'social, spiritual and ecological togetherness'.

These two perspectives are then not only ontologically but also ethically interrelated in process thought. And, if we practice what we may call the eco-human ethics derived from process thought, it will produce and continuously increase human and natural wellness and well-being as we as humans continue to make rational and logical choices that affirm previous ones for goodness – with regard to fellow human beings as well as our environment, and nature – ... those choices that have been experienced as bringing about goodness and well-being in practice. Prozesky (2000:185) calls this the 'valorizing of experience' in process ethics. And, since such a quest for well-being through learning from experience is also socially shared with fellow human beings in the process paradigm, for Prozesky, this is based on a shared power, or what he calls, the 'valorizing of power' (Prozesky 2000:185). The valorizing of socially-shared power is then the means through which humans collectively seek the best possible eco-human world and culture for themselves as well as all other living creatures – in Whiteheadian terms, 'peace', and for Prozesky, 'inclusive well-being' (cf. Prozesky 1995a:58). This stands in stark contrast to its opposite, viz. power as control, domination, exploitation, or power which is exercised through the obedience ethic, whether sanctioned divinely, scripturally, or secularly. In terms of religion, Prozesky (2000:188) says that,

... there must be a mixed verdict on religion, some of it being seen as ethical and some not, and the criterion to be used is clear: good religion is religion which gives maximum scope for intensities of fulfilled experience marked by creative diversity and which fosters and justifies spiritual convergence. If all power is shared power, then all saving power is also shared.

In summary, we can follow Prozesky (1999:4) as he describes his process ethics as it relates to Whitehead, as,

... a call for us all to participate in the global cultivation of the kind of personal character and societies that will maximize the enjoyment of beauty [goodness] for all in durable conditions of peace and truthfulness [well-being], which in Whitehead's metaphysics would constitute the fulfilment of the deepest potential of both human and cosmic processes.

Secondly, if we accept the foundational notions of cosmic creativity and the inner or essential relatedness of our eco-human world – in which humans participate, for better or worse – the question then arises as to whether it would be possible to develop a global ethic that would include (or better, transcend) the various forms of human cultural (including religious) diversity, deriving from the holistic inclusive eco-human quest for well-being. This is what Prozesky has been driving towards, and of which his *Conscience: Ethical Intelligence for Global Well-being* is a good example. Central to his argument is that 'conscience' is universal – all human beings have a conscience, and its existence and operation could be verified from 'sources' such as 'our shared humanity', the 'common core of sound, longstanding values in the world's religious faiths', our 'human nature' as verified by science, and the 'logical power of reason'<sup>12</sup> (Prozesky 2007:31). Rather than reviewing the vast bulk of thought on the notion of 'conscience' since Plato (on Socrates) and Aristotle through history<sup>13</sup>, Prozesky's notion of conscience – or an 'ethical life' – is grounded in 'ordinary human experience'. He unpacks this view in chapter two of *Conscience* (2007:32 – 64).

Suffice to say, that in line with his process ethics, our ordinary human ethical choices (between good and evil) about which values to enact or practice and which not, would reflect or accumulatively repeat those similar ones that have been confirmed by our experience of earlier ones that resulted in feelings of goodness and well-being – especially those that gave us 'maximum' satisfaction. This would include choices regarding self-sacrifice and delayed

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<sup>12</sup> These four 'sources' provide the thematic focuses for chapters 2 – 5 of *Conscience* (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Schinkel (2007) for a good overview.

satisfaction. This view on conscience, he argues, is corroborated by experiences of the faithful within specific religious traditions throughout history, but also ‘brain science’ or ‘human neurobiology’, with regard to our ‘brain structures’. Central to such experience is our relationality – to wish maximum well-being for both self and other – but also our own ethical creativity. With regard to the common core of religious values – such as love, compassion, truthfulness, justice and sexual decency within and across the religions and their traditions (Prozesky 2007:28) – humanity has experienced, since its earliest founding and practicing of religious notions, that ‘selfishness’ and ‘greed’ self-destructs’. On the other hand, the practicing of values that wish for and affirm the well-being of others, including nature, attests to our commonly shared core values and practices related to ‘generosity’ and ‘inclusive concern’ of the other. These trans-religious values, including those processmatically affirmed in secular life and its philosophies, as well as in non-theistic religious cultural traditions are: generosity, integrity, truthfulness, respect, justice and fairness, inclusiveness, responsible caring effort, freedom and beauty. These values, and how they are practiced not only inside religions, but trans-religiously and especially in our increasingly secularized world, could well be the core of values that should undergird a global ethic. They transcend culture, religion, race, gender, ethnicity, and any other exclusionary social formation, and should be practiced inclusively of *all*. They also resonate with the values espoused in the globally significant declaration of a global ethic (Küng & Kuschel 1993) as well as those advanced by Kidder (1994)<sup>14</sup> (Prozesky 2007:98 – 145). Individually speaking, these values – including those he himself advocate – should not remain rules and codes on paper, so to speak, but be actively practiced. As such, they could be operationalized as ‘steps to personal growth’ and character building (Prozesky 2007:148 – 164). A precondition, though is that we commit to the following:

- to strengthen our own moral character;

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<sup>14</sup> The former was the outcome of the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, and the latter a product of the U.S.A. Institute for Global Ethics, under the leadership of Rushworth M. Kidder. It needs to be pointed out though that Prozesky developed his own notion of a global ethic independently of these two proposals.

- to ensure that our *contacts* with others – our relationships – foster well-being;
- to make our *contexts* – such as family and workplace – as humanly rich and supportive as possible;
- to value *cultural diversity*; and
- to use whatever *controlling* powers we have to foster strong ethical leadership (e.i.o. Prozesky 2007:147).

### **Brief Concluding Reflections**

As said, we think Prozesky's thought, throughout the just over fifty years of his scholarly engagements, provide a very important corpus of knowledge – both academic and practical – for the study of Religion and Ethics. This is so not only for South and southern Africa, but for the global South, as well as the so-called 'West', as *Conscience* (2007) argues. A more comprehensive analysis, interpretation, problematization, contextualization and further development of his thought and work is still outstanding. In order to assist in this endeavor, we make a few brief comments. For these, we shall remain within the parameters of this chapter<sup>15</sup>.

- Prozesky's unpacking and critique of apartheid need to be extended to other international socio-political systems articulated with religions or specific religious traditions within the (world) religions, as well as secular systems (such as exist in the U.S.A.). Amongst others – to be produced – his focus on apartheid and critique of apartheid Christianity in the light of its own 'love ethic', can serve as test case or case study for others, focusing on fellow world religions or religious traditions. And, as he has done for the post-apartheid state, we need to continue to advocate for religious justice, or the equal accommodation of the religions, religious

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<sup>15</sup> As such, we are not dealing with Prozesky's publications after 2007. With regard to his notion of 'well-being', or rather, 'maximum well-being', readers are advised to especially consult his, in our opinion, very important publication in the *Journal for the Study of Religion* in 2014, as well as related publications after 2007, in which he reflects on 'ethics and the future'.

traditions and their practices in the world's (nation) states (cf. Prozesky 1995b).

- His development of a global ethics can in theory be accommodated by all the world's religions and religious traditions, feminist ethics, secular moralities, eco-ethical movements, LGBTQ rights, or, in his words, the world's great current 'streams of consciousness' (Prozesky 2007: 131f). Yet, we need to see what the results are when we engage these from within Prozesky's global ethics, or his notion of 'ethical intelligence' – as captured in the title of *Conscience* – which all humans in principle share.
- Throughout his works, but especially in *Conscience* (2007), Prozesky frequently refers to important historical figures whose ethical choices and behaviour – following conscience – serve as global examples. These, amongst others, include Abraham Lincoln, Florence Nightingale, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. (impacted on by Gandhi amongst others), Nelson Mandela, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. To our mind, these figures do not merely serve as examples, but represent the experiences and related ethical choices of people who lived in the same socio-political contexts. In terms of the global significance of their ethical choices – following conscience – their thought and choices, then serve as samples of what we would like to call global ethical experience. As such, it is the accumulation of global ethical experience – that ethical experience that transcends culture, race, gender, ethnicity, class, and other related exclusionary or demeaning social formations – that Prozesky has shown that cumulatively effects a global conscience, that basically usher in a global ethic. These examples and experiences have transcended those 'evil' systems which it opposed, such as Nazism, Stalinism, apartheid, American wars (such as under G.W. Bush), jihad intolerance and violence, amongst others. As Prozesky argued, these latter systems basically effect 'deicide' with regard to traditional theisms, and we can add 'the death of man' (Foucault 1970) with regard to secular cognitive disciplinary materialisms, in knowledge production and in practice.
- Closely related to the exemplary figures who exhibited a global conscience

in history, are those individuals, social movements and formations, who, in the face of suffering and exploitation, did not propagate revenge and retribution, but values of equality, social and economic justice, freedom, truthfulness, fairness, honesty and generosity. In sum, these comprise inclusive interrelatedness that transcends evil – what Prozesky calls ‘deep ethical value’ or ‘magnanimity’ (cf. for example Prozesky 2007:100ff). Amongst these we may count the founders of the world religions, but in the twentieth century, also those who struggled against the various forms of colonial and neo-colonial, as well as apartheid oppressions, discriminatory practices and attitudes, and labor, agricultural, industrial and market exploitations. The test case for them and their followers, though is whether they have and continue to ethically transcend the evils they have experienced (as applicable), once in power.

- Concerning power, and since he has lived through, witnessed the effects and criticized apartheid, Prozesky on the one hand assumes implicitly or explicitly criticizes the notion of what we may call, ‘power as domination’ or ‘power without conscience’ (cf. for example Prozesky 2007:23). Such power is obvious in oppressive, discriminatory and exploitative systems, as was evident in apartheid and especially pertinently obvious in the perpetration of state violence during the times of so-called ‘national emergency’. Yet, he also advocates his notion of what he calls the ‘valorizing of power’ – shared power. This is very important since it assumes that people from diverse cultures and religions who act together – as we for instance saw in the various anti-apartheid and ecumenical movements in 1980s South Africa – may bring about the necessary and inevitable transformations longed for and required. Goodness will always triumph over evil.
- Further, and here we want to differ from Prozesky. He asserts that ‘knowledge is power’ (Prozesky 2007:99). He says this in the context of the progressive and increasing of the information age’s production of systems for what we may call the democratization of knowledge and information. Just two points. This may be true for those systems that have ‘goodness’ and ‘generosity’ as aim. But it is equally true of those systems which sow ideological discontent, violence and brutality. Secondly, power articulates with knowledge or knowledges, through various



systems – imaginary as well as materially – that can impact the quality of human life detrimentally. Many of these systems are systems we are currently living through in the world, and implicitly accept. The point though is, that they themselves are in need of critical scrutiny and critique, through what we may call, a critique of ‘knowledge-power’.

- In our opinion, and concurring with Prozesky, we believe, no-one is exempt from the effects of secularization in the world. Over the last two decades it has especially impacted people in extremely diverse contexts through what we may call the democratization of knowledge and information globally. The so-called ‘Arab Spring’ is a case in point, and more closer to home, the ‘#Feesmustfall student movement in South Africa. So, religions, and religious traditions, especially those cloistered and self-enclosed religions and religious traditions should open up to a larger understanding of the world – because that is happening in any case, whether we acknowledge it or not. And we think that this is where Prozesky’s notion of conscience, also as we expounded it in this article, could be helpful. This would enhance the global humanness and ecological sensitivity and care we need interrelatedly as well as ecologically. As Prozesky advocates, for this we need leaders of character and commitment, leaders who articulate and represent socially and ecologically responsible decisions and who can lead by example.
- Granted that Prozesky was the founding director and head of the Unilever Ethics Centre, also contributed immensely to the ethics of accountants and auditors, and also sporadically refer to the impact of ‘environment’ (for good or ill) on people – together with colleagues, some of whom have published in this Festschrift – we need more ethically critical engagements of societies, organizations, companies, unions, businesses, clubs, corporations, political parties, etc. It is at this level, in our opinion, that the world globally, and South Africa more particularly suffer tremendously. Officials and functionaries are not held to account for their decisions, actions, and systems they create and enact. And, what we witness is that so-called systemic corruption and eco-destruction, is rampant. In addition to the fostering of a global ethic of character and commitment (‘inwardness’), we need a global ethic of organizational responsibility and responsivity a global ethic of externality or

outwardness. We need collective values in terms of which we, the global populace can hold these companies, political formations, power-holders and fellow socio-religious formations to account.

- Prozesky is well known for championing the notion of 'well-being' to capture both the transcendental realities we as humans create to represent our most inner wishes for 'ultimate' or universal wellness but also our this-worldly wellness. We shall not say anything further on this, except for linking this to Prozesky's notion of conscience. In a number of contexts in *Conscience* (and in some of his other publications), Prozesky suggests that our consciences are not given once and for all. A conscience is subject to 'learning', 'growth', and a process of 'maturation' (cf. for instance 2007:50,69,88,113,149). As such, he also applies this to the epochs of human existence, saying that our current secular phase is the latest such epoch or phase of human ethical life. As phase, it also captures Geering's (1991) distinctions between ethno- or indigenous, trans-ethnic and secular/ global moralities (cf. Prozesky 133 – 136). In the face of our globalising world, we think, these distinctions are helpful<sup>16</sup>. The important point, though is the emphasis that Prozesky places on the learning aspect of conscience or ethical living or 'ethical fitness'. Apart from growing up in ethically responsible households – as he himself has experienced – we also importantly need the putting in place and practicing of learning or educational systems that foster ethical or conscientious living, and that globally.
- Finally, about the notion of transformation, we want to raise two issues. *Firstly*, Prozesky uses this concept to refer to *personal transformation*, i.e. to come to 'faith' or conversion. Now this is a specifically religious experience, and to our mind prevalent in all the religions and religious traditions of the world, and in various forms of manifestation, and incidence. We think Prozesky does not make enough of this in his theorizing of conscience. And, if we need to convince others about the importance of a coming to or even 'converting to' a global ethic, then such

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<sup>16</sup> In terms of our post-modern condition, we have to keep these together as they are believed and practiced alongside each other, or in different hybridities – not without the requisite critique though.

an ‘experience’ need to be worked for in more social formations globally than at present. In this endeavor, what we called ‘global ethical experience’, or following Prozesky we can call it ‘deep ethical experience’, is important. *Secondly*, we have lived through and witnessed the *transformation of South Africa* from the rule, control and dominance of a racist white minority regime to a non-racial, non-sexist, and non-sectarian democratic dispensation. We have also seen a new Constitution, and democratic elections. Yet, the structural inequality that we inherited from the oppressive and exploitative colonial and apartheid systems, continue to produce wide-spread and abject poverty. We believe, that in South Africa, there is no greater challenge than this for our generation. We also believe that academe should provide intellectual leadership – produce the requisite discourse and discursive practices – that could effect radical socio-economic transformation structurally and in practice, at the different socio-economic levels needed in this regard. As such we can talk of the quest for socio-economic well-being in South and southern Africa, but also globally speaking.

Above and beyond the significance and impacts Prozesky’s thought has already had, it will undoubtedly continue in future, and that globally. This is especially so for what we may call a Prozeskian philosophical anthropology of the human ‘drive to maximize well-being’. In his thought, with this notion – which can be applied to both the multiple and variable human quests for ‘ultimate’ and/ or this-worldly existential well-being, collectively, and in harmony with nature, – he completes what Whiteheadian metaphysics and a process ethics lack. Whitehead has not developed a ‘teleology’ of human existence. As such, his metaphysics as well as his philosophical anthropology – his ‘position on human existence and human nature’ – is ‘in some respects incomplete’ (cf. Prozesky 1995:59). With the various analyses, arguments and contextualisations, with which Prozesky has advanced his own notion of ‘well-being’ over more than forty years of work, Prozesky though, made his own distinctive, unique and insightful contribution to, but also moved beyond, both process metaphysics and ethics. He in fact, produced what Whitehead lacked. And while we live through a period characterized by the ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’ (Lyotard 1984), not least colonizing meta-narratives, and narratives of empire, you have made your mark, and made it decisively, Martin. We honour you for that Martin, not least, your bravery.

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# Tomorrow's Ethics in a Globalizing World

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## **Abstract**

The exploration of the ways ethical practice will change in the future is done in this article by means of five great transitions. They are as follows: firstly, from the ethics of obedience to an ethic of creative commitment; secondly, from a primary concern with micro-ethics to an equal and even greater concern with macro-ethics; thirdly, from a cluster of regional value systems to a cooperatively created global ethic; in the fourth place, from a conceptual base in western philosophy and theology to an academic base in the social and natural sciences; and in the fifth place, from dependence on religion in important parts of the world, including ours, to what I want to call a relationship with religion characterized by cooperative, critical and creative independence for ethics.

**Keywords:** ethic of creative commitment, macro-ethics, a cooperatively created global ethic, academic base in the social and natural sciences, a relationship with religion

## **Introduction**

In speaking of ethics and morality I have in mind behaviour on the basis of values accepted as right and good, rather than the academic study of such behaviour, though I will refer to this second, academic and important meaning of the word towards the end of this article. While the emphasis will mostly be on what I see as the future of ethics, its present and past character will also receive comment. This is because I approach my subject by means of five great transitions from the present and past to what I believe the informed conscience of humankind will emphasize in the decades to come and beyond in relation to new problems.



These transitions are as follows: Firstly, from what I shall call the ethics of obedience to an ethic involving personal, creative moral commitment and responsibility; secondly, from an age-old and important primary concern with micro-ethics to an equal and even greater concern with macro-ethics; thirdly, from a moral landscape marked by a cluster of regional value systems to a cooperatively created global ethic; in the fourth place, from an academic and conceptual base in western philosophy and theology to an inter-disciplinary, academic base that also involves the social and natural sciences; and in the fifth place, from ethical dependence on religion in important parts of the world where religious observance is widespread, like South Africa and evidently also the USA, to what I want to call a relationship with religion characterized by cooperative, critical and creative independence for ethics in its relationship with religion. I shall now discuss these five great transitions in turn.

## **1 From the Ethics of Obedience to an Ethic of Creative Commitment**

Cambridge religious and ethical thinker Don Cupitt has written that in our time humanity is moving from the mode of the soldier to the mode of the artist (Cupitt: 2013; see also 1995). He has in mind the sweeping change of consciousness and culture that has radically changed much, though not yet all, of the human world, as people embrace creative, responsible liberty and throw off subjection to the rule of kings, autocratic chiefs, imperialists and dictators, who all demand obedient subjects, by force if necessary.

In his own words:

The general idea is that I want to replace the ecclesiastical idea of the believer as a soldier (*miles Christi*) who fits into a vast institution that provides him with a complete set of authorities to obey, things to believe, laws to live by, approved rituals to follow, etc., and to replace that now outmoded disciplinarian model with a new image of the believer as the artist of his (or her) own life. He (or she) works on a blank canvas, discovering and projecting out his (or her) own lifestyle or 'spirituality'. We become who we are by finding out how we can

best and most fully express ourselves, and be at ease in life. We should have been changing over from ecclesiastical to 'kingdom' religion during the nineteenth century. Instead, we lapsed into stifling nostalgia and neo-conservatism (Cupitt 2013).

Cupitt captures autocratic regimes with the symbol of the soldier, perhaps the best example of obedience to commands by superiors. By contrast, the artist stands for the creative freedom of which all of us are capable and which we begin to enjoy in conditions of genuine democracy.

Given my work in the fields of ethics and religion, it is the philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) whose wisdom further highlights the nature of this first great transition from the ethics of obedience to an ethic of creative commitment. Thus, in the preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant would write in 1781 that, 'the present age is in especial degree an age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit' (Kant 1933: 9, note a). In view of Kant's enormous influence on our understanding of ethics, it is obvious that for him, ethics itself must also be subjected to critical evaluation, including ethics as taught by religion.

Whitehead's wisdom is, for my purposes, best found in connection with creativity, which he described as 'the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact' (Whitehead 1978: 21). What he means is that the world we experience is governed not by emperors or despots but by a power of creative thought and action available to us all and at work throughout the universe.

What do these great thinkers imply for ethics as the doing of that which is held to be right and good? They mean that it is time for humanity to move on from the belief that we get our ethical values in a top-down way in the form of commands requiring obedience.

This is a very ancient notion. The first evidence of it that I have been able to locate is in the famous Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, compiled around 1800 BCE. A stone pillar was found on which was inscribed the Code. The top of the pillar contains a depiction of the deity Shamash, god of justice, delivering to the king the symbols of royal authority, so commissioning him to write the laws of the Code. Clearly, this is top-down mode. The message is clear enough: doing the right thing means that people must obey the king, who must obey the gods if they are polytheists and a single god if they are monotheists.

We find the same notion deeply embedded in other cultures of the past, including ones that are influential today. Examples are the Laws of Manu in the Hindu ethical tradition and, let it be acknowledged with the same respect, in the biblical Ten Commandments. What are commandments if not a device intended for and effective in cultures in obedience mode?

The transition from obedience to creative commitment in ethics is not so much about the *content* of instruments like those I have mentioned, though it too is seen by many as also falling under Kant's principle of universal critical freedom. The transition is chiefly about the *way* we do ethics. With due respect for the guidance of top-down ethics when we humans were an unlettered lot, doubled over by the sheer demands of keeping alive and fearful of the lash of those who sat upon their thrones, those days are now ending.

They are ending in politics with the coming of genuinely democratic systems. They are coming under radical challenge in the economic sphere as challenges mount to the control of wealth by the very wealthy few, or of the very powerful few as we saw in the old Soviet Union. We have seen them happening, albeit incompletely, in important parts of religion, such as the Protestant Reformation, as in congregational forms of church government. We are seeing it in the feminist transformations of gender injustice in society and in the worlds of faith, and we have seen it in the processes of secularization as they contested old forms of religious control. And the same revolution has been happening to ethics as it too moves from obedience to creative responsibility.

It is important to understand why and how ethics is undergoing this great change of mode and, in part, also of content, a matter which is discussed in the next section. It is happening because we humans are by nature creative beings equipped with the ability to think and develop strong values for ourselves. Doing things by means of imposed power requiring obedience runs counter to the discovery of our own independent ability to think, value and act for ourselves, including the need to do so responsibly and not selfishly. That is why in modern times, especially since the European Enlightenment, so many people are discovering the top-down mode of doing things as captivity, not liberation, and simply walking away from it into the challenging but enormously enriching experience of choosing the freedom to think, believe, value and live as responsible, creative adults in partnership with our fellow adults as equal beings. In ethics this liberation leads to a growing awareness that the ethical mode of the past, still with us, cannot meet the new challenges of today and tomorrow's world. This takes us to my remaining four transitions.

## **2 From Micro-ethics to Macro-ethics**

By micro-ethics I mean doing what is right and good at an inter-personal and thus small-scale level, like telling somebody the truth, lending them a helping hand and never stealing or striking anybody. If we think for a moment of the words of the second half of the Ten Commandments, we will see that they have this inter-personal character. As an essential part of moral character-building, this is absolutely vital. It is also what we'd expect in the ethics of small-scale communities in the agricultural and pastoral periods, and, I would add, in situations where very, very few people, if any, were able to sit back and think carefully and critically about the rights and wrongs of large-scale issues in entire cultures, such as why there is poverty or whether traditional monarchies can be ethically justified.

Things are more complex in our world of increasing personal freedom and equality – the world of my first great transition. It is also an age of information with the rise of new areas of knowledge like the natural and social sciences and modern history, giving us rich new insights into the way cultures and their constituent structures work and how to change them. The result is a keen awareness of the macro forces at work in our world. These are the embedded ways things are done in whole societies and civilizations. Let me mention some examples.

There is the way power is used, whether by self-serving elites or by all the people. There is the way the means of creating wealth are owned, such as land, machinery and knowledge itself. There is the status of people, as defined by class, religion, language, gender and skin colour.

What recent experience has shown people is that these macro structures are human creations or artefacts, not brute facts that cannot be changed. For example, we have discovered that the so-called 'divine right of kings' is a self-serving myth with nothing divine about it. Many of us are discovering similar self-serving myths about the contention that men are by nature entitled to power over women.

With this in mind we can now focus on the ethics of macro-structures and forces. Its initial project is to evaluate all such structures for how well or badly they meet core ethical values like justice, respect, responsible freedom and truth. Are women really equal citizens with men in the world? Are our political structures honourable and fair towards all, or just a voting majority? Does the failure of communism mean that capitalism is ethical and if not, what

would be? In short, the initial project of macro-ethics is the unmasking of all structures of domination and oppression.

As we saw earlier, Kant contended that religion is also subject to this project of critical ethical evaluation. This important task is, however, fraught with potential for deep misunderstanding, hostility and even conflict because it touches on things about which many people are passionate. The passion is entirely understandable, for religion, as theologian Paul Tillich once explained, is about that which concerns us ultimately. (Tillich 1957).

The problem is that people understand their ultimate concerns very differently. Let me mention just one example of the difference. For some believers, their faith and its sacred texts are seen in their entirety as divine truth and therefore, of necessity, without moral or factual blemish. At the opposite end of the spectrum there are others, no less upright, who argue with great passion that nothing in religion can be divine truth because there is no divine being. I have in mind people like Richard Dawkins and the other proponents of the new atheism (Dawkins 2006). For them, religion is entirely a human creation and just as beset with flaws as any other artefact, if not more so.

Then we find yet other people for whom religion – their own and other people’s – is seen as a mixture of things that have a divine source, making them ethically perfect in their eyes, and others that are humanly created and at times anything but good. One example of the latter would be Christians who regard biblical injunctions about the subordinate place of women as gravely immoral, or who judge biblical passages condemning gay and lesbian people just as negatively, while on the other hand accepting the ethics of love taught by Christ as an ultimate good.

So the macro-ethical project of ethically interrogating religion is one that calls for the utmost sensitivity. But it is happening, and is of the greatest importance. It does immense harm to people and the structures in which they live when flawed and at times dangerous arrangements are declared by those with power and influence to be divinely authorized, and therefore unalterable. What else were reformers like Luther, Calvin, Ignatius Loyola, Muhammad and the classical Hebrew prophets doing but unmasking evils which some powerful people had deemed sacred? So the ethical criticism and transformation of religion is not new. What is new is how radical and complex the unmasking of macro-wrongs has become.

The second part of the macro-ethics is to correct what is found wrong. As a believer in the power of the good, I believe the project will succeed over

time, but it will not be easy. Those who benefit from macro-level injustice and deception will not easily give up their spoils. But we of goodwill can take cheer. In the long run, ethics defeats empires. Whose project has won, that of Moses or that of the once mighty Pharaoh, that of Christ or that of Caesar, that of Muhammad or that of the rulers of Mecca in his day?

### **3 From Provincial to Global Ethics**

My term 'the cultural geography of ethics' defines the present situation of the world's ethical traditions. They comprise a set of cultural regions in which a particular ethical tradition is dominant, for example Hindu ethics in India and the Hindu diaspora, or Christian ethics in Europe and wherever European missionaries, invaders and settlers went.

If the world were a single country, its ethical character could be called highly federal, even confederal, with a set of moral provinces each with its own, largely religious and largely autonomous, approach to ethics. One ethical province, that of the aggressive secular humanism championed by thinkers like A.C. Grayling (2013) and Richard Dawkins (2006), is not on respectful terms with the others and wants to convert them every bit as much as some of the heavily religious provinces have sought militantly to make converts of everybody if possible, and in some cases still do.

The eminent New Zealand scholar Lloyd Geering provides a helpful model of the history of ethics which will deepen our understanding of the cultural geography of ethics. He discerns three great overlapping stages, separated by two great transitions or thresholds, as he calls them (Geering 1991: 8-13, cf. Geering 1980: 29-91).

The first and earliest he calls ethnic ethics. Humankind existed as a multitude of distinct ethnic communities, defined by language, territory, religion, culture and kinship. These existed in all the habitable continents for many thousands of years. Distance, geographical barriers and at times hostilities kept them away from and ignorant of all but a few neighbouring ethnic communities. In them what we today distinguish as ethics and religion formed a seamless whole and today's secularism seems to have been unknown, in the sense that everybody followed the ethnic faith and ethic of their community.

Around 2500 years ago this age-old pattern began to change radically in what Geering calls the First Threshold. (Geering 1980: 29-48). Across Asia,

from the China Sea to the Aegean in a century or two, there appeared a set of remarkable individuals who offered a vision and practice of religion and ethics that transcended ethnic and other human boundaries. In China there was Confucius and Lao Tzu; in India, the Buddha and the Mahavira, in Persia, perhaps somewhat earlier, Prophet Zoroaster; in Ancient Israel the Hebrew prophets who offered a universal spiritual vision, and in Ancient Greece, somewhat later, great thinkers like Socrates, Aristotle and especially Plato, who created what might be called European philosophical ethics.

The teachings of these remarkable luminaries proved attractive enough to begin to draw people from very different ethnic societies into them, giving rise to major new, cross-cultural ethical and spiritual traditions like Vedanta, Confucianism, Buddhism and Jainism. These Geering calls the trans-ethnic traditions, and it is their further development that saw the beginnings of the two most widely spread and followed forms of trans-ethnic morality, through the lives and messages of Jesus of Nazareth and Prophet Muhammad. It is the rise and immense success of these trans-ethnic moralities and faiths that gives the world its present ethical provinces, with a few remaining ethnic moralities in Africa and elsewhere.

Geering's Second Threshold is a much more recent development, riding on the liberated intellectual power of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the rise of the sciences and on some features of the Protestant Reformation, like personal access to the Bible. This more recent threshold of radical change is none other than the transition Don Cupitt epitomizes as the move from the mode of the soldier to the mode of the artist.

I have already indicated some of its effects. The most important one is a growing awareness that the ethical challenges of a globalizing world cannot be handled by a set of regional or provincial moralities – Geering's trans-ethnic moralities – embedded as they are in very different religious beliefs with a history of and potential for future conflict in some cases.

Globalization is making the world one country in matters of the environment, economy, trade, communications and some sporting codes like football and athletics. Each of these powerful new realities brings new and important ethical problems, from pollution to internet invasions of privacy and match-fixing. They call for a cooperative, creative project supported by people of good will in all religious faiths, and none, to build a genuinely global ethic in the form of an agreed set of core values and an agreed account of why they should be practised.

Valuable, early work in this direction has been done by people like Hans Küng (Küng 1997) and Rushworth Kidder (Kidder 1994). It is also an emphasis in my own recent work on comparative ethics (Prozesky 2007: 98-145), but much more needs to be done. Moreover, success in constructing a global ethic depends on whether or not the last two of my five great transitions to tomorrow's ethics take place or not. Let me turn to them now.

#### **4 From an Academic Base in Western Philosophy and Theology to a Multi-disciplinary Academic Base**

At least in the western countries and those academically influenced by them, like South Africa, the study of morality is mostly seen as the province of our philosophers and theologians. Nobody who has even a basic familiarity with the work of moral philosophers like Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Rawls and others can fail to be enriched by the power of their insights into the moral domain. No other discipline, in my experience, brings to that domain such sophisticated powers of analysis and explanation. The future of ethics must therefore continue to be illuminated by philosophy.

Another of the benefits philosophy brings to ethics is the fact that its primary, if not only, instrument, reason, can in principle be free of cultural and religious confinements, being a universal human capacity. Logicality is the same everywhere, like mathematics, or so we are told.

The world is of course intellectually broader than the philosophy of the west, and in the global ethics of the future we need to see other strands of this discipline at work, such as Indian, Chinese, Islamic and African.

Theology is the other discipline traditionally concerned with ethics in many parts of the west. Here too work of immense value has been done, such as the theological ethics of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Barth 1957, Bonhoeffer 2005) and their equivalents in other faith traditions like Judaism's Jonathan Sacks (Sacks 2002) and the Dalai Lama (Dalai Lama 1999). One does not have to share the beliefs of these theological ethicists to derive great ethical value from their work, because, despite very real differences in what the different faiths believe to be the source of the good, they are substantially agreed about core values like compassion, justice and truthfulness, a reality of the greatest importance for creating a global ethic by building moral partnerships on those common core values. This, of course, brings us back briefly to the quest for a global ethic.



It is of the greatest importance that such agreed, core values exist independently in so many cultures, and perhaps in all of them, because it means that none had to be taught good, basic morals by outsiders. The various cultures can then come into a partnership for global ethics as genuine equals. In addition, what they share as basic moral values can be used to manage the important reality of their moral divergences on matters like marriage, food, the death penalty and abortion with wisdom and due respect rather than misunderstanding, hostility and even conflict.

That ethics based on the different theological beliefs of the various religions can do great good in the moral provinces where those beliefs are widely held is clear. Islamic ethics can do much more good in Indonesia, for example, than in Canada. But it is also clear that a global ethic cannot be based on the beliefs of our religions, because whatever creed or teaching any of us believes, at least two-thirds of our fellow human beings, no less honourable and informed than we are, see it as mistaken.

What we can all share is the knowledge produced by the natural and social sciences. Disciplines like neurobiology, psychology, sociology and even physics can all deepen our understanding of our moral nature, not to speak of the insights of history, literature, political studies, education and religion studies. To deal with global evils like mass poverty, corruption, climate change and exploitation we need the best possible understanding, which can only come from all relevant disciplines.

## **5 From Dependence on Religion to Cooperative Independence**

The last of the transitions to tomorrow's ethics takes us back to religion. That our faith traditions are powerful carriers of moral values, that they have their own highly effective sources of moral motivation, like the promise of a coming Day of Judgement where the actions of the individual will be weighed up and judged by a deity, and that their founding figures were people of the greatest moral stature, is clear to any fair-minded and informed person.

It is, unfortunately, also clear that because of their quite fundamental differences and because there is no prospect of any one of them converting the whole world, the global ethics we need cannot have a religious foundation. The world is not going to get ethically better because the Bible says it should, or

the Gita, the Qur'an, or the Humanist Manifesto, because most people on this planet do not see these texts as authoritative the way insiders do.

So we will have to find an inclusive basis for a global ethic elsewhere. To be fair to everybody, that base must be accessible to and authoritative for all people alike. So it must be independent of religion. Where could we find it? My proposal is that our primary source will be the human nature we all share, made known to us by the biological sciences and our own self-awareness.

When Marxism was still highly influential in parts of academia there was disdain for the idea of human nature – understood as an unchangeable, biological fact – evidently because of suspicion that the idea was a king pin of ideologies of capitalist domination. Sciences like genetics and human neurobiology have refuted this view, and we now know that we are born with certain characteristics that cannot change, like the capacity of the brain to learn languages and develop a moral sense of right and wrong, involving innate characteristics like our drives to meet our own needs and interests, and at the same time our natural concerns and feelings for others.

Such a source is open to all people equally. Supported by the findings of the natural and human sciences, along with but not limited to the fruits of religious ethics, it can be the foundation of the global ethic we must build if there is to be a worthwhile future on this planet, or even any future at all for humanity. And while it must, for the best ethical reasons of fairness and inclusivity, be independent of our religions, I reject the contentions of the new atheists that it must oppose religion, for two reasons.

Firstly, the critiques of religion provided by Dawkins (2006) and most recently by A.C. Grayling (2013) are too ill-informed about the religions they condemn to succeed in the eyes of any who really understand religion, mainly through neglect of the exceedingly important reality of religious experience, and secondly because global ethics needs the support of religious believers. They are a large majority of the world's people. That some of the things they believe and do are validly criticized by the new atheists must be conceded. That is by no means a death sentence for believers, though it is a reminder that human believing is not made infallible by being deemed the gift of the gods, which is itself an instance of human believing, and humans are not gods and not infallible.

Therefore my call is not for the ethics of tomorrow's world to be rid of religion, as the new atheists would have it be, but for religion to be more attentive to its own moral quality or lack of it, as judged by its own norms in

the first instance and attentive also to the critique of outsiders, and in that way be the cooperative partner of ethics, recognizing it as a sovereign, independent sphere in the human project of changing this morally troubled planet of ours for the better.

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## **Editorships**

Martin Prozesky was the founding editor of the official journal of the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa (ARSA), the journal *Religion in Southern Africa*, which appeared twice a year from January 1980 till July 1987. Thereafter, it was renamed the *Journal for the Study of Religion (in Southern Africa)*, and he continued as the Founding Editor, latterly with

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P.S. Maxwell as Executive Editor, until the end of 1998.

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### **Other Publications**

Over 200 newspaper articles published to date.

### **Non-academic Books**

2003. *Frontiers of Conscience: Exploring Ethics in a New Millennium*. Pietermaritzburg: Equinym Publishing.
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### **Dissertations**

1976. *A Critical Examination of the Pietistic Element in the Religious Philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher*. Unpublished D.Phil. dissertation. University of Rhodesia, Salisbury.

### **Student Dissertations (A Selection)**

#### **Master of Arts**

1999. Munyaradzi Felix Murove: *The Shona Concept of Ukama and the Process Philosophical Concept of Relatedness with Special Reference to the Ethical Implications of Contemporary Neo-liberal Economic Practices*.

1982. James Massey: *The Process Metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead and its Expression in a Christian Pastoral Ministry.*

1977. Ian Douglas Darby: *Anglican Worship in Victorian Natal.*

### **Doctor of Philosophy**

2007. Domoka Lucinda Manda: *The Importance of the African Ethic of Ubuntu and Traditional Healing Systems for Black South African Women in the Context of HIV and AIDS.*

1993. Alrah Llewellyn Major Pitchers: *A Critical Examination of the Christology of Hans Küng.*

1989. Roger John Cazziol: *A Comparative Study of Christian Missions in Swaziland, 1845-1968.*

1986. Robert Neville Richardson: *Christian Community and Ethics: Critical Reflections on the Nature and Function of the Church in the Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas.*

1983. Robert George Clarke: *For God or Caesar: An Historical Study of Christian Resistance to Apartheid by the Church of the Province of South Africa 1946-1957.*

1982. Ian Douglas Darby: *The Soteriology of Bishop John William Colenso.*

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Since 2014, we have engaged with a further growing and development of our *Journal for the Study of Religion (in Southern Africa) (JSR)*.

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*Journal for the Study of Religion (in Southern Africa)* (1988 – the present)

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