

# The Religion of the Willful Disbelievers

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## Abstract

**If we are to treat with respect the religious opinions and practices of people who do not agree with our own, then in order to be consistent, we must be tolerant even of those who declare that they are ‘not religious’ — even while we think that they probably are.**

## Introduction

Without going to any extraordinary effort, we can hear, at one end of a spectrum, a noisy pentecostalist Christian waving her arms in the air and proudly proclaiming “I believe, I believe, I believe ....!”, while at the other an equally noisy atheist is stamping his foot and defiantly proclaiming “I disbelieve, I disbelieve, I disbelieve ...!” I hope to show that both parties are much closer to each other than they would suppose.

For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘willful disbelievers’ will name those people who say that they do not ‘believe’ in the sense in which the word is used by people who make claims of religious affiliation. Although they may be self-labelled as skeptic, secular humanist, rationalist, atheist or agnostic, and although there are valuable distinctions between

the appellations, many of my comments will be about, and many of my examples will be drawn from, humanism as representative of a position both close to and distant from that of the common, or Dover Beach, member of Sea of Faith.

I hope to offer some thoughts as to how we might extend friendship to such people — they are, after all, fellow human beings. And I shall suggest that it is quite reasonable to say that they too have a ‘religion’ even though they deny it.

## Humanitas

Humanism,<sup>[1]</sup> as it has been classically understood, can best be seen as putting into practice 'humanitas', or human virtue<sup>[2]</sup>, as seen in the practices of understanding, benevolence, compassion, mercy, fortitude, judgment, prudence, eloquence, and love of honour. Although these classical virtues have become marginalised by a sort of utilitarian calculus of personal fulfillment in modern life, they are useful for the present analysis because they too are elements of spirituality.

In the 14th century, the theologian, ordained priest and learned scholar, Petrarch, advanced the view — which came to be held by later humanists — that classical learning and Christian spirituality were not only compatible but also mutually fulfilling. Not all present-day humanists would agree.

## Classical Christianity

Because Classical Christianity is acted out on a stage made of supernaturalist materials against a backdrop of eternal and unchanging truths, it finds difficulty in making an easy marriage with the findings of the growing scientific method. The 'truths' of traditional Christianity, which are arrived at without scientific rigour and which are defended by a dogma that denies accountability — are said to deal with all phenomena, earthly or heavenly — 'all things visible and invisible'. This comes into collision with the scientific tools of observation, deduction and systematic doubt. The effects of that collision have not even yet been fully worked through.

But we should concede that it is the aims and the vocabulary of **humanism** that best suits our times, because our world is shaped by the findings of Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, Freud

and Einstein — none of whose explanations speak of a supernatural provenance<sup>[3]</sup>. Even if we were to say that God (or the gods) made the **earth**, it was humankind that makes — and remakes — the **world**.

## Secular and Religious Humanism

For practical and rhetorical purposes we can allow that there are basically two kinds of humanism: secular and religious.

Humanism is so often said to be the opposite of religion that it is difficult for most people to see the term ‘religious humanism’ as anything other than a contradiction.<sup>[4]</sup> Yet this has not always been so, and it is not so now for most subscribers to the Sea of Faith who use the term ‘humanism’ to name human-centredness. There is much in common between secular and religious humanism. Members of both groups agree that all human activity and institutions are made only by humans — there being no other creative agency. All of our art and culture and even our forms of religious expression are human products. In the prospectus of the New Zealand network we talk only of religious **expression**, allowing for the religious **propensity** to be innate, and for its forms of expression to be the human creations. But we agree that nothing comes in from ‘outside’ because there is no ‘outside’ in the sense that Plato or other supernaturalists thought, and continue to think.

While traditional Christianity is dedicated to opposing what it takes to be corrosive of spirituality — materialism, secularism and humanism — members of the Sea of Faith Network find value in materialist<sup>[5]</sup> explanations of the origins of the cosmos, of life and of consciousness. This we share with secular humanism.

We might even say that humans emerge **up** from the earth and not **down** from the heavens. Because this life is all that we will ever have, the ‘secular’ is immensely important and ‘the human’ is where we locate our priorities and our values. Those of us who retain some affection for a Christian upbringing — but who can no longer assent to what we take to be its defining affirmations — call ourselves ‘Post-Christian’. We take the view that, while institutional forms of Christian expression have more-or-less lost the plot, the plot remains important.

All humanists have in common a moral earnestness. We yearn for a better world, and the more active among us try to bring it about. Yet we differ, deeply. Religious humanists

make the claim that the religious dimension of a human being is our **best** part, even while conceding that some forms of religion expression have done much harm. On the other hand, secular humanists show, in speech and in writing, what can justifiably be called a deep loathing of religion.<sup>[6]</sup>

While secular humanists call for ‘no religion’, religious humanists call for ‘better religion’.<sup>[7]</sup>

## **A Question of Definition**

Oscar Wilde drew to our attention that England and America are two countries separated by a common language. Similarly, much of what separates secular and religious humanists can be seen in the way they each uses certain key words. Of all areas of knowledge which deal with human activity, it is in the consideration of ‘religion’ that there is the greatest muddlement. The religious lexicon is in a mess. There is at least a paper and probably an entire Conference waiting to address this sad fact. Compare the different ways in which the following words are used in a religious and in a popular context: ‘myth’, ‘mystery’, ‘truth’, ‘belief’, ‘faith’ and ‘spirit’.

In what follows I will recommend that we come down firmly on the definition of some key words.

The first is to deliver ‘spirituality’ from both its medieval concern with metaphysical dualism and also from its late 20th century New Age uses. Then we will be free to promote it to name that capability which steers us towards religion in the first place.

The second is to show that ‘religion’, while often expressed in supernatural terms, does not depend on them. Supernaturalism is an option, not an essence.

The potential benefits of gaining some clarity in these matters are enormous. Not only will we find a forum in which to meet and greet our secularist friends, we might rescue faith from its fundamentalist prison and put it back, to use a quasi-biblical phrase, on the throne of our hearts.

In seeking to describe a relationship between spirituality and religion which will work in today’s world, we must note the three-stage historical progression in the use of the word ‘spirituality’.

The early and traditional use of the term can be found in most dictionaries. It speaks of two kinds of reality, with the spiritual above and the material below. It depends upon acceptance of an unseen world — more real than this one — which reveals itself in visions, dreams, and physical manifestations. We scurry around like ants down here below while the perfect realm broods over us. This dualism, which owes a lot to Plato, is still imbedded in mainstream Christianity.

During the last half-century a new formulation of spirituality arose as a sort of personal substitute for stuffy old-fashioned religion. It had become romanticised and democratised and was aided by the Orphic and Gnostic idea of interior journey which has dogged Christianity from the start. It became a scheme for opposing both secularist rationality and the dogmatism of the formal church.

Linda Woodhead wrote of

a new mode of post-theological theology in which it is not the theologian or the ecclesiastic who has authority ... but the individual engaged in the spiritual/metaphysical quest (based on his or her personal experiences).<sup>[8]</sup>

She cited Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God* as typical of the published output.

This development transferred the authoratative source of spirituality from the custodial care of ecclesiastical institutions to the commercial concerns of book publishers. It re-potted the roots of spirituality in the ephemera of currently fashionable warm fuzzies and the dynamics of the publication of self-help books. So saccahrine are some manifestations that they have attracted the Australian epithet, “New Age wank”<sup>[9]</sup>.

A third, and to me the most satisfactory, definition of spirituality commends itself because it talks of what is lodged in our very humanness. As Dostoevsky had one of his characters say in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

What is strange, what is marvellous, is not whether God really exists. The marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God, could have entered the head of such a savage and vicious beast as man; so holy is it, so moving, so wise, and such a great honour it does to man.

Because this usage has an objective reality — we can see it in operation — it can be seen to subsume the two earlier definitions. Building on Tillich’s idea of the *telos*, or objective, of human existence, the American theologian Owen Thomas defines spirituality as

the sum of all the **uniquely human** capacities and functions: self-awareness, self-transcendence, memory, anticipation, rationality (in the broadest sense), creativity, plus the moral, intellectual, social, political, aesthetic, and religious capacities, all understood as **embodied**<sup>[10]</sup>.

Under this definition spirituality is a **natural** phenomenon, unlike the medieval dualist supernaturalism — and an **enduring** phenomenon, unlike Oprah's Book Of The Month approach. Such spirituality is oriented to **this** life and to **this** world and to **this** time<sup>[11]</sup>. It is part of the human condition — it lurks in the pockets of our genes.

Spirituality is best seen, not as a free-thinker's **alternative** to religion, but as its very **source**.

This clears the way for the word 'religion' to name spirituality in action with its built-in counterpoints:

- the **urge** and its **expression**
- the **communal** and the **personal**
- talk **about**, and participation **in**.

Here's another confusion. In everyday speech, 'faith' and 'belief' often mean 'provisional knowledge' as in "I believe that it will rain tomorrow". But both Christian scriptures and radical religious humanists of the Sea of Faith, use the term to name a much more profound matter. It is not merely believing **that**, but of believing **in** — it is an existential concern. It is what "holds your conscience captive"<sup>[12]</sup>

'Faith' and 'belief in' are questions of trustworthiness, obedience and value. You seek, like a swimmer, to be able to put your feet down and to feel solid ground. Everyone, at some time, has these experiences. The sociologist, Robert Bellah, wrote more than 30 years ago:

It is no longer possible to divide mankind into believers and non-believers<sup>[13]</sup>

You see, **everyone** believes in **something**.<sup>[14]</sup>

But the word 'religion' names secular humanism's biggest scandal. Their publications do not **define** 'religion' as much as **characterise** it and then proceed to denounce it from an assumption that religion is inescapably supernaturalist, corrupt and daft. As Rob Wheeler of the SoF in the UK observed:

The trouble with most books arguing for [secular] humanism is that they start with a crude critique of religion, focusing in an entirely unbalanced way on the horrors committed by Roman Catholicism in the past and the idiocies of Evangelicals and Fundamentalist in the present. Having shown that religion is mad, bad, dangerous and false they tend to assume that there is nothing else they have to do. Secular humanism naturally follows by default, QED, and requires no justification in its own right. At this point we can all stop thinking. ... <sup>[15]</sup>

Sadly, most dictionaries of English still define religion in terms of a super-natural order of reality and our consequent behaviour towards it<sup>[16]</sup>. While it is the function of a dictionary to **record** current usage, I believe that our job is to **reform** it.

Those of us who are 'religious' but who do not subscribe to supernaturalism, take the view that those who do are guilty only of mistaking metaphor for metaphysics — of mistaking the map for the territory.

Both the secular humanist and the literal supernaturalist would do well to listen to Paul Kurtz in the publication *Skeptical Enquirer* who wrote that religious language ...

does not convey us truth about the world (thus competing with science ...), but is evocative, expressive, or emotive in character, or is performatory and celebrative in a social context, or is moral in its imperative function, or it has poetic metaphorical meaning. Thus God talk should be construed primarily as a form of personal and social moral poetry. If this is the case, then religion does not give us knowledge or truth; instead it expresses mood and attitude.<sup>[17]</sup>

To put it another way, religious ideas are not propositions which invite debate, evidence, rebuttal and logical proof. Instead they grow out of innate spirituality and deal with matters of existential importance — of what is so valuable that we would be at all times guided by it and we would commit our lives to it. Ironically, but significantly, the passionate 'anti-religious' humanist, too, knows this feeling of deep commitment.

The following passage by Richard Dawkins, that voluble scourge of all things religious, he refers to Ursula Goodenough's book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*:

Yet, by the book's own account, Goodenough does not believe in any sort of supreme being, does not believe in any sort of life after death. By any normal understanding of the English language, she is no more religious than I am. She shares with other atheistic scientists a feeling of awe at the majesty of the universe and the intricate complexity of life. ... . If that is religion, then I am a deeply religious man. But it isn't. And I'm not. As far as I can tell, my 'atheistic' views are identical to Ursula's 'religious' ones. One of us is misusing the English language, and I don't think it's me.<sup>[18]</sup>

But I think that he is either deliberately misusing language or is, at least, insisting that it may not be brought into line with recent developments.

## Paradigm Shifting

To insist that religious thought and expression are obliged to offer supernatural explanations is similar to asking physicists to still speak of phlogiston as the active agent of fire, for astronomers to defer to Ptolemy, doctors to prescribe according to Galen, and for biologists to declare that crocodiles emerge spontaneously from mud on the banks of the Nile. To imprison religious expression in pre-Enlightenment thought forms, as many conservative Christians still lovingly do, and as Dawkins does for ease of ridicule, is outdated, dishonest or both.

All forms of human thought move on, and so must the religious. One of the most significant scientific re-appraisals occurred in the early 1960s with Thomas Kuhn's concept of the 'paradigm shift'. By this term he referred to the radical changes of the accepted perspective which periodically disturb a particular scientific discipline<sup>[19]</sup> and which permit previously problematic research data to find relevance.

At the same time the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, John A. T. Robinson published *Honest To God*<sup>[20]</sup>, a comparable **religious** paradigm shift. Since then there has been an upswelling of scholarly analysis and reflection about Christianity in particular and religion in general. Advances in archeology, of comparative literature and depth psychology leave us open to talk of 'religion' in terms that do not shackle it to the supernatural.

That is why radical Christians and post-Christians of the Sea of Faith Network<sup>[21]</sup> can use 'religion' in the following terms which were offered by the Canadian historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

He said<sup>[22]</sup> that when we talk about '**religion**' — that is without a qualifying '**a**' or '**the**', then we are talking about the personal piety or faith — the realised spirituality — of an individual human being, without reference to any particular formalised 'path' of faith. But when we use the expression '**a religion**' — or the plural form '**religions**' — then we are talking about historical cultural phenomena such as Christianity, Judaism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints — and so on. They each have a history and they change over time, usually in response to other historical phenomena which impinge on them. The traditions are ongoing and cumulative. Much ink has been spilled — and Internet bandwidth occupied — in failing to maintain the distinction between 'religion' and 'a religion'. This distinction allows us to suggest that the religious impulse is logically prior to any form of its

expression<sup>[23]</sup> as when we feel the existential need to find<sup>[24]</sup> values, by which life is centred and enriched.

This unsought, hardwired ‘itch’<sup>[25]</sup> — what we can equate to Owen Thomas ‘spirituality’ — may be ‘scratched’ in countless different ways. What we personally identify as ‘sacred’<sup>[26]</sup> we commit ourselves to deeply, even totally. Under the same rubric fall phenomena as diverse as: the hymn-shouting Pentecostalist; the Theravadin Buddhist who is indifferent to the notion of ‘God’; the sombre Anglican bishop; the mystic of many flavours (Sufi, Hindu, Christian, New Age, spontaneous and passive); as well as the atheist who fulminates against any or all of the preceding. The ‘itch’ is universal in spiritually-pregnant *homo sapiens*, while the range of ‘scratches’ is so extensive as to include even points of view as contradictory as fundamentalist pentecostalism and atheism<sup>[27]</sup>.

Following Owen Thomas we might use Tillich’s words to define spirituality, when manifest as religion, as

"the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary"<sup>[28]</sup>.

and we can quote Ronald Cavanagh for its expression:

Religion is the varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them.<sup>[29]</sup>

Note the absence of any reference to the supernatural, or prescription as to the form of its expression. Our itch, our yearning, is for the realisation of our humanness — our hardwired spiritual potential pushes us to aspire to transcendence. The pursuit of transcendence is a religious pursuit.

This approach is not without difficulties. The most obvious was raised by Richard Dawkins when he wrote:

But if the term *religion* is allowed such a flabbily elastic definition, what word is left for conventional religion, religion as the ordinary person in the pew or on the prayer mat understands it today — indeed, as any intellectual would have understood it in previous centuries, when intellectuals were religious like everybody else?<sup>[30]</sup>

Dawkins thinks that he wants another noun, but all that he really needs are some qualifying adjectives.

There are two other difficulties. Given such a generous definition, it is possible to count some of the more resolutely **anti-religious** secular humanists as being **religious**, if only because of the sincerity of the anti-religious feelings. The Marxist with hammer in one hand and sickle in the other is gripped by a deep archetypal image of ancient wrong and future justice.<sup>[31]</sup> To **value** a life free from supernaturalist superstition and to **commit** oneself to that belief is a matter of deep personal integrity. The particular way in which the skeptic puts integrity into action is to reject the cant, the double-talk and the hostility to Enlightenment knowledge that for so long has stood for Christian orthodoxy. Anti-Christian? Yes. Religious? Yes.

The other difficulty arises where one's 'ultimate concern' is something commonly held to be deeply bad. Nazism, cannibalism and satanism all have attracted people who have given over their lives unconditionally. One response could be to say that, if it is **that** bad then it is not really 'religion'. But that would be an evasion. We ought to honestly concede that they **are** religious expressions but that they lack the life-affirming focus by which we applaud most forms. Retain the noun, use more adjectives.

## **Watch Out, Its Coming Back!**

It is forty years since the cover of *Time* magazine asked "Is God Dead?" Don Cupitt gave an answer five years ago<sup>[32]</sup> by accounting for the death of God in terms of the death of Plato's influence on us. A generation ago we might have had grounds for thinking that religious faith and practice were fading away, at least in the West. Dwindling church membership, then and now, supported that view. It was widely assumed that, as people became more educated, they would just give up on religion. Secular humanists pray for that day — well, sort of!

Several major developments have abruptly changed all that and religion has erupted in the news media. We see ancient paths of faith subverted to terrorism and militarism.

David Boulton, a Quaker and a prominent member of the UK Network of Sea of Faith wrote that...

Today, barely half way through the first decade of the 21st century and the third Christian millennium, we are living through a mighty revival of religion in its crudest, most bigoted, most pernicious forms.<sup>[33]</sup>

Let us consider two examples: politicization of religion mixed with terrorism, and hostility to reason.

The interaction between a formalised religion and a political point of view is always a difficult one. Each, according to their precepts, makes claims to be the commanding viewpoint in the life of a subscriber. If ‘religion’ is to be taken seriously, then surely it sets the agenda for all major decision-making. But ‘politics’ makes its claims also — of idealism, pragmatism, ‘feet-on-the-ground’. We must observe that not all expressions of faith result in tolerance for other points of view and so a secular independent ‘keeper of the peace’ is needed, as the Australian religious broadcaster Rachael Kohn<sup>[34]</sup> said — the secular democratic society is the best guardian of religious freedom.

Most promoters of religion will defend its a-rational nature on the grounds that religion is subjective rather than objective, inviting us to undertake non-scientific activities such as declaring value, of loving, or being compassionate. But we may not defend incursions into the domain<sup>[35]</sup> of science if, in doing so, the scientific method itself is violated. Much of ‘Intelligent Design’ attracts such accusations. It is not, as a rationalist might say, that science is superior — its just different.

Classical Christianity has made life difficult for itself by preserving pre-scientific knowledge in dogma, like spiders in amber, long after it has been superseded. Lloyd Geering speaks as strongly as any humanist — even atheist — against theism and he argues passionately for a “Christianity Without Theism”. These are some of the characteristics of theism — the belief in a real, supra-personal God — that he dislikes. Theism, he said

added to purely human words a dimension of absolute authority which they did not deserve ... For centuries the Western world has encouraged us to believe that our future is in the hands of a benevolent and all-powerful God and that we have been placed here on earth to prepare for an eternal destiny elsewhere.<sup>[36]</sup>

## **What is to Blame?**

Atrocities of many kinds have been conducted in the name of religious faith. A catalogue would exceed the size of this paper. But it is too simple just to say that it follows that an improvement would be made by banning religious faith. Indeed the suggestion is so

ludicrous in its Canute-like naivety that it ranks alongside any suggestion to ban sex, automobiles, alcohol and chocolate.

The way forward is to follow the analysis of Cantwell Smith and to separate the ‘itch’ from the ‘scratch’<sup>[37]</sup>. We can allow that spirituality is, by definition, good and that the bad appears in some forms of its **expression**, as it does in the often-quoted parallel case of sexuality. So, this paper takes the view that the ‘itch’, which takes on many names: spirituality, religion, faith, belief, integrity — is that which seeks to promote the human condition. It is as ubiquitous as language and as problematic as sexuality. And, like sexuality<sup>[38]</sup>, the uses to which the religious disposition may be put are widespread. We deplore some of those uses without demanding an end to the underlying spirituality.

## So, Who Needs Religion?

So, who needs religion? Don Cupitt found that the idiomatic uses of ‘Life’ and ‘It All’ now occupy the space that ‘God’ once routinely occupied in everyday speech<sup>[39]</sup>. It is a widespread attitude among Sea of Faith people that a religious outlook on life is not only healthy but is essential to a fully-realised life. While the secularisation of, especially, the West has brought many advantages, it has also left something of what George Steiner referred to as a ‘Nostalgia for the Absolute’, a sense of disarray, a ‘dessication’<sup>[40]</sup>. This loss is felt at the personal level also. Carl Jung wrote,

Among all of my patients in the second half of life, that is to say over thirty-five, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them feel ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers and not one of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook.<sup>[41]</sup>

It would be an insult to the work of Jung and countless others to fail to see past the stereotypical ‘old man with a beard in the sky’ approach. The religious humanist takes the view that, while secular humanism has many commendable features, it offers an incomplete reading of all the richness and potential of the human person.<sup>[42]</sup>

We are born to transcend the Darwinian legacy. I am not proposing **metaphysical** transcendence, but **aspirational** transcendence<sup>[43]</sup>.

As Feuerbach said in a lecture in 1848<sup>[44]</sup>, we are all born as animals and, if the circumstances are right, we develop both the aspiration and the competence to transcend our animal substrate to become spiritual beings. And we can do it with out leaving home, let alone the planet.

Let us be clear, 'transcendence' does not look to denial of the flesh, but it does assign the highest priorities to 'spiritual' attitudes<sup>[45]</sup> — to love, faith, hope, and mutual support. It is these 'fruits of the spirit' that should have the casting vote, not 'the flesh'. Relegate the flesh, but do not deny it.<sup>[46]</sup>

The kind of life that our human-ness invites us into is one best undertaken in reconciling that which our analytical science has put assunder.

To consider such demands, it is necessary to recognise that a large percentage of our mental processes are subconscious, subjective and a-rational. We all possess an unconscious region of the mind which is not accessible to conscious introspection. Those who spend most of their mental activity in aesthetic pursuits attest to the sheer delight in not being bound by Reason with its stern capital "R".

Wholeness is the stated goal of both the 'religious' Christian tradition and the 'secular' psychotherapeutic tradition. Our western Christian tradition has looked to 'the church' to facilitate a process of re-prioritisation in which the 'spiritual values' of mercy, pity, peace and love<sup>[47]</sup> are made to override the fear and greed and self-absorption that is our animal legacy. Today it is common for us to ask the psychoanalyst to help bring the conscious and unconscious aspects of a person's mind into harmony<sup>[48]</sup>

During the 20th century, Christian religious thought moved in the direction of existentialism. It did this at the expense of the grand historical tradition of institutionalism. The New Agers were doing this in leaps and bounds.

But Don Cupitt's quarrel with traditional Christianity identifies a more fundamental problem:

The whole history of Western metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche rested upon a mistake, and it was a very bad mistake. We were running away from time, finitude and contingency. We forsook Being and took refuge in dreams of absolute security, rational necessity, timelessness and total knowledge and control. But now with the end of metaphysics, philosophy is at long last returned to its original and founding question, the question of Being.<sup>[49]</sup>

The cognitive content of religious expression has been shown to be almost bankrupt. We can't get to where we want to go *via* rational thought, any more than we can get satisfaction by eating the menu. Antony Flew wrote:

Man is in a condition of anxiety arising from the realization of his necessary freedom of choice, of his ignorance of the future, of his awareness of manifold possibilities, and of the finiteness of an existence that was preceded by and must terminate in nothingness<sup>[50]</sup>.

This is the very anxiety that Cupitt suggests that we must live with, even revel in. By dismantling the gods, by taking leave of the Christian God, we are then able grow up into the human creatures that we might be.

## Taking Leave of God

To 'reify' is to treat an abstraction as though it were concretely real. Many of the authors already quoted look on religion as a life-guiding abstraction, as for example, in Cantwell Smith's 'personal faith'. But, because it is an abstraction it is hard to visualise. So, Cupitt's definition: "'God' is the religious concern reified."<sup>[51]</sup> The abstraction — religious concern — is clothed in **personhood**, and so made available to thought.

I have argued that religious expressions must be allowed and encouraged to undergo paradigm shifts as have science and economics and much else. It is a commonplace among members of the Sea of Faith that, for the expression of faith to be genuine, it must be one's own. Lloyd Geering wrote:

the moral imperative which we experience in the human condition has been internalized. This does not make morality any less important than it was before, but it does make it possible for us to become more morally responsible persons.<sup>[52]</sup>

So, growing up may entail taking leave of an externally imposed morality and even of God.

## Why Secular Humanism isn't Enough

I started this paper with a discussion of 'humanitas' as the development of human virtue. While no-one could dispute the value of understanding, benevolence, compassion, mercy, fortitude, judgment, prudence, eloquence, and love of honour, we might have a niggling suspicion that they are not sufficient for the building of a realised human existence.

Furthermore I take it that what is left out of the secularist creed is already **informally** present in the lives of my willful disbelievers, but resolutely ignored — much like an inebriated uncle at one's daughter's wedding.

Human beings have two capabilities which are so much in evidence that they separate us from other animals to a significant degree. We can even conjecture that they are 'hardwired'.

One is a capacity for language which, in the majority of people, is expressed in one or more of the natural languages. The other is a capacity to ascribe life-directing significance to people, places, events, and ideologies. In the majority of people this is expressed in involvement with a formal 'path of faith' and/or an ideological movement such as Communism, and/or in social activism such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace; and/or in any one of a multitude of society-watchdog organisations such as the several Humanist or Rationalist or Skeptic organisations.

We in the West live in a disenchanted world in which many hunger for the mental, emotional and spiritual life which was previously fed by ritual and rich metaphors and myth. In seeking nourishment, many now fall prey to political spin doctors and to the advertising industry which has never stopped believing that there is an a-rational component of the human psyche. Such merchants of coercion have turned to their advantage the vulnerability that the western mind displays when it is separated from a commitment to transcendence. Starved of soul-satisfying myths, symbols and metaphors, many in the west have turned to New Age forms of expression which are, for the most part, 20th century commercial re-packagings of older pre-Christian forms of religious expression and/or latter-day ethnic perceptions.

But the post-Modern twenty-first century cannot give us assurances of any kind. Things are just too free-floating. Like Abraham, each of us must be prepared to set out, with only our faith, and without any forward reservations. We are invited to simply throw in our lot with Life<sup>[53]</sup> and to accept, in faith, that simply **being human** is worthwhile.

Since the language of faith deals with the most profound aspects of our existence, then 'existential truth' is much more relevant to our faith than is the philosophical or the logical. Scientific and philosophical truth<sup>[54]</sup> equips us to handle the objective world about us, while existential truth helps us interact subjectively with objects of value, including ourselves. For the most part, secular humanists value the first meaning while religious humanists embrace both. Or, to put it another way, if a secular humanist embraces the second version then she is already on the slippery slope towards religion. Once we step into the domain where we deal

with what the scientific method systematically **excludes** — subjectivity, aesthetics, moral claims — then we are entering the area in which religion operates. The Canadian academic, novelist and critic Robertson Davies put it like this:

"In the modern world ... we are obsessed with the notion that to think is the highest achievement of mankind, but we neglect the fact that thought untouched by feeling is thin, delusive, treacherous stuff."<sup>[55]</sup>

A purely secular world is simply not able to safeguard that which is most precious about being human. Twenty years ago in New Zealand, hard-right economic policy and a surrender to the dynamics of 'the market' elevated fear and greed to primary virtues, and social compassion died. Neither is the scientific viewpoint alone a sufficiently rich foundation on which to build a life, because, in order to operate objectively, science must ignore our subjectivity. While that is good for science, the very subjectivity of which we are made — all our hopes, loves, fears, ecstasies, joys and terrors — are of no account there.

The philosopher Jacque Monod was no friend of religion, but he touched a nerve when he wrote:

"The ancient covenant is in pieces: man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged only by chance. Neither his destiny nor his duty have been written down. The kingdom above or the darkness below: it is for him to choose."<sup>[56]</sup>

Any new and radical approach to religious thought must start at about that point. It must acknowledge what older systems of dogmatic religious certitude denied: that time passes destructively; that events — good and bad — just 'happen' without pity for any victims; that death is the last stop on the tramride of our lives. To change the metaphor, we are all in the same captainless and rudderless boat, and we must turn to each other for warmth, for support, and for the encouragement by which the humanness, latent in us all, can flower. We must start here, now, because this is the only time and the only world that we will ever know.

Get that right and something worthy to be called 'God' will emerge.

## **Sea of Faith and Humanism**

What has The Sea of Faith Network got to offer a secular humanist? At least we are neither a church, nor a church substitute. You might call it a 'talk shop' wherein any and all ideas about the expression of faith are heard sympathetically. One of our members described it as "a safe place in which to talk about unsafe things". I get rueful nods of

acknowledgement whenever I refer to it as a ‘detox centre’. There are even some capital-H Humanists among the membership of Sea of Faith who are made more comfortable by there being no assertions of dogmatic certainty nor definitions of orthodoxy. Sea of Faith does not suit everybody and nor does it try. It treads that uneasy line between a rejection of a supernatural order of things and the feeling — conviction even — that all that is profound and ennobling about being human, needs forms of expression that **sound** supernaturalist — when what is really happening is that we are talking in the language of transcendence. Its the age old problem of metaphors being taken literally.

We are not being supernaturalist when we affirm that God or the gods are figures of speech which we deny at our peril.

So is it time to look to a convergence between Sea of Faith and such Humanist groups who preach that religion is irredeemably supernaturalist? My own view is that that will eventually be possible, but it will take some time. Just as there are devout religious hardliners who promote ‘religion’ over against a devalued ‘world’, there remain, if the published Humanist journals are any guide, a dyed-in-the-wooliness unreflecting hostility even to the word ‘religion’ or any of its synonyms. Having earlier in their lives dismissed the book, smashed the bell and snuffed the candle, they don’t want to go there again.

Humanists need to be aware that voices, like Don Cupitt’s, are saying that the dualism of Classic Christianity no longer sustainable in the face of post-Enlightenment science. But that very science and its model of a single, observer-independent reality is itself looking somewhat shaky.<sup>[57]</sup> Similarly, but slowly, the way in which we recognise, acknowledge and respond to the religious concern must be encouraged to change, as our perception of what it is to be human, changes.

I incline to the view that like monarchy, the institutional church has had its day and that people like us should be presenting alternatives. Like a plant nursery, we should be planting seeds of faith and encouraging anybody who will, to find homes for them out in the wider world. Perhaps we might eventually rename our Network, ‘The Seedbed of Faith’.

The listener might detect that I am at the ‘dry’ end of religious phenomena. I am uncomfortable with ritual and liturgy and the claims of mystics. It may be that, as it is between me and some poets and musicians, I just don’t ‘get it’ and that maybe one day the penny **will** drop. But, just as the warm, moist, ‘yin’ end of faith expression is difficult for me, it is likely to pose an even greater challenge to willfull disbelievers for whom ‘faith’ is indistinguishable from reprehensible credulity.

## Concluding Remarks

I hope that by now that my listeners will have detected some recurrent themes. Let me bring this address to a close with the following bullet-point summary which I offer to willfull disbelievers as the beginning of what could prove to be a mutually beneficial dialogue:

- We are **physical** creatures before we are **mental** creatures and we are mental creatures before we are **spiritual** creatures. Our conscious selves crouch on top of a causal pyramid, the nature of which is slowly being understood.
- We are **contingent** creatures built of atoms, defined by genes, bullied by hormones, bouyed by endorphins, tortured by nightmares and inspired by good music, good poetry and good preaching.
- We each have a unique **provenance** and we each live a **unique** life.
- We have two strongly-exercised capabilities which separate us from other animals to a significant degree: a hard-wired capacity for language<sup>[58]</sup> and a hardwired capacity for spirituality and its social manifestation as religion which ascribes life-directing significance to people, places, events, and ideologies. This definition of spirituality encompasses the others and it accounts for them.
- So powerful is this urge that we feel bound (*religare*) to do something about it. Its forms of expression are so various as to sometimes encompass violent contradictions.
- The expression of religious faith does not, of necessity, require an acceptance of supernatural agencies or realms, even though many take that option.
- Scientific discoveries require us to look for improved metaphors by which to express the sheer wonder of life on earth. If scientific paradigms may be modernised, why not religious also?
- New expressions of religious faith are constantly emerging. In recent decades there has been a re-emphasis on earth-centred values and rituals. Many radically religious people — post-theistic, post-Christian, religious humanist and many others — take the view that the earth is our only home. Ever. It is not merely a transit lounge in which we piously wait for death to waft us away to another world above the bright blue sky.

- Although Christianity persists as the majority path of faith of the West, it is largely shorn of its political clout, except in the neo-conservative United States. Christianity is so diverse in its forms, practices and creeds and has changed so much over time, as to not be readily described or critiqued without considerable qualification.
- Christianity is shrinking numerically while shedding its liberals and its radicals. In a ‘circling-the-wagons’ response, spokespeople are moving towards a ‘purity’ model of Christianity and away from the ‘compassion’ approach of Jesus<sup>[59]</sup>.
- Our deepest values — including the right to chose or reject expressions of faith — are best protected by secular government.
- While humans exist, religion will persist in one form or another because to ascribe value and to commit utterly to it is an essential part of being human.
- The search for better ways will go on as long as humans exist because, at rock bottom, that is what religion is. The ambition to be radically, totally human is about as sacred as it gets. The difference in our time is that we are now free to experiment with expressions of faith as never before. We may even find that those who willfully disbelieve are really believers, after all.

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## Appendix: A Suggested Terminology of “Itching and Scratching”

I must confess to using some key words, especially ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ in ways that might seem arbitrary to some. In seeking justification I draw the reader’s attention to the wide range of usages that we find in both technical literature and the popular. My aim in this chart is to show what I take to be a causal progression from a capacity that we are all born with to the bewildering ranging of ways in which it comes to be expressed.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Spirituality</b></p> <p>"... the sum of all the uniquely human capacities and functions: self-awareness, self-transcendence, memory, anticipation, rationality (in the broadest sense), creativity, plus the moral, intellectual, social, political, aesthetic, and religious capacities, all understood as embodied." <i>Owen Thomas</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Potential to Itch</b></p> <p>By any reading we have a set of higher-order capabilities that mark us out from other animals. Spirituality, in this definition, is an objectively observable phenomenon in almost all human beings. Spirituality is not the New Age free-thinker’s alternative to religion, but is its very source. It is the sum of our potential to rise above (‘transcend’) our animal substrate and become, in this sense, ‘spiritual beings’.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Religion</b></p> <p>" ... the varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them." <i>Ronald Cavanagh</i></p> <p>“[in language that is] evocative, expressive, or emotive in character, or is performatory and celebrative in a social context, or is moral in its imperative function, or it has poetic metaphorical meaning.” <i>Paul Kurtz.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Noticing the Itch</b></p> <p>When we detect an itch — that is, when we become aware of the presence of this spiritual potential — then there is a tendency to scratch it to provide relief, if only to replace it with another form of irritation.</p> <p>Tillich captured the feeling when he defined religion as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary".</p> <p>For this analysis it is convenient to separate the method of scratching into:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the urge and its expression</li> <li>• that is, the itch and the scratch</li> <li>• personal and communal (see below) religion</li> <li>• talk about religion, and participation in it</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>A Religion or Religions</b></p> <p>Historical cultural phenomena such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam .. They each have a history and they change slowly over time, usually in response to other historical phenomena which impinge on them.</p> <p>The traditions are ongoing and cumulative.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>after Wilfred Cantwell Smith</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Scratching the Itch</b></p> <p>Wilfred Cantwell Smith provides a useful distinction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘religion’ (as above) is the personal piety or faith of an individual human being, without reference to any particular formalised ‘path’ of faith. It is the itch, looking for a scratch.</li> <li>• ‘a religion’ is an historical cultural phenomena such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam ... a set of self-conscious activities on the part of a person who feels the need to honestly answer the issues put forward by the religious attitude which grew, like language and sexuality, from the very stuff of which we are made.</li> </ul>

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# Endnotes

1. this section is freely paraphrased from several entries in the CD version of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2002.
2. "The Greeks held that everything and every one was capable of a perfection belonging to its nature, which they called its *areté*, its excellence or 'virtue'. .... [For Man it is] how to make the best of themselves as human beings ... Greek Philosophy is, *inter alia*, the search for human 'virtue' ..." Livingstone 1938 p7
3. Although both Darwin and Freud seem to use 'God' in a deistic way — viz, as a first cause who is now absent.
4. An article written by Naomi Sherer, found at [fire.benton.wa.us/philosophy/insidius.html](http://fire.benton.wa.us/philosophy/insidius.html) is mostly an ill-informed rant against all things religious, but its title "Religious Humanism as Oxymoron" sums up a widely-held opinion.
5. the term as used here does not mean 'acquisitiveness'.
6. The Humanist *Manifesto I* of 1933 was quite happy with 'religious Humanist' and said that "Religion consists of actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant". By the time of *Humanist Manifesto II* in 1973 the atmosphere had chilled to where religion was seen as series of obstacles to self-realisation.
7. There is a third and rather curious position which is represented by the hybrid "Universism" which like secular humanism, rejects faith as slavish credulity but which claims to put religion on a rational footing. see [www.universist.org](http://www.universist.org)
8. Woodhead 2004
9. Quoted by David Tacey on 13 June 2006 during a lecture in his series *The Spirituality Revolution* at St Andrews on The Terrace Wellington New Zealand as part of the Geering Lecture series for that year.
10. Thomas 2001 p2
11. that spirituality is rooted in relationship is the theme of Buber 1937 and this is even more clearly articulated in Geering 1983.
12. from the recent movie *Luther*
13. Bellah 1976 p228
14. It is possible to show that "[l]ike all other religions, humanism seeks to answer basic and ultimate questions regarding reality. To the question, "Who am I?" humanists answer that "man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as the result of a continuous process." To the question, "Where did I come from?" they respond that "the human species is an emergence from natural evolutionary forces." To the question, "Why am I here?" humanism declares, "The ultimate goal should be the fulfillment of the potential for growth in each human personality - not for the favored few, but for all of humankind" " . . . commitment to all humankind is the highest commitment of which we are capable; it transcends the narrow allegiances of church, state, party class, or race in moving toward a wider vision of human potentiality." To the question, "Where am I going?" humanists answer, "[r]eligious humanism considers the complete realization of human personality to be the end of mans life and seeks its development and fulfillment in the here and now." To the question, "How do I get there?" they respond . . . "[b]elieving that religion must work increasingly for joy in human living, religious humanists aim to foster the creative in man and to encourage achievements that add to the satisfaction of life." This compilation of excerpts from *The Humanist Manifesto II* was published on the Internet by Robert L. Waggoner as *The Religious Face of Humanism*.
15. Wheeler 2006.
16. As early as 1978 Cavanagh (qv) could contrast two quotes: from Webster's *Third New International Dictionary*: "Religion is a belief in an invisible superhuman power ...." and from the *American College Dictionary*: "Religion is the quest for the values of the ideal life, and for the means of achieving them, and includes a world view that relates this quest to the surrounding universe."
17. Paul Kurtz, "Should Skeptical Inquiry Be Applied to Religion?" *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine July/August 1999:
18. Dawkins 1999
19. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962)
20. see Robinson 1963. To students of religion the material in his book was not especially new or shocking but that a Bishop of the Church of England should write "... a more radical recasting ... is demanded ... in process of which the most fundamental categories of our theology — of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself — must go into the melting" caused an uproar which has not yet ended..
21. I don't want to appear to be talking *ex cathedra*: SoF has no *cathedra*. Nor do I want to say that I speak for "the membership". But I hope that my views would be widely agreed with amongst SoF people.
22. Smith 1963 esp. p34-p44
23. It is quite consistent to suggest that cause-and-effect runs the other way — that the participation in a religious milieu induces religious feelings. While conceding a degree of reciprocity, we see the evidence as favouring the priority of 'religion' over 'religions'.
24. or make, we cannot easily distinguish
25. "Man ... is an animal born to believe." Disraeli 25 November 1864.
26. in the general sense of setting them apart or above other items as being worthy of veneration. "My mother's memory is

- sacred to me". This often leads to expressing 'worthship', the word that gave us 'worship'.
27. "... a secular society is not hostile to religion, but provides a kind of neutral environment in which different faiths are free to pursue their ways and works." Hutchison 1981 p522
  28. Tillich 1963 p3
  29. Cavanagh 1978 p19
  30. Dawkins 1999 But the person in the pew or on the prayer mat may not be a philosopher of religion.
  31. Bellah 1976 p223, Steiner 1974 p6
  32. Cupitt 2001 p8
  33. Notes from his address at the SoF (NZ) annual Conference, 2004
  34. Dr Rachael Kohn is heard across Australia by radio and on the web every week on ABC Radio National in the programmes: "The Spirit of Things" and "The Ark". She said this at the 2005 SoF (NZ) Conference.
  35. Stephen Jay Gould in his book *Rock of Ages*, (Jonathan Cape 2001) proposed "**Non Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA)**" which he explained as "the magisterium of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. NOMA has met with some, though not universal acceptance.
  36. Geering 2002 especially pp137-144 but elsewhere passim
  37. my words, not his.
  38. the connections between sexuality and religious practice (especially monastic and mystical) has a long history. Phenomena such as St Anthony's *succubi*, mass sexual hysteria as in Huxley's *The Devils of Loudon*, and the current revelations of paedophilia by celibate priests are all likely to be explained by reference to psychological dynamics.
  39. Cupitt 2003 amplifies this.
  40. "Historians and sociologists agree ... that there has been a marked decline in the role played by formal religious systems, by the churches, in Western society. ... [T]he decay of a comprehensive Christian doctrine had left in disorder, or had left blank, essential perceptions of social justice, of the meaning of human history, of the relations between mind and body, of the place of knowledge in our moral conduct." The thesis of Steiner 1974 pp1-2
  41. Jung 1933 p264
  42. There is another 'axis' for which there is not the space to explore, the idea found in Borg 1994 in which we can see religious paths of faith spread out on a spectrum with conscientious conformity to the requirements of purity at one end and "mercy, pity, peace and love" (Blake's phrase) at the other.
  43. "The word [transcendence] needs to be rescued from its metaphysical associations if it is to be useful today"
  44. "My wish is to transform ... Christians who, by their own profession and admission are half-animal, half-angel, into people who are whole." The lecture was titled *The Essence of Religion*. This quote comes from Geering 1992 p26.
  45. That religion should be about 'attitude' rather than found at either the 'mythos' or the 'logos' pole of Karen Armstrong is convincingly argue by Julian Baggini in *The Guardian* of April 29, 2006.
  46. The "middle way" of The Buddha said almost exactly this.
  47. from Blake.
  48. Campbell 1976 p279
  49. Cupitt 1998 p106
  50. Flew 1979 pp107-108
  51. Cupitt 1980 p18
  52. Geering 2002 p136
  53. articulated in Cupitt 2003
  54. "a statement is true if what it says is the case actually is the case" typical PHIL101
  55. Davies 1997 p 153
  56. The concluding words of Monod 1970.
  57. Speculation is mounting that absolutes such as the speed of light and the ratio of the mass of a proton to that of an electron, may be changing over time,
  58. Bellah 1976 p223
  59. Borg 1994 especially pp53-58