THE HORIZON OF POSTRELIGION

By

Professor Wayne Hudson

PROFESSIONAL LECTURE

Delivered on

Thursday, 1 July 1999

5.30 pm

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

Nathan Campus
The Horizon of Postreligion

I am aware of something within me, playing before my soul, which if it came to fulfilment, could only be eternal life.

St Augustine

Prophetism is in fact the fundamental mode of revelation - on condition one understands prophetism in a very much larger sense than that admitted by the gift, the talent or the special vocation of those whom one calls the prophets. I think of prophetism as a moment of the human condition itself. For every man, assuming responsibility for the Other is a way of testifying to the glory of the Infinite, and of being inspired.

Levinas

The ‘end of religion’ is an old theme in the Humanities. It is a theme to which I return tonight from an unexpected direction as I apply constructive history to the horizon of postreligion.

Constructive history refers to a new approach to history which focuses on the future and on public affairs. It is an application to history of a major contemporary intellectual trend in the Humanities.\(^1\) Conventional history focused on the past, and, in its modern form, attempted to generate explanatory narratives of historical events. It assumed that the object it was studying already existed in the past. Constructive history, in contrast, emphasises the degree to which human beings need to construct (inaugurate, instaurate, impute) frameworks which they then use to navigate paths through historical circumstances. It does not assume that these can be found

\(^1\) Gordon Kaufman uses ‘constructive’ in broadly this sense in *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (1993). According to Kaufman all theological notions are human imaginative constructs and can be reconstructed. Similarly, the Harvard legal theorist R. M. Unger (1987) envisages ‘constructive social theory’ as fusing the reformist and utopian genres of programmatic thought. For Unger’s more recent work, see *Democracy Realized: The Progressive*
The Horizon of Postreligion

already existing in the past, but it emphasises the importance of historical materials as sources of alternative possibilities which can inform our choices. Constructive history is not a form of prophecy, but an intellectual resource that seeks to inform debate and discussion. Its outcomes are 1. historical studies; and 2. prospections designed to enhance contemporary perceptions of organisational possibilities. These prospections may inform technical proposals for the reform of contemporary institutions, but they are not themselves idealistic demands that existing reality should change to better conform to our fantasies. Nor are they prophecies that particular changes are going to happen. To this degree, constructive historical prospections may be a contribution to a contemporary reinvention of the Humanities. Unlike the delusions of social romanticism in both its Marxist and non-Marxist forms, they do not predict the direction of history, or confuse normative ideals with possible future facts. On the other hand, they allow an advance beyond the defeatism and social resignation which currently pervades parts of the Humanities because they show how historical research can promote rational and progressive social change without involving a totalising notion of Kritik.

My lecture develops in stages. First, I note that religion is currently enjoying a positive re-evaluation which contrasts with the widespread eighteenth and nineteenth century expectation that religion would die out. Secondly, I clarify what is at stake by reconsidering Hegel’s philosophy of religion, which, on a certain reading, implied that the end of ‘religion’ had already occurred, in principle, if not in empirical reality. Third, I argue that constructive history necessarily disaggregates and complicates Western generic notions of religion, and, because it does so, makes possible new and productive ways of studying religious materials found in the historical record. Fourth, I apply the techniques of constructive history to the consideration of three religious or esoteric movements which, in my estimation, are of interest for attempts to think about the end of religion. Fifth, on the basis of these and other case studies I have carried out, I set out a prospection about postreligion as a set of horizional organisational possibilities which we should debate and discuss in order to raise the level of rationality and historical sensitivity with which we approach the question of the end of religion. Finally, I consider some objections to my procedure before summarising what the lecture has achieved.

The Horizon of Postreligion

I

'Religion dies out, and theology comes back; theology dies out, but religion comes back.' These are contemporary surmises at the end of the second millennium, as major contemporary European philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo, and Dieter Henrich, emphasise that religion has unexpected depths, and is something we cannot leave behind without loss. This was not how matters looked to major intellectuals in eighteenth or nineteenth century Europe, let alone to Australian intellectuals in the nineteen sixties.

Nineteenth century European thought was profoundly shaped by the critique of religion. This critique was developed during the European Enlightenment from Spinoza onwards. It reached a high level in the works of the English Deists who managed to show that the rational arguments for the truth of Christianity were unsound, and that no determinate doctrine could be shown to be revealed. The Enlightenment critique of religion was carried further by Voltaire and the philosophes, and reached its peak in Kant’s Critical Philosophy. Kant set aside all traditional metaphysical theology, but preserved a transcendental theology based on moral faith, for which God and immortality were necessary postulates of practical, but not theoretical, reason. After Kant, Hegel famously attempted to complete and also to overcome Kant’s philosophy by producing a speculative transcendental philosophy which made God, in the sense of the Absolute, the object of philosophical inquiry. Subsequently Marx produced a powerful critique of Hegel, accusing him of idealist mystifications that reversed the real order of historical causality. Then in the twentieth century the Marxist utopian Ernst Bloch returned to Hegel and attempted to integrate aspects of his system with Marx’s emphasis on the detectivist study of political and economic processes. Bloch did this in the form of a philosophy of hope, including a technical theory of metareligion set out in one of his most interesting books, Atheism in Christianity (1972). Metareligion, in Bloch’s sense, is an after life of religion, in the sense of a continuing assertion of counter-factual hope. Superstition and supernaturalism disappear,

---


3 The potential of Marx’s critique of religion has still not been understood. For an attempt to extract it, see my ‘Towards a Positive Marxist Critique of Religion’ in V. Hayes (ed.), Australian Essays in World Religions (Bedford Park: AASR, 1977):96-105.
The Horizon of Postreligion

together with the ‘binding back’ of religion as a social organisational form, but the work terrain occupied by religion is not abandoned, but is occupied by a socialist dogmatics. Today, after the decline of Marxism, it is possible to transform Bloch’s concept of metareligion into something very different: the horizon of postreligion.

II

To do so, I begin by reconsidering the upshot of Hegel’s philosophy of religion. Hegel was arguably the most profound European philosopher of religion, but it is a difficult task to establish what, if anything, of contemporary value can be found in his corpus, including his celebrated Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion (1821-1831).

Characteristically, Hegel offers an extremely uncompromising speculative definition of religion as the consciousness of the true ‘in and for itself’:

Now religion itself is the standpoint of the consciousness of the true; ([it is] the consciousness of the most completely universal speculative content as such), not of something that is true, not of this or that, not of something that on one side is still finite and untrue, but rather of the absolutely true, of the universal, of the absolutely self-determining true that has being in and for itself (Hegel 1984:205).

For Hegel, religion is the self-knowing and self-relationship of spirit, the self-consciousness of absolute spirit. It is not merely the relationship of the finite consciousness to the infinite, but the self-consciousness of absolute spirit mediated in and through finite consciousness:

The simple concept that we have established is the self-consciousness of the absolute spirit, its self-consciousness of being for itself as spirit (Hegel 1984:325).

What could he possibly mean?

Hegel’s philosophy of religion conceptualises religion as the domain in which individual spirit relates to itself as its own substance. It allows religion to present its own intelligibility by providing it with categories which are not available to it. As a result, Hegel envisaged ‘the end of religion’, in the sense that his speculative philosophy of religion produces a level of reflexivity.
beyond that proper to religion. Nonetheless, the 'end of religion' in Hegel does not mean that religion declines, or ceases to be important. For Hegel, philosophy does not replace religion, for philosophy is also within religion 'as the leaven that makes the whole mass rise'. Religion remains as a form of representation (Vorstellung), but philosophy makes possible a new level of comprehension of it.\textsuperscript{4} What is important here is: 1. the claim that through religion we are shaped and reshaped through the course of history in ways which change our ethical substance; and 2. the claim that religious representations and symbols have complex cognitive meanings, even though believers do not grasp these meanings in theoretic terms.

Hegel, of course, related all this to Christianity as 'the absolute religion'. Today it is necessary to reconsider his theme of the 'end of religion' in the light of a pluralist world history which is not teleological or Eurocentric, and to recognise that human spirituality is being reshaped by growing reflexivity, the impact of electronic media, and alleged globalisation. We can no longer assume that human spirituality can be reduced to a Western notion of 'religion', or that the world religions are themselves not changing, possibly in radical ways. It is also necessary to take into account the astonishing multiplicity and diversity of human spiritual traditions, many of which are now entering into multifaith dialogue. The most historically significant development in the contemporary world in the area of religion is not fundamentalism, New Age fantastic, or media religion, but the emergence of attempts to rethink how we conceive the entire area of the historical management of human spirituality in the light of the particular experiences and perspectives of all the major world religions, of the primal religions which predated them by thousands of years, and in the light of various neo-religious phenomena – from new religions to so-called secular faiths, such as Marxism, feminism, and economic rationalism.

A wider historical view also shifts the emphasis from purely European philosophical debates to world philosophical debates, especially in India, China, Korea and Japan.\textsuperscript{5} It makes it


\textsuperscript{5} This is clear from recent books on world philosophy. See, for example, N. Smart, World Philosophies (London: Routledge, 1999) and R. Collins, The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
possible to separate the study of religious beliefs from the practices and spiritual technologies used by religious traditions. Hegel was primarily concerned with religious beliefs. He was not interested in practices and spiritual technologies *per se*, and had relatively little knowledge of any non-Western religious practice or even philosophy. On the other hand, he integrated his philosophy of religion with the technical study of institutions and law, and so pioneered a breakthrough with which contemporary theologians are only just starting to catch up, as they consider the tensions between forms of philosophy which reproject existing social institutions and theological doctrines expressing future social relations. The Hegelian legacy then, can be summed up as strong cognitivism about religion, real ontological change in the course of history for human beings and their communities, and the integration of religious phenomena with the study of human institutions and law, where these are model ideas that constructive history can take up.

III

Next, I argue that constructive history necessarily disaggregates and complicates Western generic notions of religion, and, because it does so, makes possible new and productive ways of studying religious materials found in the historical record. There may be no generic ‘religion’. ‘Religion’ can often be analysed into historically changing ensembles of heterogeneous performances, not all of which are spiritual and moral. Further, the constellations we call ‘religions’ can be analysed as combinations of recurrent sociological types rather than a single type ‘religion’.  

Our understanding of ‘religion’ also needs to be complexed by the recognition that the notion of ‘religion’ works badly for non-Western traditions, as scholars have long argued (Cantwell Smith 1963). Similar conclusions follow once generic talk of religion is historicised. Louis Dumont, for example, argues that the great religions only became ‘a religion’ when their holistic encompassing of all other social categories was shattered. Only then was there ‘religion’ in the modern sense, where ‘religion’ is one social category beside others, and other categories,  

---

6 Once this is understood, it is possible to draw the crucial consequence that different activities and practices traditionally associated with religion may have different futures. For example, belief-based social control or sexual
most obviously ‘the economy’, are given primacy over it (Dumont 1986). These considerations suggest that much more pluralist, carefully differentiated, and historical approaches to the study of ‘religion’ are called for.

In this lecture I construe ‘religion’ as historically determinate at the level of social organizational form, but inherently heterogeneous in terms of constitution. To do so, I use an approach that is both cognitivist and organisational-materialist. Against much social anthropology, I propose that the doctrines associated with religions are important from a cognitive organisational point of view because they involve objective thought experiments which display problems about counterfactual and virtual realities. Here I assume a technical distinction between doctrines and beliefs, where the latter designates the ideational orientations of social actors in terms of what they claim should be asserted, and the former refers to the high theoretical matrices of a tradition, of which adherents may be only partially and imperfectly aware. At the same time I propose that the organisational forms found in religious movements are important for reasons that may have little to do with the beliefs and purposes of adherents, even though beliefs, doctrines, and organisational forms often require each other, and are interrelated in ways which often differ from one movement to another.

A cognitivist approach to religion has to attempt to relate human religious phenomena to evolutionary biology and to the human brain, but it also takes seriously the mental constructions religious actors use. And it can do so without a misleading isolation of thoughts from affections, feelings or emotions by locating the cognitive in para-rational as well as rational materials. An organisational materialist approach to religion, on the other hand, can grasp the conditions and efficiencies of both recurrent and unique organisational forms. It can also explicate the point

---

7 Consistent with this, it is possible to return to doctrine without returning to belief. Thus the contemporary return to Trinitarianism as an alternative to theism signals a discovery of relationality in which there are no separate entities but only relata which are socially infused. In effect, Trinitarianism becomes a model for an alternative organisation of human relationships. See C. M. La Cugna, *God for Us. The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1973) and D. Cunningham, *These Three are One* The Practice of Trinitarian Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

hidden in the philology of our word ‘religion’: religion as binding back. The organisational questions become: how we are bound, not whether or not we believe in a transcendent power above human beings or in the mythologies of any particular religious tradition, and are we still bound back? Binding here is a matter of social logical organisation, and may characterise formations of personal identity, institutions, and organisational forms, where these may be different and conflict in particular empirical cases. This opens up a range of significant inquiries which do not make the ‘village atheist’ mistake of assuming that we can choose not to be bound. And when cognitivist and organisational materalist approaches are combined, it is arguably possible to handle instances of symbolisation and ritual as well.

This approach avoids confusing ‘religion’ with a generic type; it also avoids stereotyping religious performances in terms of allegedly irrational beliefs. It has the positive virtue of making it possible to understand and study aspects of ‘religion’ which modern scholars tend to neglect, even though they may serve the rational ends of social actors. Although it obviously permits a more positive evaluation of ‘religion’ than some other approaches, it is not insensitive to the case against religions as a sources of mystification, repression, fear and superstition. Nor does it miss the fact that religions have often inspired hatred and violence, even quite recently.

IV

I now apply the techniques of constructive history to the consideration of three religious or esoteric movements which, in my estimation, are of interest for attempts to think about the end of religion. Specifically, I attempt to show that the thought experiments, practices, spiritual technologies, and organisational forms that appear in neglected religious and esoteric movements potentially have a wider importance, not least for the major world religions. In this way, constructive history can draw attention to important changes to organisational form, without

---

9 There are parallels here with Durkheim. For Durkheim what goes on in religion is not to be understood in terms of the beliefs of individuals or even the doctrines of the religion concerned. Religion’s role is not to make claims about ’the outside world’. Its true purpose is not intellectual, but social: it serves as the carrier of social sentiments. Hence religious beliefs and rituals are in the last analysis symbolic expressions of social realities. Moreover, for Durkheim the rituals of religion have priority over beliefs. They are the real ties that bind. I agree with Durkheim that social organisational form (and group structure) is important in ways which escape the consciousness of religious adherents, but I reject any holistic notion of ‘society’ and develop the search for ties that bind quite differently. See W.S.F. Pickering, Durkheim on Religion (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1994).
attemping to predict the future of religion as such, or the way in which the great majority of
human beings in any particular religious or esoteric tradition organise themselves.

In recent years I have worked extensively on seven such movements: the Society of Jesus,
Soka Gakkai, a Japanese new religious movement, Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy, The Church
of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, Christian Science, Swedenborg’s Church of the New
Jerusalem, and The Society of Friends. My case studies demonstrate that each of these
movements contains new thought experiments, practices, spiritual technologies, and
organisational forms. This is important because it shows that existing historical models can
provide concrete organisational examples which suggest that some aspects of human spirituality
may be able to be arranged differently.

I now give three examples, in ascending order of difficulty: the Society of Friends,
Christian Science, and Anthroposophy, illustrating the presence of organisational form,
practices, and doctrine respectively, where each of them involves at least two of the three. If
there were more time, I would discuss Soka Gakkai and also two contemporary Chinese
Buddhist movements in order to demonstrate that my evidence is not limited to Western sources.

My first example concerns organisational forms. The Society of Friends began as an
attempt to revive the primitive Christianity lost after the death of the apostles. The radical
organisational idea operative in George Fox’s teaching was to shift the centre of Christianity
from atonement by means of the sacrifice of God’s son to the notion that the inner light could be
directly experienced by each person. While his early followers actually ‘quaked’, the idea that
religion was about ‘that of God in every man’ endured, together with the potentially subversive
rejection of all ‘external’ religion and ‘hireling priests’.

Today the Society of Friends is well known for its outstanding peace witness and for its
leadership in many different moral causes, including Oxfam, Amnesty International and prison
reform. The Society is based on an organisational shift away from a religion of creeds and
ceremonies administered by a clergy, towards a weekly meeting conducted in silence. This
organisational shift shows that significant levels of spiritual experience and moral activism can
be sustained by a procedural mechanism – the practice of inspired communal silence – which
The Horizon of Postreligion

does not require agreement about world views, ideology, or beliefs. Hence many Quakers are
humanists, atheists, Buddhists – and so forth. In organisational terms, the example of The
Society of Friends demonstrates that moral solidarity and practically effective reformist activism
can be generated by resort to common organisational forms without the necessity of common
beliefs, world views, or ideologies, even though there may be a shared life orientation. And it
further shows that mystically oriented movements can produce original organisational
arrangements, in the case of the Quakers the development of a unique committee system and the
strategic use of interruption and silence in the conduct of practical business, for example, in
business (at which the Quakers excelled) and in the conduct of international affairs at the level of
the United Nations and detente. It does not show that either can be maintained long term without
resort to 1. doctrines; and 2. spiritual practices.

My next example concerns doctrine. Christian Science\textsuperscript{10}, a religion whose members do not
use any form of medicine and rely exclusively on prayer for healing, is often regarded as the
ideology of an American sect alleging that no one needs doctors, an ideology which appeals, for
some obscure reason, to wealthy women. This ideology is then dismissed as manifestly
irrational, as nonsensical, and as potentially dangerous. Obviously it is difficult for many to take
seriously an outlook which maintains that it is impossible for anyone to sin, to suffer or to die
and that all the phenomena of the physical universe are non-existent illusions. There must also
be reservations about a teaching which encourages security guards, dentists, real estate agents,
owners of flower shops, senior citizens, and autodidacts generally to rely on ‘divine
metaphysics’ for their physical well being, and not to submit to medical examinations, X rays or
vaccination, unless compelled to do so by law.

It is unsatisfactory, however, to interpret Christian Science as a candidate for normal
philosophy status, and then to dismiss its central claims, as John Hick does, as absurd (Hick
1989). It is equally unsatisfactory to take Christian Science to be normal Christian theology, and
then to argue, as Catholic and Evangelical writers have done, that it is a travesty of the Christian

\textsuperscript{10} The term ‘Christian Science’ is systematically ambiguous. Here I follow Mary Baker Eddy’s idiosyncratic usage.
Hence, Christian Science sometimes means the religion she established, but at other times it means the practice of
the metaphysics which is the basis of Christian Science as a religious movement, as in statements such as ‘Christian
Science is transforming the universe’.

10
faith. Similarly, the radicalism of Christian Science is not illumined by comparison with the Vedantic doctrine that all reality is consciousness of the pure self, or by contextualist comparisons with Quinby's secular healing system based on mind over matter, or by detailing the influences of New England Transcendentalism through Alcott or the role of the New Thought Movement. None of these approaches help us to understand what is unique about Christian Science as a religious movement, let alone why it might be important.

In organisational terms Christian Science is of outstanding interest because it uses projective 'metaphysical' doctrine to achieve practical, this worldly effects. The key to Christian Science is Mary Baker Eddy's 'divine metaphysics' or the science of real being. This metaphysics consists of practical postulates about 'what really exists', as opposed to what appears to be the case. It is alleged to be *practical* in the sense of being able to transform human experience to the extent that it is accepted and practised. In this sense, it is alleged to be *demonstrable*, and so 'scientific'. The basic move is to take proleptic perfection which cannot be represented or imagined as a basis for identification and action. Christian Science is not a metaphysics in the sense of a philosophical theory of the universe, despite certain passages which might encourage such a reading. Indeed, it is not 'a metaphysics' in a technical philosophical sense at all. Mary Baker Eddy had read little philosophy when she wrote *Science and Health*, and she wrote the book non-sequentially with sentences appearing in non-deductive order. Nonetheless, the claims made for this divine metaphysics are not modest. All can enjoy perfect health if they correct their false beliefs. No one needs to wear glasses or hearing aids. Blindness can be healed by understanding the spiritual vision God has given man.

Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science is a practical immaterialism which seeks to change the reality we experience. It posits that the real universe is spiritual and *always at the point of perfection*. Healing is important not for itself, but because it reveals how the universe is governed. Although it has some parallels with early Christian gnosticism (as opposed to the doctrines attributed to 'the Gnostics' by their enemies), Christian Science has its own technical character, based on a highly unusual association between a system of theology and a system of medicine. In this context, it advances a concept of God which meets many of the challenges of modern atheism. Like modern atheism, Christian Science asserts that the idea of a superhuman
The Horizon of Postreligion

being who exists in a material universe is incredible, but then draws the opposite conclusion viz. the physical senses do not report the whole of being, and the ordinary belief that the human being is material is an error. There is no matter. All that exists is God and His Ideas. The finitist notion of deity of popular theology is to be replaced by an infinitist conception of deity: God is incorporeal, divine, supreme, infinite Mind, Spirit, Soul, Principle, Life, Truth, Love. The practical force of such a view can be best grasped by envisaging the claim that God is the infinite, perfect Principle of being. The problem, of course, is that God is no longer subject to limitation. God, man and the real universe are all 'spiritual', but 'spiritual' has a non-determinate sense, being 'infinite' and 'all inclusive'. Such refusal of limitation has consequences. God becomes not only the perfect cause of the universe, but the only cause. Only God and His Ideas really exist. Similarly, given that God is absolutely perfect, omnipotent, all wise, totally good, perfection imposes considerable finitude. God cannot know of the existence of evil, sin, suffering or death. Similarly, the divine-human coincidence means that God is dependent on man, without whom his Ideas would not be expressed. Indeed, God would be a nonentity without an image and likeness of Himself (Miscellany 303).

There are also implications for philosophical anthropology. In The People's Idea of God Mary Baker Eddy wrote that 'our ideas of divinity form our models of humanity' (14). Man in Christian Science (there is no sexism intended; Mary Baker Eddy was a leading nineteenth century feminist) is absolutely perfect, spiritual, and immaterial, and reflects all of God’s qualities perfectly. He is a spiritual entity with individual characteristics and capacities, but no material mind, brain, or body. Man is not God, but he is of the same nature as God (man and God are one in being), and has no limitations. ‘Man is not matter; he is not made up of brain, blood, bones, and other material elements’, Mrs. Eddy declares (475). This might seem to imply a radically doceticist anthropology. However, what Mrs. Eddy means is more subtle. Her point is that no anthropology of man as a separate being is possible. There is no medium between God and man. The divine coincides with the human. The human being does not exist as an entity separate and apart from God. In Christian Science Man has no mind, personality, intelligence, soul, will or ego of his own. Instead, Man reflects the intelligence, life and personality of God. All this turns out to be less strange than it at first seems. Mrs. Eddy admits that these statements apply to the real man, or the man of God’s creating, not to mortal man. She admits that we do
not see much of the Scientific man. The real or perfect man can only be known insofar as we develop spiritual sense, an expertise adherents are helped to acquire. On the other hand, knowing perfect God and perfect Man in consciousness provides the basis for correct identifications in difficult circumstances in daily life. Allegedly, individuals can use working with consciousness in this way to resolve not only health problems, but relationship difficulties, business problems, problems of occupation and career management, anxieties about housing and neighbourhood crime. The Science of Christianity stirs the mind to a change of base. Christian Scientists act on the basis of present perfection, not on the basis of the imperfect reality presented by the physical senses. To achieve this they monitor their thoughts. Only what one wants to see realized in physical effects is to be admitted into consciousness. All beliefs which promote dependence, powerlessness and limitation are to be identified and corrected.

All this may sound extremely strange, but the militant use of counterfactualisity is very remarkable. From a constructivist standpoint, Christian Science can be reinterpreted as a post-religious cognitive theology, based on a daily regeneration of consciousness. Although Christian Science claims to be a religion, it can be interpreted in organisational terms as cognitional praxeology which leaves the religious phase of human spiritual organisation behind, insofar as the latter depended on beliefs and rituals, even though this is concealed by attendances at church services and the paraphernalia of middle-brow Protestant Christianity. And it does so in a way which makes greater and not less use of doctrines.

My third example relates to practices and spiritual technologies. The Austrian philosopher, scientist, and clairvoyant Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was a polymath and one of the most extraordinary people of the twentieth century. Steiner left some forty-eight books and six thousand printed lectures, collected in four hundred German volumes. These lectures deal with a vast range of subjects. He also launched initiatives in many different fields of human endeavour, and had an influence on the intellectual life of Russia, Europe and the United States. The movement he founded, Anthroposophy, a Rosicrucian form of theosophy based on a cognitional method which allegedly meets the standards of the natural sciences, is the most innovative and important esoteric movement of modern times.
While most people find Steiner’s Rosicrucian cosmology fantastic and incredible, his more orthodox writing on philosophy and natural science are of a high standard, and the work arising from his activities and those of his followers has achieved world-renown. Indeed, the achievements of Anthroposophists in areas such as curative education, architecture, biodynamic agriculture, and banking are often both original and impressive. How is this to be explained?

Anthroposophy trains its adherents to use spiritual exercises which develop emergent senses and modify the ‘experience bodies’ of human beings. These exercises have determinate effects. It also equips its adherents to generate moral intuitions and to make refined social judgements. As a result, exemplary Anthroposophists are expected to:

- manifest abnormal psychological and physical states produced by the arduous practice of spiritual exercises over many years;
- found, establish, organise and successfully run practical activities with visionary features and innovative organisational forms;
- make perceptive and intuitive judgements on the basis of very limited evidence;
- maintain high levels of ethical idealism over time in the face of severe personal and social difficulties.

From an organisational point of view, what is significant about Anthroposophy is that it integrates arcane projective cosmology which affects the will or thelic experiences of human beings with esoteric spiritual exercises. Contemporary sociologists of religion are unable to understand either phenomenon because they have seriously neglected the study of esoterism, and then concentrated in the little work they have done mainly on the membership patterns of adherents. Instead, an approach is needed which recognises that esoteric practices construct

---

The Horizon of Postreligion

complex enclavements which allow different mediations of sense, feeling, and will to those achieved by modern practices exercised in a single totalised homogenous space.\textsuperscript{12}

Once esoteric practices are taken seriously in this constitutive sense, the constructive historian can generate a significant research programme. The case of Anthroposophy raises the crucial question of whether it is possible to move away from ‘religion’ in certain determinate senses and to embrace esoteric spiritual practices instead. It also raises social organisational issues which require investigation, such as which cosmologies function in formative ways when they are combined with practices and spiritual technologies? And why do some cosmologies, when allied with certain practices and technologies, help to generate new organisational forms, whereas others impede their generation? The constructive historian cannot hope to definitively answer these questions, but she or he can hand them over to the natural and social sciences for investigation.

IV

Next, on the basis of these and other case studies I have carried out, I set out a prospectus about postreligion as a set of horizontal organisational possibilities which we should debate and discuss in order to raise the level of rationality and historical sensitivity with which we approach the question of the end of religion. As a set of horizontal organisational possibilities, postreligion is ‘after’ religion in the sense that it does not involve:

- belief in spiritual beings or personal powers behind the world;
- forms of belief-based social control, especially social control involving belief in spiritual beings or personal powers behind the world;
- institutions which order common social life according to doctrinal principles which are interpreted in realist terms.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13} Clearly there is a movement out of ‘religion’ if we accept Tylor’s classic formulation:
The Horizon of Postreligion

Defined in this way postreligion may seem a thesis about the end of religion. This is a speculative conclusion which some are prepared to draw. The Cambridge theologian Nicholas Lash, for example, refers to the 'end of religion' in the sense of a specific social spatialisation:

Not the beginning or the end of faith, or hope, or charity. Not the beginning or the end of prayer or proclamation, of the duty laid upon all humankind to work for peace, and justice, and the integrity of God's creation. But the view that 'religion' is the name of one particular district which we may inhabit if we feel so inclined, a region of diminishing plausibility and significance, a territory quite distinct from those we know as 'politics' and 'art', as 'science' and 'law' and 'economics'; this view of things, peculiar to modern Western culture, had a beginning, in the seventeenth century, and ... is now coming to an end (Lash 1996:ix).

It is not clear on Lash's account what follows from the 'end' of 'religion' in the sense of a special territory. The Cambridge post-Christian polemicist Don Cupitt, on the other hand, envisages a break with Western philosophical theism and the realist interpretation of religious statements:

I am proposing a very considerable redefinition of religion, a redefinition that (to adopt the Christian vocabulary) will bring religion closer to the Kingdom than to the church, closer to the Sermon on the Mount than to any sort of orthodox theology, and will make it very short-termist in outlook. Unlike the secular theologies of the 1960s, it will 'aestheticise' religion, in the sense that it sees religious living in terms of artistic practice and symbolic expression. As redefined here, religious life is an expressible, world-building activity through which we can get ourselves together and find a kind of posthumous, or retrospective, happiness (Cupitt 1997a:14).

---

One characteristic shared by all religions, great or small, ancient or modern, is the belief in spirits who think, act and feel like human persons. The essence of religion, is the belief that there are living, personal powers behind all things (Tylor 1871:429).

But this may not have enough organisational purchase. Theologians, of course, have long been sensitive to the possibility of conceptions of religion which emphasise anti-mundane experience without positing mythical entities.
Cupitt’s approach attempts to preserve religion only as a human performance, like art or music; it rests on accepting a ‘poststructuralist’ linguistic turn. A third view is put by the French political philosopher Marcel Gauchet. According to Gauchet ‘religion’ is the idea that the social order comes from a source outside human agency, and is already given as immutable prior to human freedom and activity. For Gauchet ‘religion’ is quintessentially expressed in its so-called primitive forms, and the history of religion is a movement away from this religious view of reality. Today ‘religion’ in this organisational sense is ending (Gauchet 1997).

All these views are arguably too conservative from an organisational point of view, just as they are too modish from a long term historical sociological standpoint. They accept Western sociological theory and cultural fashion uncritically. They also underestimate the organisational changes that can be found, as my case studies show, as thought experiments, practices, spiritual technologies, and organisational forms in marginal religious and esoteric movements. Finally, they fail to integrate either detailed studies of the existing world religions or empirical data on their current trajectories. As a result, they encourage the illusion that the world religions are declining, whereas on a worldwide basis the contrary is the case.

In contrast, the constructive historian can offer a different version of the prospection of postreligion: one which envisages the relevant organisational possibilities as appearing within as well as outside the world religions, as they enter into multifaith dialogue, abandon absolutist claims, and admit high levels of pervasion in the organisation of both personal spirituality and community management. On this account postreligion can be characterised, constructively and experimentally, as a new phase in the history of religion. It would not then be a form of religious liberalism, let alone a form of secular religion without God (of the kind envisaged by Saint Simon, Comte and Durkheim), a religion of reason and ethics (of the kind espoused by the Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen), or a political inheritance of religion (of the sort envisaged by Lunacharsky and the Russian Godbuilders). It would also not be a break with social embedding, or a leap into an alleged post-traditional order (Heelas 1998). And, so far from being

---

14 These changes are as yet little studied, partly because sociologists have largely failed to take religion fully seriously as something still to come, and not merely a residue (see Robert Wuthnow 1998). Evidence for pervasion is growing. See, for example, the presentation of Christianity in the thought experiments of Japanese Buddhism, in D.W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).
The Horizon of Postreligion

a voluntaristic historical prophecy, it would be inseparable from the history of capitalism, from new features of the world economy which erode older social and economic systems, and from alleged 'globalisation' since these developments impose financial limitations and stylistic trajectories on ways of organising human spirituality. There would be no question of imagining future changes whisking away the institutions and forms of law that set limits to existing forms of social consciousness (Rose 1992). Nor would the prospect of postreligion imply an acceptance of theories of inevitable and irreversible secularisation.

Once it is understood that postreligion in the sense in which I am using it here would still be 'religion', it should be clear that the prospect I am proposing is significantly different, not only from all nineteenth century 'end of religion' arguments, including those of Hegel, Marx, and by extension, Bloch, but from contemporary 'end of religion' theories as well. Unlike the latter, I am suggesting that 'religion' makes possible the mediation of social organisational possibilities, and is relevant on a continuing basis to the successful management of human spirituality, even if 'religion' in some determinate senses (but not others) fades away.\(^{15}\)

I now sketch a fuller version of postreligion which is non-secular, and compatible with mainstream religious tendencies such as orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, as the speculations of Cupitt and other anti-realists are not. Postreligion in this sense would be more religion, and very different from any form of anti-religion. It would be quite explicitly non-secular in that:

1. the practice of the antimundane would be preserved;
2. indirection made possible through mythological symbolisation would be extended;
3. new forms of constructive symbolisation would be developed;
4. the psychiatric purchase of historical religious materials would be re-released and brought to bear on the political, social and economic institutions which shape our lives.

\(^{15}\) The term 'spirituality' is increasingly used even by theologians to designate forms of religious life which are not necessarily 'religious' in the traditional sense. See Diarmuid O'Murchu, Reclaiming Spirituality (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1997) Cf. his Quantum Theology (New York: Crossroad, 1998).
The Horizon of Postreligion

On this account, postreligion would be a modernisation of religion which renews and rebirths tradition (Werblowsky 1976). It would be consistent with Western science and technology and with the critique of religion and the commitment to rationality of the European Enlightenment, but it would go beyond the European Enlightenment because the problem of religious mythology raised by the European Enlightenment is solved in a different way. Religious mythology would no longer be interpreted literally, but it would be taken more and not less seriously. Likewise, the psychiatric functions the mythology embodies would not be abandoned or repressed. Here my approach has parallels with contemporary Christian advocates of a return to strong Trinitarianism, patristic Christianity, and some aspects of the liturgical cosmology of the Orthodox church.\textsuperscript{16} Of course, postreligion in this sense might require social institutions and social organisations of a different logical type. If it were to be a form of religion which \textit{bound but did not bind back}, then it might be necessary to introduce organisational forms with a proterior, as opposed to an anterior, organisational structure. To spell this out in detail is the task of a constructive utopianism.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{V}

Clearly any articulation of an horizon of postreligion is likely to be controversial. Two critical evaluations should be noted at this stage.

First, empirically-minded sociologists of religion are likely to want to see the prospection of postreligion translated into empirically testable terms that take account of the complexities of popular religious experience in different continents, for example, Africa and South America. They would also want to consider a range of causal explanations linked to rigorously specified causal mechanisms. Of course, the constructive historian would be delighted if their work

\textsuperscript{16} Here the work of the British Anglican theologian John Millbank is outstanding. Millbank, a student of Gillian Rose, reasserts radical orthodoxy or patristic Christianity against the errors of secularism. Like Catherine Pickstock, he envisages the liturgical consummation of philosophy or the situation for which philosophical questions are held to be answered, if ever, in liturgy, and not in discursive ratiocination. See J. Millbank, \textit{Radical Orthodoxy} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

\textsuperscript{17} I exemplify this form of pessimistic utopianism in my latest book \textit{The Reform of Utopia} (in press), which relates my work on Ernst Bloch to recent developments in legal and political theory, especially the work of R.M. Unger at Harvard.
provoked further research of this kind, but they must also be modest enough to accept that an intellectual historian working with texts is not a social scientist manqué.

Second, postreligion as a prospection is likely to be found wanting by even the most broad-minded and enlightened of contemporary theologians, including those theologians who understand theology as a dialogical communicational enterprise. The term 'theology' understandably frightens those educated in secularism. It also alerts those who attempt to adhere to high standards of rationality to be on their guard. Doubtless 'theology' has a bad odour as long as it is identified with religious particularism. In a contemporary context 'theology' cannot stand for either a positively determined ideology of a religious community or for pseudo-knowledge of non-existent entities. Today, however, theology increasingly accepts its public vocative character, as well as its social determination. It does not attempt to provide news from nowhere, let alone an occult supplement to physics. Instead, it focuses upon the needs of human communities, as well as individuals, for horizons, ideals, and narratives, and on ways in which the cultural products developed to meet such needs can be subjected to ethical challenge and critical evaluation. Once a break is made with the Enlightenment doctrine that science provides the paradigm for all knowledge, it is possible to practise theology as the rational interpretation and evaluation of human spirituality.

Theologians may concede that spiritualities without some of the features of religion are now appearing in every Western country. It does not follow that future organisations of human spirituality can dispense with belief-based social control, or, if new forms of spiritual organisation are possible which depend much less on belief-based social control, partly because there is a greater capacity for self-control, it still remains to be seen whether authentic spirituality can be other than belief-based. And in the case of the major world religions, especially Christianity, Judaism and Islam, there is a danger that an approach which dispenses with beliefs loses the specific contributions which makes these religions important or even intelligible.

---

18 For steps towards a communicational theology inspired by the work of Walter J. Ong S.J., see T.J. Farrell and P.A. Soukup (eds), *Communication and Lonergan* (Kansas: Sheed and Ward, 1993) esp. ch.4. For a developed theology of this type, see R.M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
Islamic leaders are likely to emphasise that the status of Allah as a transcendent legislator whose will is mandatory for all realities, not only human beings but angels and jin, has not been addressed, and that no satisfactory hermeneutics for explicating the Holy Quran has been provided. Jews and Christians may complain that the unique specificity of covenantal history of Israel has not been taken into account. Christians may object that the specificity of Jesus Christ, and so the content of the Christian kerugma, has been ignored. Likewise, Buddhists may object that the prospection of postreligion does not incorporate the specific Buddhist teachings about karma and non-dependent origination. More generally, theologians of many traditions may insist that it is necessary to place more emphasis on the capacity of some existing religious traditions to enable particular experiences. Following Steven Katz (1983), some religions can be understood as developing traditions of experience and interpretation in which interpretative structures (including attitudes, emotional stances, value judgements, meditational practices and rituals) prepare for and are incorporated in experiences. These traditions realise themselves by reproducing their typical experiences in their adherents (Katz 1983, Dupre 1998, Moses 1999).

Clearly the prospection of postreligion developed here fails to address the historical functions of particular traditions in adequate detail. In reply, the constructive historian may argue that the study of religious traditions worldwide is likely to promote some of the features included in the prospection of postreligion, and that tradition-specific religions will need to address these features from their own perspectives. Here the work of the Spanish-Indian theologian Raimon Panikkar is important. Panikkar develops a dialogical hermeneutics of the world religions which recognizes that pluralism is constitutive, and cannot be reduced to some 'transcendent unity' or common core.\(^{19}\) Instead, he offers a hermeneutical analysis of the mythothemes of many religions, especially Hinduism and Christianity. Moreover, Panikkar asserts:

1. that no movement from *mythos* to *logos* is possible;

2. that Western philosophical theism and metaphysics are now obsolete, and should be dropped;

\(^{19}\) For excellent discussion the work of Panikkar, see J. Prabhu (ed.) *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1996).
3. that a new form of religious consciousness is appearing which needs to be thematised in terms of the new ‘global myth’.

But such claims are contested. The constructive historian is likely to be more sensitive to historical continuities than a writer such as Panikkar. She or he may not be convinced that ‘theism’ and ‘metaphysics’, both terms with diverse meanings in different historical periods, are obsolete. On the contrary, there are strong historical reasons to think that these thought experiments will continue to have their uses. But the constructive historian must agree that changed historical conditions impose a duty to rearticulate what is inherited from the past.

Nothing I have said in this lecture justifies an attempt to predict the future course of human religious history in any detail. Nor have I given any good reason to believe that the dreadful abuses of power and wealth which have characterised the world religions at diverse times and places will cease to occur in any future constellation of institutions. I have, however, attempted to make the horizon of postreligion more visible. The approach I have adopted does not allow me to advance any dogmatic view, and if postreligion ever becomes more than a prospect, it is likely to have other features than those I have discussed tonight. Nonetheless, I have sought to direct your attention to the possibility of studying religious materials in new ways using constructive history. I have also sought to persuade you that the thought experiments, practices, technologies, and organisational forms found in marginal religious and esoteric movements are potentially more important than traditional scholarship and the sociology of religion suggest. Finally, I have signalled the prospect of postreligion as a set of horizontal possibilities which we should debate and discuss in order to raise the level of rationality and historical sensitivity with which we approach the question of the end of religion.

Raising the horizon of postreligion challenges secularists to abandon strawman arguments and to research the more demanding terrain of a naturalism which acknowledges the role of illusionary enterprises in human life. It challenges religionists to eliminate mystifying and sometimes frightening forms of belief-based social control which are now dispensable, and to

\[20\] It remains to be seen if these thought experiments, practices, technologies, and organisational forms can be deployed without delusional convictions, or the rigid bonding associated with them in their original forms. My own
The Horizon of Postreligion

embrace new organisations of human spirituality appropriate to contemporary natural science, technology, and alleged 'globalisation'. Of course, as Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch both knew, every moment of historical time is precious because through it the Messiah might enter in. Grasping this expectation transforms our way of living in history, even if the Messiah still has not come. Or, in other mythographies, we await the Maitreya Buddha, and attempt to express compassion. In the case of postreligion, grasping the possibility helps to change us, even if the historical outcome is very different.

expectation is that they can, but I do not maintain that their use can be entirely illusion-free, or that strong levels of attitudinal commitment may not be required for their successful deployment.
REFERENCES

AGAMBEN, G. *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993).


CUNNINGHAM, D. *These Three are One The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).


EDDY, M.B. *Science and Health* (Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1910).

EDDY, M.B. *The First Church of Christ, Scientist and Miscellany* (Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1913).


HENRICH, D. *Fluchlinien: Philosophische Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982).


The Horizon of Postreligion


PRABHU, J. (ed.) The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1996),


The Horizon of Postreligion


