



# After Religion — What?

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**Abstract:** In 1912 the great sociologist Durkheim defined ‘the division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane’ as ‘the distinctive trait of religious thought’.

This definition works very well for tribal religions and for medieval religion, but in the modern West something very odd has been happening. The sacred world seems to be changing, declining, or even disappearing altogether.

For Hegel the merging of the sacred world into the profane world began with the Incarnation, and its completion is the fulfilment of Christianity. Marx, following Hegel, translates the old history of salvation into a new revolutionary political ideology. Nietzsche, more radically, sees ‘the Death of God’ as leading to nihilism. When humans have become completely demythologized, and have lost all their old guiderails and landmarks, what will they live by?

I hold that after nihilism religion must return into ordinary language, everyday life, and solar living in the present moment. This new religion of life began to appear as early as Wordsworth, and has recently become prominent in our everyday speech.

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In his book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912; Eng.Trans. 1915), the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim lays down the most widely-quoted modern definition of religion:

The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought.

Durkheim points out that sacred things are very diverse: they may include spirit-beings, beliefs, times, persons, rituals, buildings, spaces, amulets, traditions and institutions. What is sacred is normally powerful and higher-ranking, but there are cases where people may treat something sacred with great casualness, and even disrespect. The most general characteristic of the sacred is that it is profoundly Other: so different that in order to ascend from the profane world into the sacred world you must undergo a deep transformation. You need to purify yourself, and perhaps pass through a death and rebirth, a rite of passage.

So says Durkheim; and his definition was always accepted as authoritative by the great Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade, whose enormous output spanned some sixty years. But as he began his last three-volume *History of Religious Ideas* (Volume 1, 1975), Eliade announced that he would end his history with

... the sole, but important, religious creation of the modern Western world. I refer to the ultimate stage of desacralization ... the complete camouflage of the ‘sacred’ — more precisely, its identification with the ‘profane’.

In the end, Eliade’s health did not allow him to finish his projected book, but he clearly held

that in the modern West religion as it has existed hitherto has either ended abruptly, or at least has undergone a major transformation. The sacred world has simply disappeared. It has become engulfed by the profane world, amalgamated with it in such a way that it survives only as scattered scraps of what is nowadays called 'Heritage'.

The end of the sacred world was announced by a number of important thinkers during the nineteenth century. For Hegel it had first begun with the Incarnation of God in Christ, whereby the sacred world comes down into the unfolding process of human history. Protestantism then takes the Christian project one whole stage further, by closing down the religious orders, and proclaiming instead the sanctity of ordinary, profane marriage and domestic life. Eventually the historical development of Christianity unifies the two worlds.

Karl Marx followed Hegel in accepting that all reality is historical, but for him historical change and development are ultimately brought about, not by the dialectical movement of *ideas* as in Hegel, but by the interplay of *material forces*. This means that Marx does not acknowledge any sort of ideal or metaphysical order that shapes the course of history. On the contrary, history for Marx is a realm of physical struggles. Hegel might claim that his philosophy included and fulfilled Christianity, but Marxism became one of the most straightforwardly and dogmatically antireligious of all philosophies. For Marx, there is nothing sacred.

Then at the end of the nineteenth century Nietzsche sums up the crisis in Western thought which he announces in the famous phrase, 'the Death of God'. He is far more sceptical than either Hegel or Marx about the implications of the new historical, humanistic, this-worldly, and now darwinian outlook that we in the West have come to. He attacks almost every residually-theological belief that we have left to us — the beliefs in One great and good Reality out there, one Truth out there, one sense that everything makes out there, and one goal of life waiting out there for us. On the contrary, nothing says that it must all add up. Nothing says that there are any great and readymade Answers out there, nothing says that there ever was or ever will be a world in which goodness is triumphant. For Nietzsche every kind of belief in the objectivity of the real, the ordered, the true, the good, and the intelligible is ultimately theological, and has to be questioned. But when we question it, we see its groundlessness. Nietzsche is a nihilist who leaves us with nothing but an endless play of forces and — if we are disciplined, and work hard — our own brief joy, both in life and in creative work.

For these three great nineteenth-century thinkers — Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche — it is true, then, that religion as we have known it for many centuries past has indeed been based on a sharp division between two worlds, the sacred and the profane. They all agree that the classic distinction between two worlds, Heaven and Earth, the Invisible and the Visible, the Spiritual and the Material, the supernatural and the natural, is coming to an end. But they see the meaning of that end in very different ways. For Hegel the end of a separate sacred world is the fulfilment of the traditional Christian hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God on this earth. For Marx, the end of the Sacred world means the end of religion, but with the proviso that the ghost of the old religious eschatology lives on in Marx's *political* eschatology of the coming of a fully communist society on earth. And Nietzsche also remains haunted by the very religious ideas that he rejects, for he has his own gospel of human redemption and the coming of a new and higher type of human being on this earth.

All three of these great thinkers picture a future consummation of history on this earth. They all end the old two-worlds dualism; they all want us to give up dreams of living in Heaven and instead to be content with an account of human destiny that is purely this-worldly. But there is another story we have yet to tell which is both more radical and more ordinary.

For centuries the history of Western thought was a history of the slow development of the critical kind of thinking. It gave us modern critical history. It gave us natural science. And, applied to ourselves, our philosophy of life and our values, it gave us a relentless passion of doubt that by 1900 had dissolved away religious belief and all kinds of objectivity, leaving the West confronting the question of nihilism.

Put it like this: when we have lost all our old myths, all our big stories about beginnings and

endings, what is left to us? One interesting and influential answer was, and is: ‘At least we still have ordinary language and ordinary life. At least we still have the present moment.’ One response to the spiritual crisis of the West has then been to follow the Protestant tradition and say: ‘Maybe we have lost our faith in grandiose messages and ambitions. But we can still find happiness by returning into the calm sanity of everyday life, and the here and now. When we have lost all the “over-beliefs” (as the Victorians called them) there is still the comfort of saying Yes to all this, just now. The only place where we can still hope to find the meaning of life is in the present moment.

Here, too, we can remember Nietzsche’s remark, that the West’s long history of critical doubt and self-questioning, which has given us our modern systems of knowledge, and has also made us ultimately sceptical and nihilistic, is *itself* of religious origin. It began with the ascetic religious quest for inner, personal integrity and purity of mind and of will. It began by destroying all idols, and it ended by destroying all objectivity. The religion that takes these principles furthest is, of course, Buddhism, which Nietzsche recognizes as being nihilistic.

These varied responses suggest to us a line of reply to the question that I have been called upon to answer. The question is ‘after religion — what?’, and I begin with the word religion. Historically, religious thought did indeed divide the world up into two great realms, the sacred and the profane. We humans live in the profane world. We tell stories about the sacred realm, the world of holy things, the heavenly world. It is the world of gods, spirits, dead ancestors, sacred forces and holy persons. It is a world that has great power and influence over us, and we greatly need its favour. So we tell stories about the dealings of the sacred world with our world, and about what we must do in response. Religion is thus seen as consisting — in a well-known phrase — of ‘culturally-patterned interaction with culturally-postulated supernatural beings’. Religion is a matter of looking to the heavenly world for guidance and help, and doing business with it.

That’s what religion was, and religion in that sense reached its highest development all around the world during the long medieval period. But even at the height of the Middle Ages, there were some discordant noises: in several parts of the world philosophical traditions survived and kept alive a tradition of independent critical questioning. And, secondly, in every great religious civilization there remained a few secular areas of life that religion did not directly control. In these areas human beings managed for themselves, developing their own arts and technologies. Thus we need to remember that religion was never completely totalitarian.

In any case, as everyone knows, the long medieval centuries came to an end, though on various different timescales. The first culture to experience the end of the Middle Ages was perhaps early-renaissance Italy, and the very last strongholds of something like a medieval culture were perhaps Ethiopia, or certain of the Himalayan kingdoms, in the late nineteenth century. Whatever the local timescale, by now it is everywhere obvious that the old premodern kind of religion has slowly faded and vanished. The secular realm has grown exponentially, by a process that has involved travel, exploration and encounter with other traditions, printing, a huge expansion of new man-made knowledge and culture, mass literacy, better communication, industrialization, mechanical transport, and the emergence of a new political order.

The old medieval kind of religion has then rather suddenly collapsed everywhere. Naturally, this event horrified people, and in many parts of the world great efforts were made to reform and modernize the old system so that at least something of it could live on under the new conditions. The Protestant Reformation within Christianity is one very striking example. Another example is the way in which the meeting of Islam and Hinduism prompted the rise of new syncretistic movements from Sikhism to the Bahai. More recently, there were well-known attempts to connect Hinduism with European idealist philosophy, and so make Hinduism into a world faith. More recently still, a de-ethnicized version of Buddhism, called the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, has tried to build on the great appeal of Buddhism to the West.

So the story goes on; but nobody has yet had any lasting success in modernizing one of the old faith-traditions. On the contrary, in each of the great traditions we have seen an anti-modern,

neo-conservative backlash. Each tradition now seems most vigorous in its strictest, most anti-liberal form — Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholic Christianity, conservative Islam, village Hinduism and so on. Unfortunately, these neo-conservative movements have usually gained their energy from becoming political, aggressively militant and ethnocentric, and we are painfully aware of an ugly decline in quality. Old religious values, some of them very precious, have been lost.

To conclude this stage of my argument, I argue that religion as we have known it hitherto is indeed now rapidly disappearing from the world. The process is very painful. But what next?

Of all the answers I have mentioned, the one I prefer is the last. Historically, it owes something to Protestantism, and something to Wordsworth, Tolstoy and Wittgenstein. It says that when the advance of critical thinking has completely demythologized us, we should give up all the grandiose cosmologies developed by large-scale organized religions, and come back into this world, to the present moment, to ordinary language and everyday life. Religion is thus contracted down to personal spirituality, and the love of God is translated into the love of life. Given favourable conditions, most people find it pretty easy to love life, but our natural enjoyment of life is constantly threatened by anxiety, dread and even extreme horror at life's permanent limits: its constant slipping away, its extreme contingency, and its end in the nothingness of death. To live well and be happy each of us needs to find a way of negotiating these inescapable limits. So I redefine a person's *religion* as the set of attitudes and practices through which she seeks to become fully reconciled to life in general and to her own life in particular.

On this new view, my religious life is the story of how I gradually come to face and accept the truth about our human condition, and learn how to love life and live well. It is a personal task and quest that everyone faces nowadays, when the old larger-scale religions, philosophies and political ideologies have all failed. We should leave the large-scale stuff to science. The gospel I now preach is that through solar living we can find a joy in life that will not wholly desert us, however bad things get to be, and that indeed can be maintained right up to the end.

On my account religious truth is simple and easily available. In one sense, everybody knows it already. It hasn't been revealed by a god, it does not need an expert interpreter to explain it, and there is no chosen people or institution that owns the franchise on it. Religious truth is obvious, and the main problem is to find the best and most effective way of gently reminding people of it.

*Don Cupitt 2006*