THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN OUR POSTSECULAR AGE

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ABSTRACT

The article is a contribution to the commemoration of the 2008 centenary celebration of the University of Pretoria. Its focus is on present-day theological trends. The article's point of departure is the commendation of the philosopher Charles Taylor for being awarded with the Templeton Prize in 2007. With this prize the Templeton Foundation bestows 'progress toward discoveries about spirituality'. The article links Charles Taylor's idea of the postmodern spiritual tendency of 'enchantment' as a closure of modernity's exclusive humanism to Peter Berger's reproach of civil religion. It pleads for a non-fundamentalist and non-populist post-secular spirituality which concurs with post-theism, a de-centring of the power of institutional religion and the enhancement of a biblical hermeneutics that does not emphasise a proposition-like and moral code-like reading strategy. The article is aimed at a spirituality of living faith in light of ancient biblical and confessional life stories.

INTRODUCTION

The Templeton Prize – progress toward 'discoveries about spirituality'

In 2007 the American Academy of Religion awarded the Harvard University publication, *A secular age*, authored by Charles Taylor, with the prestigious Templeton Prize (Taylor 2007:27) – the biggest prize in the world for excellence and merit (in 2008 the Templeton Prize was worth $1.6 million). The John Templeton Foundation's prize is for 'progress toward research or discoveries about spiritual realities.[1] Previous laureates include people such as the Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for his 'struggle for open expression', a 'living symbol of freedom of thought and conscience' (in 1983); Nobel Peace Prize winner, Mother Teresa, for 'her extraordinary efforts to help the homeless and neglected children of Calcutta' (in 1973); and Dr Billy Graham, the evangelical theologian who 'invigorated an entire generation with a simple, yet poignant message of salvation' when he 'took his message of Christianity into the electronic world of radio and television' (in 1982).[2] Professor Michael (Michał) Heller, a Polish cosmologist, philosopher and catholic priest, was the 2008 prize winner.[3]

SECULARISATION AND 'DOSES OF CHRISTIANOID CONCEPTS'

The 2007 winner, Canadian Charles Taylor, is professor emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University in Canada. The *commendatio* stating why Taylor was awarded the prize in 2007 reads that it is because he has 'for nearly half a century … argued that problems such as violence and bigotry can only be solved by considering both their secular and spiritual dimensions.'[4] Whereas Peter Berger argues that our modern-day emphasis on secularisation and the so-called decline of 'mainline churches' should not delude us by being unaware of the huge numerical growth of Christianity in some 'denominational traditions' in North America[5] – not to speak of other parts of the tri-continental world – Taylor reminds us of what we have already known for many years: that not even 'secularisation' is void of spirituality. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich have already taught us that secularisation should not at all be considered a curse upon humanity.

In line with the well-known thoughts of Bonhoeffer and Tillich, Berger also emphasises the blessing that secularisation has resulted in the realisation that some aspects of Christianity need to be reformulated in order to be retained, but that others will have to be rejected – see especially Peter Berger's 1979 book *The heretical imperative* (*cf.* Osmer & Schweitzer 2003:37-38). One such untenable notion is the idea that Christianity is based on an infallible, external authority. According to Berger, there

> 'occurs a process of religious inoculation, by which small doses of Christianoid concepts and terminology are injected into consciousness … By the time the process is completed the individual is effectively immunized against any real encounter with the Christian message'.

> (Berger 1961a:116)

Secularisation helps to divest Christianity of its 'culturated' religion (see Berger's [1961b] book *The precarious vision*). Concurring with Bonhoeffer, Berger (1961b:177) actually pleads for a 'religionless' Christianity[6] and that Christendom needs to be secularised. Dorrien interprets Berger's idea as

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follows:

> The purpose of religion is to construct a sacred cosmos. Religion offers a protective canopy of transcendent legitimacy, meaning, and order to the insecure constructions that society calls 'reality'. The fate of any social order is therefore inevitably bound up with the fate of religion.
>
> (Dorrien 2001:32)

The future of religion in modernity is therefore shaky. In his work, *A rumour of angels* (1969), Berger pleads for the liberation of theology from this 'modern reality'. Theology should again find 'signals of transcendence' in the natural world, but should also be able to transcend this world. Religious experience for him is not mystical, but discovering the religious implications of everyday human experiences. The Bible is a record of such human experiences seen in a religious light (*cf.* Dorrien 2001:33).

READING THE BIBLE IS THE OBSTACLE

Our perception and reception of the Bible can be *the* obstacle to recognising and embracing the spirit of the gospel. What needs to be avoided is the capturing of the faith experiences of biblical characters in a fixed-for-always proposition-like format. Such a religious set-up would be catastrophic to living faith. What is needed is to experience the feelings of hope, despair, fear, faith, awe and anxiety contained in the Bible. These experiences are retold by reliving them. When such experiences are shared and embraced, ancient biblical evidence and past religious and confessional traditions can convey a message of hope congenial to our own personal present-day spirituality. Such an encounter speaks of living faith when it is proclaimed, confessed, sung and prayed for the very first time.

Yet, the way in which the Bible operates – or rather the way in which believers use and abuse the Bible – often constructs barriers to feeling and communicating spiritual experiences in our secular world. The obstacle consists of a simple human inclination of the need to live by a set of codes – a human characteristic so clearly seen in judicial intuitional life since antiquity. Our 'earliest' European law code was written in stone in the fifth century BCE at the *ekklesiaterion* (circular agora) of the ancient city Gortyn in Crete. In this set of codes of conduct, for example, one finds the 'preference of men over women'. Surprisingly different from the earliest codes of the Judeo-Christians, however, the Minoans of Crete gave both the wife and the husband the right to divorce (Vasilakis 2008:49–55).

This kind of everyday *normalcy*[7] became a cognitively rationalised way of living, especially since the Enlightenment. The reason is our subconscious internalisation of our modern legacy. People have always been inclined to live according to particular codes of conduct because these codes enhance safety by repressing fear and creating certainty. Comfort is vital to believe that survival is really possible in the physical world. So-called 'pure reason' provides humankind with this comfort. Reason (the cognitive dimension) means the ability to analyse, understand and explain in a sensible way what someone observes and experiences physically. Reason therefore, means power, power means control, and control implies comfort. According to empiricists, the awareness of this power is modernity's greatest 'gift'. It empowers people with the cognitive coping skills needed to survive in the secularised world. However, like everything else that is human, the fragility of reason and the limits of scientific knowledge have become noticeable in late modernity. Similar to the consequences of the 'Copernican revolution' by means of which humankind began to rethink physicality in all its facets because of the abandonment of an outdated 'flat' geocentric worldview and the acceptance of a new heliocentric worldview, the 'Kantian revolution' creates insight into the human ability to analyse and understand the Transcendent which lies beyond empirical analysis and knowledge. Immanuel Kant's (1781)

work, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [English title: *Critique of pure reason*], is therefore one of the most influential works in the history of philosophy. Also referred to as Kant's 'first critique', it was followed by the *Critique of practical reason* and the *Critique of judgement*. Kant showed how pure reason is improperly used when it is not related to experience. The 'existence of God' or the 'immortality of the soul' is not based on possible experience (*cf.* Kant [1881] 1998:8-9; *cf.* Allison 2004; Wikipedia 2007).

It therefore comes as no surprise that the 2008 Templeton Prize went to Professor Michael Heller 'for linking maths … to God'. According to the e-mailed announcement by Goodman (2008), 'Professor Heller explained his affinity for the two fields [science and religion]' as follows: 'I always wanted to do the most important things, and what can be more important than science and religion? Science gives us knowledge, and religion gives us meaning. Both are prerequisites of the decent existence.' In *The Times* of 13 March 2008, the journalist R. Gledhill makes the following remarks about Heller's award:

> Heller's view is that "[s]o long as the Universe had a beginning, we can suppose it had a creator, he says. But if the Universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?' What it means is that "Heller argues against the Newtonian concept of creation, that is, against the idea of an absolute space and an absolute time and of God creating energy and matter at certain times." According to Heller, "modern theologians should go back to the traditional doctrine that the creation of the Universe was an act that occurred outside space and time." In his statement at the prize awarding ceremony he said: "For Americans, the dialogue between science and religion has too often been at the most superficial and ignorant level, illustrated in particular by the so-called 'Intelligent Design' movement, which I have in the past argued is risible nonsense, without the slightest useful content and blighted by pervasive dishonesty and incompetence in its major advocates. It also strikes me as theological gibberish. Though I don't use theology of any description, I still think there are some positions worthy of more serious consideration by outsiders than others."
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> (Gledhill 2008:n.p.)

Mike Stofka refers to this kind of thinking as follows:

> People cling to the idea that there is also a formula that governs spiritual decision-making as well as outer decision-making … Some people claim that the scientific method provides the complete formula behind human life – they're not necessarily saying people don't have a spiritual side, just that it isn't very relevant … Other people say "every word of the Bible is the formula"; or one of the following: "the traditions and customs of my religion are the formula"; "the traditions of my ancestors…"; "what my religious leader says…"; "the Koran…"; "the Bhagavad-Gita…"; etc. However, people go astray when, in their desire for an all-encompassing formula, they conclude that everything in the place they look for truth is correct – whereas both the strictly scientific approach and religious one are only partly correct (*emphasis by Stofka*).
>
> (Stofka 2005:46–48)

OUR POPULIST, BRICOLAGE CULTURE AND CHARLES TAYLOR'S SHIFTING DEFAULT MODES

Today we are aware that nothing is objectively, totally and constantly true within all contexts. Religion is also a contingent construct. Social scientists use terms such as 'bricolage', 'patchwork', 'zap culture' and 'meander culture' (Janssen 1998:101–113) to describe the tendency of people today to create such temporary popular religious constructs. Against this background Charles Taylor[8] argues that if we wholly depend on secularised viewpoints, the fragmentation of our popular

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7. The word *normalcy* was coined by the American president Warren Harding. The newspapers reacted violently, for in the view of many, *normalcy* was 'barbarism' for normality (*Reader's Digest Family Word Finder* 2006:561).

8. templetonbookspark.com/ 2007/11/13/templeton-foundation-press-at-aarsbl

culture will cause our global community to be increasingly 'exposed to clashes of culture, morality, nationalities, and religions'; the result being a cultural life not only stripped of 'its critical function as it was absorbed into mass-consumer culture' (Melton 2001:4, in explicit reference to Habermas [1962]), but also, in Max Weber's terms, of *enchantment* (Taylor 2007:250–257, 29–42, 61, 75, 98–99, 233–134, 238–239, 268–271, 280, 331, 364, 613–614, 714, 773). This *disenchantment* goes hand in hand with a decline in personal faith (Taylor 2007:143, 145) and religion (Taylor 2007:426, 428, 550, 708; Fraser 2007).[9]

Secularism has often been equated with disenchantment – in other words with a worldview and lifestyle that are not filled with awe for the divine. It refers to a particular aptitude, an inclination in reaction to a human spirituality which pretends that it is subservient only to theocratic arrangement. The fall of royal empires as a direct result of the emerging critical philosophy and the effect of the revolutions in France, North America and Russia, as well as other factors such as the renaissance of arts and music – from classicism to baroque to romanticism – amounted to the loss of ecclesial power, which more than often fulfils the role of retaining the imperialism that provided the operational basis for crusading inquisitions.

However, Charles Taylor shows that the secular without the spiritual is determined to lead to peril. It is not only a problem of an unacceptable divorce between religion and natural science, with a damaging effect to both. It is also 'equally true that the culture of the humanities and social sciences has often been surprisingly blind and deaf to the spiritual.'[10] Taylor has long objected to what many social scientists take for granted, namely that the rational movement that began in the Enlightenment renders such notions as morality and spirituality simply old-fashioned anachronisms in the age of reason.

Such a narrow, redutionist approach wrongly denies the full account of how and why humans in our post-secular world strive for meaning – also by religious means, whether in a populist-fundamentalist, a cultural-critical or a Pentecostal-charismatic foundational mode. Without being aware of present-day grass roots spirituality, one will be mentally stuck, which, in turn, makes it impossible to solve the world's most intractable problems ranging from mob violence to racism to war. Yet, the opinion that this type of spirituality is not really religion remains echoing among the philosophers. Remarks from Jacques Derrida and Charles Taylor will suffice:

> *What Christianity will become in the coming centuries is totally unpredictable. Perhaps it's the religion that is more prepared, more apt, to transform itself than any other. When I spoke of mondialisation or, in English, globalization, I was thinking of globalization as a Christianization, as a Roman Christianization. I was implying that Christianity is the most plastic, the most open, religion, the most prepared, the best prepared, to face unpredictable transformations.* So perhaps if the deconstruction of Christianity develops we won't be able to recognize the roots of the Christian religion anymore and yet, nevertheless, we will still be able to say that this is Christianity.
>
> (Caputo, Hart & Sherwood 2005:33, my emphasis)

> *And, crucially, this is a culture informed by an ethic of authenticity…The focus is on the individual, and on his/her experience…This kind of search is often called by its practitioners "spirituality", and is opposed to "religion". This contrast reflects the rejection of "institutional religion", that is, the authority claims made by churches which see it as their mandate to pre-empt the search, or to maintain it within certain definite limits, and above all to dictate a certain code of behavior.*
>
> (Taylor 2007:507–508, my emphasis)

9.Schmidt (2007:338) refers to our society's *'Kohärenz zwischen säkularen und religiösen Überzeugungen'* as the dynamics within the secular society where conventions have to 'adapt or die' – my version of his expression *'Anpassungszwänge und Konventionen einer säkularen Merheitskultur'*.

10.See http://templetonbookspark.com/2007/11/13/templeton-foundation-press-at-aarsbl

It seems that almost at the end of the consummation of the process of secularisation and the destruction of ecclesial manipulation, critical philosophers still consider the necessity that secularisation needs to pay its last levy – and that is to finally organise the funeral of institutional religion. Here, one of the last living exponents of the new-Marxist 'Frankfurt School', the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, played a significant role (Habermas 1981:3–14; 1987). According to Nicholas Adams (2006:198), Habermas claims that present-day 'public theology', that is grass roots spirituality, 'strips religious practises of their religiousness.' Religious traditions thus lose their identity since the 'collapse of metaphysics caused theologians to assimilate to the atheism of university life, and thus betray their tradition' (Habermas 2002:75–76). How the pendulum has swung! The popular opinion has moved away from its former loyalty to an opposite one. In 2005 Habermas even shared a round-table talk with Joseph Ratzinger, the present-day Pope Benedict XV, and previously president of the Vatican's International Theological Commission under Pope John Paul II – the body (years ago the Roman Catholic Church's official inquisition) which, among others, debarred Hans Küng from his Tübingen teaching position in religion because of Küng's critical voice against papal hegemony (Adams 2006; Habermas 2001, 2002, 2007; Osmer & Schweitzer 2003; Habermas & Ratzinger 2005).

According to Taylor, the habitus of people and their ideas functions as a paradigm, a kind of default mode to which they return involuntarily until such time that this default mode has changed. As far as religion is concerned, the most significant change in default mode took place over a period of 500 years between 1500 and 2000 CE (Taylor 2007:13). Before 1500 was the mythological pre-modern era, and after 1500 the modern secularised era. The extreme of the modern era is described by Charles Taylor (2007:27) as 'exclusive humanism'. This does not, however, mean that 'God is dead'. It only means that, in contrast to the mythological world, people in the secularised world can choose to be religious or not, without the pressure of some external influence or the fear of external retribution. The mythological world can be described as follows (Taylor 2007:25–27):

- The natural world in which people exist, was created and is directed by transcendent forces
- The existence and presence of God is seen as that God 'lives' in (i) a temple in a specific city and in objects such as an ark, altar, Torah, or in (ii) a kingdom in heaven or on earth or under the earth (e.g. Hades), or in (iii) a church and its accessories such as Bible, sacraments, traditions, dogmas, etc.
- People mystify their experience of awe at having been created and directed by the God who lives among them and express it liturgically by means of scripture, rite and ceremony.

The Latin word *religare*, which means to 'bind' or to 'keep in protective custody', was soon also used for the experience of being in awe of transcendent forces (Simpson 1966:511) positively experienced as trust and negatively as fear. In the Hebrew Bible 'fear' (*jirāh*) implies a respect for the immanent manifestation of the transcendent God (Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:400). The Latin for 'trust' is *fides* (Simpson 1966:62), in Greek *pistis* (Liddel & Scott 1961:1408), and in Hebrew * āmᵉnā* (Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:62). This 'trust' or 'faith' fills the void which simply forms part of being human. The longing for the divine saturation of 'emptiness' is part of being spiritual and the more the void is filled, the more one can share the spiritual gifts with others.

Secularisation was the consequence of human beings now being able to choose freely between wanting to accept a transcendent power or not. Different options are available to the people of our globalising post-secular mass-consumerist culture. Prior to the Judeo-Christian option (in its great variety), the options were limited to polytheism and monotheism. Later it grew into a choice between God and Satan. Still later the choice was between different sets of theological dogmatic systems, religious

traditions and denominations within a tradition. Before 1500, people were socialised into 'how things are and should be'. Before the new millennium, 'exclusivist humanism' was the main influence (Taylor 2007:19–21, 26–28, 41, 88, 98–99, 130, 134, 221, 233–234, 242–269, 636–642, 656, 768–769), and today an endless variety is available.

With regard to the Christian tradition one can distinguish broadly between the 'theology' (as ecclesial reflection on the Word of God as 'revelation' and the canons of the church as deducted from the Bible – in Protestant circles the priority of 'revelation' has been expressed by the notion of *norma normans* and the 'subservient deducted canons' as *norma normata*) of institutional religion and 'public theology' (as popular/lay reflection on spirituality) (*cf.* Van Aarde 2008). This boundary line has implications for how we conceive the divine – a theological issue which I will refer to as the 'God problem'.

THE GOD PROBLEM

Theology exists in mainstream churches as well as in what were previously called 'sects'. Though some Pentecostal-charismatic groups claim not to be prescribed to by traditional confessions but are guided by the Holy Spirit, they too have internalised the central tenets of faith. I am therefore sceptical about the typical distinction made between mainstream churches and charismatic churches as if the two groups operate with two different 'theologies'.[11] This socialisation can also be seen among 'public theologians' such as film directors, poets, novelists and lay evangelists. For centuries the thought of people embedded in the Westernised first continental world has been perpetuated by theism supported by doctrinal fideism.

According to Jürgen Habermas (2001:24–25), the reason for this symbiosis between metaphysics and spirituality was the Hellenisation of Christianity: '*Die Hellenisierung des Christentums hatte zu einer Symbiose zwischen Religion und Metaphysik geführt: Diese löst Kant wieder auf*' (see Habermas 2001:24–25). Habermas (2007:395) hints at the possibility that in the experience of the earliest Jesus followers this symbiosis, with the help of Platonic thinking, brought about an estrangement from the existential trust in the saving act of God.

Post-secular 'bricolage' – today's populist meander culture – renders it misappropriated to draw the line between the so-called mainstream churches and Pentecostal-charismatic groups. Both show signs of 'institutional religion' and both demonstrate, either consciously or subconsciously, the symbiosis between metaphysical theism and living faith. Hal Taussig puts this viewpoint as follows:

> Evangelical churches labelled "nondenominational" or "interdenominational" have almost nothing to do with the open-minded, openhearted progressive Christianity …. Although both progressive and evangelical Christianity have lively spiritual and worship expressions, that is where the likeness ends. Even this likeness is superficial in that the spirited songs, dancing and wide congregational participation occurring in both these groupings are done to very different words and rationale. Evangelicals and postmodern intellectual perspectives, feminist issues, and GLBT[12] issues. Although a few more evangelical churches are showing some sensitivity to issues of poverty, racism, and ecology, by and large these commitments belong to progressive Christians, not evangelical ones.
>
> (Taussig 2006:130)

In my view, the distinctive line should be seen between institutional religion and spirituality on the public square as it is professed in films, books, the arts, and the like (*cf.* Van Aarde 2008). The academic theologian's task is to describe and reflect on this process. This is the point where the validity of

accommodating 'scientific theology' at the university – also in our secular age – becomes so clear – as expressed in the following excerpt from the inaugural address by Dr Max Price, an expert in 'public health medicine' and at present the vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town:[13]

> The university [= faculty of theology] is still very much a space of focused intellectual inquiry, imaginative thought, experiment and analysis – a space of ideas, critique and the pursuit of truth (even if the meaning of that concept has been much contested over the centuries). While recognising that the Church of old did produce many great philosophers and thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, more often than not the Church was traditional and conservative in the literal sense of resisting change and new ideas. The universities parted ways with the church and the two have continued in parallel partly because, with the rise of scientific rationalism, universities offered a space which encouraged new ideas, controversy, argument and challenges to orthodoxy. This is the primary purpose of a university [= faculty of theology], and its success depends on a culture within the institution which is tolerant of heretical views (I use that term deliberately), which is not tolerant of attacks on people based on their background, what they believe in or who they are, but insists on the debate being about ideas and their evidence and their logic.
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> (Price 2008: n.p.)

Academic theology's task is to identify both dated ideas and creative ideas, originating from the contemporary world, which can provide a new direction. Some such dated ideas are the following:

- fundamentalist creationism (based on Genesis; anti-evolutionary)
- intelligent design (the complex reality is seen as God's creation; anti-evolutionary)
- evangelical and/or orthodox conservatism (Genesis no longer taken literally, but the Jesus story is still taken literally)
- liberal theology (free from Scripture and traditional confessions and dogmas except when these concur with what is rationally acceptable)
- deism (God created but then left creation to its own laws), and
- theism (God intervenes from time to time)
- confessionalist fideism (God is understood in terms of dogmas – people believe more in dogmas than that their focus is on God self)
- cultural-theological civil religion (cultural practices are equated with God's will).

All these religious conceptual ideologies (except perhaps the liberal theological disposition) are theistically oriented. Nigel Leaves (2006) distinguishes three post-theistic options:

- panentheism (Leaves 2006:23–32)
- theological non-realism, according to which creation is celebrated as the 'gift of life', faith as belief that will not let you down, 'eternal life' as a 'solar' living of a believer 'who is no longer afraid of death', and intercessory prayer as an 'expression of love and concern' (Leaves 2006:35), and
- grass roots spirituality which, according to Robert Forman (2004:4), is 'burgeoning mostly on the margins of mainstream, popular culture and traditional church hierarchies … [not] growing … in science labs, parish naves or university classrooms, but rather in living rooms, church basements, yoga centers, nature walks, meditation rooms and coffee shops all over the nation and the world. It is at heart populist, devoid of leadership or overarching organization' (Leaves 2006:47).

BELIEVING AND READING THE BIBLE AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME

Bearing the above in mind, I would like to promote a biblical theology which incorporates scientific insights that lead to a view

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11. See Vu (2008): 'Mega church pastor Rick Warren suggested … that mainline churches need to reconcile with evangelicals to counter its mounting problem of membership decline.'

12. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender.

13. www.news.uct.ac.za/usr/news/ 2008/downloads/installation_address.pdf. Inclusion in square brackets added to the original presented on 19 August 2008.

of Scripture which does not clash with scientific insights. The challenge will be to 'rehabilitate' ecclesial language concerning the church as institute, worship, pastoral care, deaconate and the everyday lives of Christians. Scientific insights in the following fields should be taken seriously.

Present-day natural science is built on the legacy of Copernicus, Darwin, Einstein and Heisenberg, among others. The sun, moon and stars are now seen as part of physical time and space as opposed to being part of the metaphysical. Consequently, God no longer resides within metaphysical space, but in this physical (ecological) space. Thanks to the relativity theory and quantum physics, we are aware that so-called 'facts' are instead perspectives. Experiments are theory-laden and theories are never fixed. In light of the insights of genetics we know that genes adapt to changing circumstances in order to survive. Those who cannot adapt become extinct because evolution has taught us that organisms adapt or die. Adaptation means that change has taken place. What was, no longer exists in its previous form. The law of inertia creates the illusion that some things never change because they are 'primordial' and are not the social product of human construction.[14] The conventions and ideas that uphold the habitus of living beings (both human and animal) are resistant to change. What is seen as 'essential' (i.e. primordial) to humanity is especially protected against change.

Essentially speaking, one's sex and ethnicity determines one's human social identity. These can be seen in people's (i) social roles, (ii) attachment to the land, and (iii) the language they speak. Social identity is further defined by what people share: (i) the values of their culture, (ii) customs, and (iii) historical memories. Social identity also rests on shared physical attributes such as skin colour, eye colour, hair type and the shape of one's head/ face. Broadly speaking, social identity hinges on differences with respect to age, sex, nationality and race.

These insights have contributed to the 'grammar of religion'. Theologians have realised that they should distinguish between religious language (which talks about God) and concrete language (which talks about the physical reality). Religious language is the mythical language of imagery, whereas the 'grammar of science' is concrete and objectified. Imagery articulating the experience of God has been borrowed from concrete (profane) language. Imagery does not provide a replica of the concrete reality from which it borrows its speech, therefore biblical images should be 'translated' from concrete scientific language, where we are aware of the fact that we are operating in two sets of 'grammars'. An example: God does not equal a father (male person who has had a child with a woman). 'Father' is a metaphor/image in religious language. Contemporary biblical religious language 'translates' myths from a pre-modern world into myths from a scientific world. The gospel is not sold out to 'facts' and 'theories', however. It is always critical of the physical reality, including human culture.

As far as our God-image is concerned, this type of theology acknowledges that traditional metaphysical language about God is a problem because it clashes with scientific insights. For example, 'God rules over the church and world' refers to a metaphysical God who rules from 'out there'. This is the language of a view of nature of God living above the cosmos from where God rules. Our understanding today is that the metaphysical and the physical have merged. We need new language (imagery) to express how God concurs with our lives, invites us to do God's work in our world and lives in our hearts.

All of this has implications for prayer. God is not requested to intervene from 'out there' in the affairs of the cosmos. Prayer is rather a conversation with God who is already 'here'. Natural and human phenomena such as disasters, drought, illness and catastrophes are understood in terms of socio-ecological forces

14. The concept of 'primordialism' is associated with Edward Shils (1957) and Clifford Geertz (1963), while 'constructionism' is associated with Frederik Barth (1969).

rather than as 'God's will'. 'Walking with God' and 'journeying together with others' are seen as the manifestation of the great commandment to love. Language about the beginning and end, life and death, heaven and hell is appreciated as 'mythical language' which should be 'translated' into religious language in terms of contemporary scientific insights about time and space.

Traditional metaphysical language about Jesus' death on the cross in terms of a God who intervened from 'out there' in order to reconcile the world with God will be translated into contemporary religious language which understands Jesus' death in terms of his life. Jesus was killed because he loved unconditionally, included everyone and did not understand God in terms of cultural conventions. Historical Jesus research has aided us in understanding his death in a religious way, articulated in scientific terms. The pre-scientific mythical language in the Bible concerning Jesus' resurrection says in contemporary scientific language that Jesus' way of life is continued in this concrete time and space. Death has not brought an end to his life. The biblical confession, 'Jesus Christ is Lord' (basis of the later credos) can be 'translated' as: 'Jesus' life continues in and through us.' This continuation of Jesus' life has implications for our theological insights concerning direct access to God for all, acknowledging the dignity and identity of others and loving others in a selfless manner, in other words, inclusivity irrespective of orientation, age, sexuality, nationality and ethnicity.

The Holy Spirit of God is understood in the old metaphysical language as the substitute for God who was made present from 'out there'. New language about the Spirit will be, for instance, to confess that a person who lives in God's presence is a Spirit-filled person who is guided to live in a Christian manner, journeying with God (this implies the continuing life of Jesus). The implications of such a 'new' theology are that the Roman legal language which was used to articulate the Trinity will have to be 'translated' for today.

A theology which takes science into account recognises that the church is currently in a phase of de-institutionalisation. This does not mean that the gospel message has been discarded in favour of secular, agnostic or atheist views that God, faith and the church are already 'dead' (dated). The implications are that the church is opposed to hierarchy and that it does not want to be office-centred. The offices should be a functional, service-oriented leadership which facilitates and guides people to serve God and others with their diverse spiritual gifts. The consequences will be that worship services will be enriched by liturgies which are expressed in contemporary religious language. Sacramental theology will have to be reconsidered. As far as discipline is concerned, a legalistic ecclesiology should make way for a gospel perspective on church. On the one hand the humanity of the church will be acknowledged, and on the other hand the emphasis will be on a life guided by the Spirit of God.

If the Bible is read from this stance with the aim to contemplate, pray, confess and preach old and new stories of faith as though for the very first time, the exegetical approach would be *post-liberal*. Walter Brueggemann (2005:170–171) explains the 'new characteristics of post-liberal exegesis' as follows (my paraphrase and interpretation):

- Though very much aware of the audience, the exegete will not be guided by their conventions, but will speak to their needs in an imaginative and creative way. Brueggemann calls it '… *an act of imagination*'.

- Both exegete and audience approach the text from the framework of their own ideologies. The exegete knows that the text does not have *one* meaning only which is true for all times. On the other hand the text cannot be so freely interpreted that it accommodates all ideologies. On the contrary. In a colonialist context, for example, a post-colonial reading will be ideology critical. The same goes for

gender critique in a male dominated and/or heterosexist world. Brueggemann calls it '… the *critique of ideology*'. Such a critical reading will also expose the denial of ideology by both the exegete and the audience.   Brueggemann refers to it as 'hidden ideology'.

- Exegetes approach the text with all of themselves: their presuppositions, prejudices, histories, experiences, bodiliness. Awareness of oneself and the situation of the audience (including those inside and outside of institutionalised religion) makes it impossible to approach the text in a detached, rational and authoritative way. According to Brueggemann, '*every reader and every reading is to some extent contextual*'.

- For Brueggemann this kind of biblical exegesis '*has a practical urgency to it*', because for too long people have been damaged by means of the Bible. A post-liberal reading creates the awareness that 'life-and-death matters are at stake for both the interpreter and for the community of interpretation'.

- This exegesis is not the enterprise of institutional religion. It assumes a dialogue between exegetes and 'theologians' in the public square.

THE END OF INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION?

Institutional religion cannot remain untouched by this. It cannot simply maintain the status quo in a post-secular world. The logical consequence would, however, not necessarily be that *religion* must come to an end and be replaced by *spirituality*. What then, is the future of the *ecclesia* as institute?

Because the experience of faith means the sharing of spirituality, *religio* presupposes *communio*. In this respect the Dutch theologian Gijs Dingemans (2001:276–301) refers to this communal interaction as a 'round table church'. When the origins of the word 'church' (Barth 1964:120) are taken into account, *church* does not presume static institutionalism, but rather the dynamic interaction of people gifted by charismata. This happens in a communal-liturgical setting, a 'circle' of religious people called the 'faith community'. Such a *communio* certainly manifests as a kind of 'round table church'.

The semantic roots of the English word 'church' (German: *Kirche*; Afrikaans: *kerk*) are the Greek word *kirkós* and the Latin words *circa* and *circum*, meaning 'round' or 'circle' (Simpson 1966). In other words, by its 'de-institutionalisation' the church should again become the place where human beings encounter the divine by remembering Jesus within the context of sharing faith experiences. In such a circle people do not have to agree on everything or share the same social background. Jesus is remembered when they share their faith experiences. They share their longing for the divine and by doing so the void in their individual and communal lives is filled.

The *communio* is the 'junction' where God, through ancient scriptures, faith traditions of the past and experiences in the present, meets people in the real world (Dingemans 2002:142). The faith community which is met by God in the 'real world', the *saeculum*, is challenged to distinguish critically between what is culturally immanent and what is transcendental, though the two are always mixed in their lives. If this distinction is not made carefully, the danger is that one will fall into what Peter Berger (1961a:39–57) calls 'bad faith', rather than having a 'living faith'. 'Bad faith' amounts to civil religion, whereas a living faith means living in the presence of God and being morally responsible for others; also those outside of one's own group. In Charles Taylor's terminology, 'bad faith' is 'exclusive humanism'. In Paul's terminology, living faith is to live by faith alone – which is remembering Jesus.

Previously Jürgen Habermas saw the rejection of religious beliefs, norms and values as modernity's 'unfinished project' (see Browning & Fiorenza 1992). For Paul Ricoeur ([1989] 1995:306), spirituality which is nurtured by the Jesus narrative

can become an agency of hope, also for the church as institute (*cf.* Drewery, Winslade & Monk 2000). In his contribution, 'Pastoral praxeology, hermeneutics, and identity', Ricoeur refers to this as follows:

> It is a problem of identity. *It seems to me that this is also a problem for those concerned with pastoral ministry inasmuch as there is always the problem of the "who": Who is the actor? Who intervenes? One intervenes in relation to* whom? *… It is in such reflection that the word "return" assumes meaning, as when I speak of returning to myself, that is, of a return to what I am doing, but also to myself, to the self.*
>
> (Ricouer 1995:306)

This journey of such a 'self' implies that the 'self' as a 'spiritual being' has arrived at a *second naiveté* (*cf.* Wallace [1990] 1995). A *second naiveté* assumes *religio*. In the first naiveté, '*religare*' was understood by its meaning of 'binding' or 'keeping in protective custody' (Simpson 1966:511). In this sense of the term, post-secular spirituality would mean the 'end of religion'.

In Ricoeur's sense of the word, *religare* means to return. This 'return' implies a 'binding' to something that goes back in time. Reliving it again today, as if for the first time, implies a de-*con*-struction, a re-telling in order to both reformulate and to retain. This is the *second naiveté*. This returning completes the circle. But completing the circle does not mean returning to the old beginning. It is a suspicious process which departs from the unacceptable and gives birth to new meaning. Such a suspicious 'hermeneutical circle' (Ricoeur 1995:186) presupposes a return by means of *remembering* (in philosophical terms, *mimesis*; Ricoeur 1984–85) the important narratives of the biblical and ecclesiastical past, especially that of Jesus and the church's proclamation of his kingdom message.

This process of *returning* to the past consists of three steps happening all at once: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration (Kearney 2001, 2004). The first implies the rational, critical, suspicious encountering of past faith experiences; in the second I am involved in the encounter, not in a clinical, rational and objective way, but in a critical, rational consciously suspicious way; the third tells the story of the birth of a new self – the interpretative process has changed me. The hermeneutist Pambrun (2001:296) explains it as follows:

> In this sense, the configuration of the narrative becomes a cognitive and existential operation in my refiguring of existence. The present, that is my life, becomes the place where my relationship to the future as hope and my relationship to the past as possibilities intersect, namely where the "unused potentialities of the past" are affected on behalf of others.
>
> (Pambrun 2001:296)

By being religious, in the words of Jacques Derrida – deconstructivist philosopher of our time (*cf.* Cohen 2001) – we *have returned* ('*religare*') to *the roots of our (Christian) religio* (Caputo, Hart & Sherwood 2005:33), and it has happened not in a metaphysical-theistic sense 'out there', in another sphere of time and space, but right here *in* our world (*saeculum*).

> … Derrida states many times that since techno-science enlarges the religious realm even in opposing it, the secular culture is a religious culture without dwelling on the other implications that arise here – that there is no religious culture that is not secular through and through.
>
> (Terada 2007:252)

Being religious is to *de-secularise* our world by living in the presence of God as a Spirit-filled person. Such transcendence in everydayness implies living in a (Christian) moral manner.

Charles Taylor helped me to *articulate*[15] that which I have already been doing: having the courage to be a religious person today. Post-secularity therefore does not mean the *end of religion*, but rather the end of *exclusive humanism*.

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15. See especially the chapter titled 'Ethics of inarticulacy' in his previous book *Sources of the self: The making of modern identity* (Taylor 1989:53–90).

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