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Exclusivist Boundaries and Extremist Transgressions: Persistence and Problems of Religion

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ABSTRACT

Some fifty years ago scholars claimed the end of religion was nigh. More recently some at the fringe of the Christian religion have touted the imminent end of the world. But the world is still here; and religion of all sorts persists, although not without some considerable problems.

Why is religion so persistent? And what are we to make of contemporary problematic issues, such as extremism and terrorism, often associated with religion? What might the Taliban in Afghanistan, Anders Breivik in Norway, and the Christchurch Cathedral in New Zealand, have in common, for instance?

In this article I will outline a model for understanding the nature of the persistence of religion, paying particular attention to three interwoven dimensions: narrative, ethical, and metaphysical. I will also discuss, in the light of this model, the contemporary problem of exclusivism and extremism which arguably arise from the lack of an adequate conceptual mechanism for coping with religious diversity.

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Half a century ago intellectual pundits in the West were predicting that religion *per se* was all but over: religion had had its day; the secular world and the scientific mind-set was about to triumph; sociologists and the proponents of secularism gleefully predicted the end was nigh. This sense of inevitable decline was voiced by Berger and Luckmann (1966), for example, and has been seemingly reinforced by the apparent relentless trend of Census results with regards to religious allegiance, most usually with respect to Christianity. More recently Steve Bruce (2002, p. 3) notes the process of secularization

being manifest in terms of the declining role and social standing of religion with respect to societal institutions, together with an overall “decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs.” Karel Dobbelaere (2002, p. 23) refers to the idea of the “secular” as being that which is opposed to the “sacred” in the sense of implying “a cultural emancipation from religion”. And, further, the more rampantly aggressive secularism born of the dismissal of religion present in various programmatic and policy forms (see Dobbelaere, 2002, p.23), and which regards religion as merely a private and arbitrary choice, of no relevance to the public square (Heath Atchley, 2009, p. 2), is certainly well in evidence. Yet despite such analyses, predictions and trends, religion has persisted and is palpably manifest. What it is we call religion is seemingly so deeply embedded within the human condition that, under many and varied guises, religion remains alive and very ubiquitously present.

Religion presents as a stubbornly persistent fact of life, but also in many quarters the harbinger and locus of very considerable problems. On the one hand, twentieth-century post-war processes of globalization and secularisation yielded an expectation of the eclipse of religion; on the other hand, today the world is witness to the ‘return of religion’ marked by inescapable diversity, myriad fundamentalisms, resurgent exclusivisms and problems of extremism that, by and large, I suggest are born of reactionary responses to the ubiquitous presence of different religions. The persistence and plurality of religion, with attendant contemporary problems, forms the substantive focus of this paper and can be formulated as two questions: Why does religion persist? What constitutes the contemporary critical problematic of religion? In response to the first I wish to explore something of the interaction of what I will refer to as the narrative, ethical/experiential, and metaphysical dimensions of religion. And with respect to the second I propose to focus on the putative inability to adequately accommodate diversity that, I argue, lies at the root of religious extremism. But before I turn to these questions, I want to offer some orienting comment on the state of religion today, and also the study of it, at least in western societies such as Britain, New Zealand and Australia, and to

highlight two recent scenarios of boundary and transgression, scenarios which represent a recurring type, even as the events I cite are bound to a specific time and place.

Linda Woodhead (2012, pp. 6-7) offers an astute observation on the variable receptivity in academia to religion and its study. Some hostilely reject it; others evince openness and appreciation. And where a profound secular attitude predominates, as is often the case in politics, international relations, arts and cultural studies for example, “[i]t is not just that religion gets caricatured and demonised. It’s that it gets left out of the picture altogether” (Woodhead, 2012, p. 6). Of this academic secularism she comments: “It’s a crazily narrow-minded approach, which has to turn a blind eye to the luxuriantly variegated religiosity of most of the world, and ignore the past, including our own”; and so she speaks of the need for a revolution “to correct the secular gaze that airbrushes religion away” (Woodhead, 2012, p. 6). As she avers, mindful of the reality of religion in today’s world: “A less secular bias in our universities, and a more mature understanding of religion, is needed. Most religion is fascination. Some is awe-inspiring. Some is ludicrous. A small part, often in combination with a political cause, is downright dangerous. But you need to be educated about it in order to have the confidence to discriminate” (Woodhead, 2012, p. 6). I could not agree more. Religion is increasingly in the news; it is increasingly a multifaceted ubiquitous phenomenon impinging on societies and individuals across the globe; yet it is also an increasingly marginalised subject, it would seem, at virtually all levels of our education systems. Almost everywhere the subject of Religious Studies is on the back foot. Secular society has succeeded in setting very firm boundaries to religion in the public sphere; transgressing those boundaries provokes, very often, reactions of hostile dismissal of religion. Yet more and more, across the globe, we see religion caught up in variety of boundary and transgression contexts: the assertion of religious identity-boundaries, clashes occurring at the borders where boundaries intersect – both spatially and conceptually – and a stream of transgressions involving religion, or at least religious motifs, now form a veritable news-casting staple.

In *The Guardian* of Monday 3 September, 2012, there were two items which rather expressed the interplay of boundaries and transgressions vis-à-vis religion. Both had to do with Islam. This in itself is a recurrent trope; but it is the specifics of each event which is worthy of attention. The first announced: “Historian defends his programme on Islam” (p. 6). It had to do with a television programme on Channel Four (‘Islam: the untold story’, broadcast on 28 July) that focussed on the question: “whether, as Muslims have always believed, Islam was born fully formed in all its fundamentals, or else evolved gradually, over many years” (p. 6). The programme attracted numerous complaints with many accusing it of distorting the history of Islam. Not having seen the programme, but noting the response of the Director that suggests it was doing little more than stating the academically obvious to a wider audience – perhaps a little akin to the role played by John A.T. Robinson’s *Honest to God* in rehearsing standard academic fare in a form palatable to a general Christian readership in the 1960s, and so provoking a hostile response – I could only but wonder about what was really going on. What is this issue all about? What is the phenomenon here taking place? What is the source of the religious contention? On the surface of it, it seems the reaction to the programme was in the nature of an affront being given (or rather taken) by virtue of a received tradition being publicly challenged. A boundary had been crossed in raising a question and posing responses that undermined a fixed position. And this suggests that, to some extent, we are witnessing an example, in the hostile reactions, of a ‘fixation on the fixed’; of concern for boundaries and the charge of transgression in respect to a perceived breach. Persistence of religion is identified with maintaining a fixed conceptual status quo; and this fixed position is itself inimical to any suggestion of plurality of perspective or diversity of interpretation, let alone the admittance of propriety in respect of any genuine alterity: the programme transgressed by posing an ‘otherness’, at least in terms of the way the boundary of religious identity is construed.

The second item, ‘Pakistani mullah arrested over claims he falsified evidence in girl’s blasphemy case’ (*The Guardian*, 3 September 2012, p. 14) told the story of how a Muslim cleric, so negatively focussed on the presence of

Christianity within his Islamic milieu, planted information in order to frame the arrested child in what appears to be a put-up job designed to intensify pressure on local Christians: “We are not upset that the Christians have left and we will be pleased if they don’t come back” said the accused mullah (p. 14). Even though the case was surely undermined, the prosecuting lawyer was reported nevertheless to be planning to press the case against the girl, accused of burning a prayer book that contained passages from the Qur’an. Once again we may discern a ‘fixation on the fixed’ at play. An extreme reaction to a lived situation of religious plurality leads to a dual transgression: the reaction to the perceived ‘transgression’ of the interloping presence of a religious ‘other’ on the one hand, and arguably, on the other, the committing of a transgression against the Qur’an and Islam itself with respect to the Quranic injunctions concerning the People of the Book and the allowance of religious diversity, especially with respect to the presence of Christians and Jews within the Ummah. With these comments and examples in mind, let us now turn to the issue of the persistence of religion.

Why does religion persist?

Martin Riesebrodt (2010) in a recent book asks: Why has religion persisted across the course of human history? Secularists, he notes, had been predicting the end of religion for a long time. But religions continue to attract followers. Religion continues to thrive. In his attempt to answer the question, Riesebrodt concentrates on the concrete realities of worship, examining religious holidays, conversion stories, prophetic visions, and life-cycle events and argues that all religions promise to avert misfortune, help their followers manage crises, and bring both temporary blessings and eternal salvation. Religion will not disappear as long as these promises continue to help people cope with life. Riesebrodt focusses on the salvific motif as the promissory focus; I would tend to the idea of ‘transformation’ as being more ideologically neutral and phenomenologically apposite. Indeed, in concert with an empirically-based approach such as Riesebrodt’s, the phenomenology of religion has yielded a range of useful analyses and hermeneutical frameworks. Religion is no one thing. Religion comprises highly variegated phenomena. There is no single definition that does full justice to the range

and complexity of phenomena that attracts the appellation of 'religion'. Definitions must be provisional, hermeneutics inclusive, and methodologies apposite. Among many useful typologies, Ninian Smart's seven dimension analysis seems as good as any and is well recognized (see Smart, 1995; Pratt, 1993). Without wishing to minimize any of the seven by way of a perceived coalescing, I suggest that when thinking about religion today, especially in respect to questions concerning its persistence and manifest problems, a focus on three broad dimensions, or clusters of dimensions if one uses Smart's typology, may offer fresh insight.

Three interwoven dimensions: narrative, ethical/experiential, metaphysical

The three key dimensions as I define and use them are as follows. First, there is the broadly conceived 'narrative' dimension which refers to the fund of 'story' in which an individual 'dwells' and that constitutes the primary reference for religious identity. Second, the ethical and experiential dimension which refers to the diverse ways in which the religious individual 'lives out' his or her religious identity in respect to values, attitudes and behavioural principals on the one hand – moral guidance for attitude and action – and, on the other, the manifold patterns of private and public religious practice, observance, ritual and so forth. Third, I suggest, there is the 'mental grounding' of religious life and sensibilities in terms of the metaphysical presuppositions that, for the most part, underlie religion and yet often remain quite unrecognized – or else highly confused and confusing. Furthermore, whilst often addressed as discrete items within various phenomenological typologies, I regard these three as very closely interrelated such that, together, they form the bedrock of definition and meaning when it comes to how we might understand the term 'religion'. Indeed, I suggest that it is in the interrelation of these three chief elements or dimensions that an understanding of religion's manifest persistence, and also the root of many contemporary religious problems, may be discerned and addressed.

The narrative dimension constitutes the arena of 'indwelling' that gives shape and substance to religious identity. It comprises, of course, the vast fund of

myth, legend, story, history and so on that apply at multiple levels – overarching macro (e.g. being ‘Christian’ or ‘Buddhist’); local-macro as in being ‘Western’ Christian or ‘Mahayana’ Buddhist for instance; focussed-macro (‘Anglican’ Western Christian; ‘Tibetan’ Mahayana Buddhist); micro (‘Australian’ Anglican Western Christian; ‘this or that lineage’ Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist); and micro-local (‘Sydney Diocese’ Australian Anglican Western Christian; ‘New Zealand based’ specific lineage of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism, etc., etc.) – whereby to each there is attached a narrative of varying sorts that provides a component of identity reference for both the individual and the respective community. So within any one of either a ‘Christian’ or a ‘Buddhist’ religious identity there are actually many variant identities. Of course we know this; but I hope I have sketched an analytical framework that gives some rational shape to this multiplicity, for in terms of religion ‘narrative’ is itself complex and multi-dimensional. This is something that ‘fundamentalist’ perspectives often overlook, or simply dismiss in favour of absolutising their own specific narrative. In general terms, I suggest the narrative dimension as such serves several clear functions. Ahistorical myths, history, legends, morality tales and so on, especially as encapsulated in scriptures as well as the respective ‘grand tradition’, together with level-specific histories, stories and allied reportage provide inspirational and existential elements of identity, meaning and orientation. Patterns of relating as exemplified in the narratives, and a perspective on the nature of reality given within narrative material, provide insight, meaning, and an ontological orientation for religious identity. In other words, narrative yields key stories and allied derived beliefs that provide spatio-temporal or otherwise locational identity reference points. Narratives give shape and distinction to religious life and identity. The ‘ethical and experiential’ dimension refers, as noted, to the manifold ways whereby religion is lived out in daily life. It encompasses both common values – such as the ‘Golden Rule’ – as well as specific and distinctive teachings often manifest through culturally loaded norms conveyed by way of commandments, law-codes, moral injunctions and imperatives, and the processes and values attached to education and enculturation. And here the ‘ethical’ spills over into the ‘experiential’ with both personal expressions of piety on the one hand and behavioural patterns associated with rituals,

festivals, and generally observable public events, on the other. Once again, there are internal variants in respect to this dimension that parallel the multi-levelled nature of the narrative dimension.

Third, there is the metaphysical, or the mental / intellectual grounding framework or otherwise worldview presuppositions (*Weltanschauungen*) in which the narrative dimension, and its reception and outworking in terms of beliefs and behaviours, is set. However, metaphysics is a highly misunderstood term, with much confusion reigning because, when it comes to religion, metaphysics multi-levelled. Indeed, I suggest we can think of metaphysics as ranging over three 'orders' – the philosophical higher or first-order; theological/ideological middle, or second-order; and the mythic/fanciful lower or third-order. It is not so much the case that these are to be conceived in some sort of hierarchized descending fashion but rather as in the manner of concentric circles of interrelated cognitions that radiate out from the first or central universal and foundational level (as in the idea of 'time') through differing levels or 'phases' wherein each subsequent presupposes the previous, but no earlier or more 'central' phase requires necessarily anything further 'out' from it, as it were. The point is, these three 'levels' or 'phases' of metaphysical conceptuality are interconnected and together underpin the ways in which religious narrative is 'read' and how the ethical and experiential elements of the religious life are engaged. Let us explore a little further.

The first is the arena of metaphysics strictly speaking – the mental or conceptual sub-stratum which enables us to comprehend and interact with the physical world in which our existence is set. This includes our construct of time – which in so-called Western traditions is lineal. In Eastern thinking it is cyclic. This distinction impacts very directly on narrative and ethical/experiential dimensions, as well as upon differences found in respect to middle-order religious metaphysics, as I shall show momentarily. Another of the 'higher order' metaphysical elements is epistemology, our views about knowledge: how it is we know what it is we know. Is knowledge that which is

'given', as it were, from 'outside' the human mental realm, or is it something which is discoverable, constructed and so produced by human ratiocination? Both understandings can be found within religion; the latter tends to predominate in non-religious worldviews, such as secular scientism, and leads to a radical disjunction of materialist and non-materialist, or transcendental, constructions of what we mean by 'knowledge'. Finally, in this illustration of philosophical metaphysics, we can alight on the nature of reality itself – as in, for the most part, whether reality comprises the arena of the real or the illusory; whether it is only physical and material *per se*, or whether the transcendental or non-physical (emotions, intentions, willing, artistic creativity and so forth) also comprise 'reality'. These latter, depending on how they are understood in terms of higher order metaphysics, then govern perspectives on, for example, freewill, determinism, human rights and other values. One critical element of the first-order level of metaphysics which, I suggest, is inherent to religion, is what I would term the presupposition of 'ordered singularity' as a sort of metaphysical *Urgrund* understood as lying at the very heart of the human *socius*: human existence cannot abide chaos. Religions for the most part express this in terms of an undergirding unicity or monism: there is, ultimately, only a singular reality; one divinity; one community; one way of being properly human. This oneness is portrayed as the reconciliation of variety and the bulwark against ultimate chaos. The metaphysical binary that accompanies the *urgrund* motif is played out in terms of narrative as well as ethics and experiential dimensions as a fundamental dynamic of the religious life. It is given evidence in the variety of oppositional posturing found throughout much religious discourse and dynamics, as we will see below.

Middle, or second-order, metaphysics refers to the specific conceptual structures underlying religious thought found in the developed sense of a theology or relevant ideology. Here we find the interconnected complexes of concept, logic and ideas. Three examples will suffice to make the point. Middle order metaphysics in religion refers to notions of purposive existence, as in the why and wherefore of the realm we inhabit as in some sense 'divinely' or 'transcendentally' created – this is what lies within the various

creation narratives that religions imply; behind the variegated data of the creation stories is a teleological metaphysic. Second, most religions employ the metaphysic of what may be called the 'necessary transformative trajectory' that issues in the religion-specific assertions concerning redemption, recapitulation or some form of 'salvation' or other transformation, howsoever understood and articulated. Finally, most if not all religions articulate some notion concerning an 'ultimate destiny' which comprises the eschatological metaphysic. And this can be radically different across religions if only because of the fundamental difference occasioned by the higher-order motif of time. For example, Christian proclamations of a once-and-only divine redemptive act effecting salvation as the determiner of a single final destiny makes little sense in the context of cyclic time and allied re-incarnated individual existence by which, thereby, multiple salvific opportunities are offered. A middle-order metaphysic of singularity is trumped by a higher-order metaphysic of cyclicity for the one whose religious identity narrative is linked to this particular higher-order metaphysic. It is reversed, of course, for the one whose narrative identity is linked to the metaphysic of linear time and associated notions of specific once-only cosmic origination and termination.

But what of the third metaphysical element, the otherwise 'mythic' or 'fanciful' lower order? This is where religion takes on a distinctly 'other-worldly' and fairy-tale demeanour, I suggest. It is often what critics take as the essential metaphysical meaning or dimension of religion for it involves such elements as spiritual entities – angels and demons, for example – and alternate realms of or for human being ranging over hells, underworld, purgatory, and heavens. And it can involve various supernatural dynamics as in spiritual warfare or astrological governance for instance. Thus the decisions and dynamics of the lived physical life are understood to mirror, or be directly linked to, a transcendent dimension that, in fact, amounts to a lower order metaphysic. This is where, often, the narrative dimension of a religion is read as directly referencing metaphysical reality. But this is neither of the higher or the middle order of metaphysics. Yet it is what, too often, religion is charged with being all about. It often constitutes the substance of beliefs that are peculiar to religion, beliefs which make of religion something quite 'other-worldly' for,

indeed, they are about another, either parallel or superimposed, realm that from the perspective of the religion interacts with and impinges upon the physical realm inhabited by humanity. But such beliefs are of a different metaphysical order to those structures of understanding which, although perhaps cast as beliefs function more as undergirding presuppositions of understanding and conceptuality. As with any attempt to give structure or a framework to the ways in which we think and organise our cognitions, the picture I am conjuring needs to be understood as itself provisional and fluid; some items are more readily identified as first-order in this schema; some third-order – many hover across two or more of these ‘orders’ or levels. The point is to recognise that this sort of distinction is valid and meaningful. It enables the education for discrimination to which Woodhead refers is so needed.

So, having identified and briefly discussed the interplay of narrative, ethical/experiential and metaphysical dimensions of religion, what might this contribute to understanding the persistence of religion? In short, I suggest that the secular assumption about religion that emerged out of post-Enlightenment Europe and that has predominated in Western discourse, at least, has largely dismissed the narrative and metaphysical dimensions because they were not adequately understood, nor their relation to the ethical, in particular. At best, this latter realm of ethical value was seen as the residual worth of religion and, perhaps, its lasting cultural contribution. Western society may be laud its foundation in Judeo-Christian ethics, but let’s leave metaphysics and narrative – apart, maybe, from Christmas lights and Easter eggs, out of the public domain. In order to put this idea to the test I will engage in a dialogue with a recent book by Alain de Botton (2012), *Religion for Atheists: A non-believer’s guide to the uses of religion*. De Botton (2012, p. 11) avers that the “most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is *true* – in terms of being handed down from heaven to the sound of trumpets and supernaturally governed by prophets and celestial beings.” He tends to equate religious truth with superstition and fairy-tale fancy; these latter being patently untrue, religion is inherently and inevitably false. Nevertheless, religion serves valuable functions and meets authentic need.

De Botton (2012, p. 11) wishes “to remain a committed atheist (yet) nevertheless find religions sporadically useful, interesting and consoling.” However, to give credit where due, he writes with considerable sensitivity and insight about religion and he is thus enamoured of the prospect “of importing certain of (religion’s) ideas and practices into the secular realm” (de Botton 2012, p. 11).

Over half a century ago an attempt was made, with respect to Christianity, to demythologise religion with a view to stripping distracting mythic non-sense in order better to see the true sense of religion.¹ De Botton similarly seeks to extract from its narrative bed the value that religion might otherwise have and to apply that to the prospect of constructing a secular alternative – a sort of religion-less religion. Here he paradoxically demonstrates the ineluctable connection of religious narrative, ethics and metaphysics in his quasi-romantic attempt to rescue religion from itself so that one may have the benefit of its values without recourse to either narrative or metaphysic. Can such an extraction or abstraction meaningfully occur? Religion has been invented, says de Botton (2012, p. 12),

to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise. ... The error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of the faiths remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed.

De Botton’s book (2012, p. 19) seeks

¹ Cf. the programme of ‘demythologising’ the Christian New Testament undertaken by Rudolf Bultmann *et al.*

to examine aspects of religious life which contain concepts that could fruitfully be applied to the problems of secular society. It attempts to burn off religions' more dogmatic aspects in order to distil a few aspects of them that could prove timely and consoling to sceptical contemporary minds facing the crises and griefs of finite existence on a troubled planet. It hopes to rescue some of what is beautiful, touching and wise from all that no longer seems true.

But in what sense is that which “no longer seems true” false? In what sense might it be deemed true? What is the meaning of ‘true’ in the religious context? Here the issue of correspondence vs. referential theories of truth come into focus. This involves the lack of critical appreciation of ‘truth’ which impacts on various contexts of the interaction of borders, boundaries and transgressions. In the context of religious truth claims, is the truth asserted a matter of a correspondence of discourse with external objective reality – truth is thus factual concurrence – or is it a matter of the truth-claim denoting not so much fact as meaning; as asserting a referential relationship between discourse and an externality which, in the nature of things, can never be directly apprehended but only conceptually delineated?

Drawing mainly on Jewish and Christian traditions, with occasional nods to others such as Islam and Buddhism, de Botton explores and praises the contribution of religion to the idea of community and education and the values of kindness and tenderness, among others. On the one hand: “We learn from religion not only about the charms of community. We learn also that a good community accepts just how much there is in us that doesn't really want community – or at least can't tolerate it in its ordered forms all the time” (2012, p. 66), and de Botton dreams of secular versions of religious rites and celebrations that would be good for communal health. On the other hand, with respect to a value such as kindness, which is exemplified within religious narratives, the “absence of religious belief in no way invalidates a continuing need for ‘patron saints’ of qualities like Courage, Friendship, Fidelity, Patience, Confidence or Scepticism” (2012, p. 95). Furthermore, the secular realm has much to learn from religion when it comes to truly effective

education, according to de Botton. “Recognizing that we are as much sensory as cognitive creatures, they understand that they will need to use all possible resources to sway our minds” and so the broadly educational or formative methods of religion “deserve to be studied and adopted” (de Botton, 2012, pp. 161-2). Religion provides a perspective that the secular seems incapable of.

Among the canner initiatives of religion...has been the provision of regular souvenirs of the transcendent, at morning prayer and the weekly service, at the harvest festival and baptism, on Yom Kippur and on Palm Sunday. The secular world is lacking an equivalent cycle of moments during which we, too, might be prodded to imaginatively step out of the earthly city and recalibrate our lives according to a larger and more cosmic set of measurements (p. 201).

Religious art, architecture and institutions all have more than merely residual value; they offer a model of elevating the mundane, of transcending the profane; indeed of accessing transcendental reference and meaning. And it is in the quaintly quixotic peregrinations in which de Botton indulges that this can be seen, as in his challenge to museum curators to enable art “to serve the needs of psychology as effectively as, for centuries, it has served those of theology”; thus art works should be co-opted “to the direct task of helping us to live: to achieve self-knowledge, to remember forgiveness and love and to stay sensitive to the pains suffered by our ever troubled species and its urgently imperilled planet” (p. 244). For de Botton, this transcendently useful purpose of art would allow museums to become “our new churches” (p. 244). Similarly, he argues that “we should revive and continue the underlying aims of religious architecture, by expressing these through secular temples designed to promote important emotions and abstract themes, rather than through sacred shrines dedicated to embodied deities” for such secular temples “would function as reminders of our hopes...they would all be connected through the ancient aspiration of sacred architecture: to place us for a time in a thoughtfully structured three-dimensional space, in order to educate and rebalance our souls” (p. 275). Presumably he is using ‘souls’ in a meaningful but non-supernatural sense! Much can be gained from religious

institutions and their institutional life. “The question we face now is how to ally the very many good ideas which currently slumber in the recesses of intellectual life with those organizational tools, many of them religious in origin, which stand the best chance of giving them due impact in the world” (p. 299). De Botton (2012, p. 311) concludes by asserting that

The essence of the argument presented here is that many of the problems of the modern soul can successfully be addressed by solutions put forward by religions, once those solutions have been dislodged from the supernatural structure within which they were first conceived. The wisdom of the faiths belongs to all of mankind, even the most rational among us, and deserves to be selectively reabsorbed by the supernatural's greatest enemies.

But, once again, the question can be asked: is there not an inherent problem in attempting to disconnect ethics (and the experiential dimension) from the narrative in order, simply, to avoid metaphysics – primarily of the lower order and a misunderstood middle order? Presumably not even de Botton wishes to eschew higher order metaphysics. So, in an ironic fashion, I suggest de Botton's quest to shear religion of all but residual value, and in the process reinvent a secular form of religion to carry that value, in terms at least of narrative and experiential alternatives, and given his misapprehension in respect to metaphysics, only serves to support my argument that these three broad dimensions are intimately interrelated. Rather like the old ‘horse and carriage’ song, “You can't have one without the other”. However, I will give de Botton the last word – and yet in so doing I suggest he gives his own game away: “Religions are intermittently too useful, effective and intelligent to be abandoned to the religious alone” (p. 312). Quite.

Key contemporary problematic: contending with religious diversity

Having reflected upon factors involved in the persistence of religion, I turn now to examine what I suggest is the contemporary critical problematic of religion, par excellence, namely that of contending with religious diversity. If de Botton has implicitly challenged us to re-think the basic structure of religion as

comprising narrative, ethical/experiential and metaphysical dimensions, how might the understanding of religion this yields contribute to our critique of contemporary religious problems and issues? As we know, 'plurality' simply names the state of affairs that reflects a diversity of items within a field of otherwise sameness. Instead of one ruling power we have a diversity of political parties vying to take their place in the ruling chamber, thus reflecting, and contributing to, the modern social diversity that makes for democracy. Instead of all members of a nation or State belonging to one religion, or owning even the same allegiance and identity within one overarching religious tradition, there has ever been a measure of diversity of religious identity now exacerbated by the globalised mixture that sees all religions effectively everywhere, or near enough to something like that. Contending with this diversity as value-neutral fact or state of affairs is the underlying issue to the problem of exclusivist extremism, which in turn expresses a value-laden ideological position taken in response to the fact of plurality. This fact of religious plurality has been responded to in terms of at least the following paradigms, or ideological sets – Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Particularism and Pluralism (Hedges, 2010; Race and Hedges, 2008; Pratt, 2007a); there is no need to rehearse the details and manifold variations within these here. It is the first, exclusivism, which relates also to fundamentalism, that is itself varyingly linked to extremism and terrorism and so constitutes the problematic wherein the contending with diversity yields a reactionary and nugatory response: plurality is rejected (see Pratt, 2007b; 2010). This is made manifest in varying expressions of intolerance – the denial of diversity and the rejection of alterity (Pratt, 2011). We see this expressed in many contemporary situations within society – with respect to gender identities, racial or ethnic groupings, as well as with religious allegiance and identity. In general terms such rejection is, as we saw above, a matter of attempting to maintain a state of uniformity and a defence of 'tradition'.

Religion often yields to a 'fixation with the fixed' and offers intimations of immutability. In a threatening context of change and challenge, recourse to the unchangeable and the security of that which is presumed a received tradition of unyielding sameness, or alternatively the attempt to return a

society to such a state once thought to exist in some pure form, now lost or besmirched and so requiring extraordinary effort to recover, lies at the heart of religious reaction that attempts to reinforce the borders of an ideological identity lager, and so inclined to take extreme action with those perceived to threaten the border through their transgression of it. We see this demonstrated most vividly in the actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan who will eliminate all alterity that threatens their narrative, ethic, experience and metaphysic – whether girls seeking an education; young people enjoying their time of youth, fellow Muslims who follow a more mystic and peaceful way, or indeed anyone and anything perceived to embody a threatening ‘otherness’. In Norway, the criminal actions of the right-wing Christian-oriented extremist Anders Breivik, whose name and atrocities will be ever etched into European consciousness; together with the quixotic Swiss minaret ban, are examples of what we may call ‘reactive co-radicalisation’. They are not the only examples; they are among the more recently obvious and dramatic. So, too, the frenzy whipped up across the Muslim world in the wake of ‘The Innocence of Muslims’ video posted on You-tube. In each case the perception of a religious other as manifesting a threat to border and identity yielded a paradoxical extreme action that, in turn, transgresses otherwise norms of behaviour, value and narrative. Breivik killed fellow citizens as a means of expressing rejection of Islam as a cultural and religious threat to European identity; the Swiss took fright at four minarets in their country and resolved that no more should appear, and in so doing transgressed their own constitution and European conventions. In Christchurch, New Zealand, in wake of the devastating earthquakes of 2011, legal moves – unlikely to succeed – have been undertaken by those desperate to see the iconic Cathedral rebuilt to force the Church to accede to their extreme demand. Muslims, incensed by depictions of the Prophet and his followers as violent and criminal, react by fomenting violence and crime. So what is it that links all these expressions of extremism with religion somewhere in the frame? They are varyingly representative of the response of exclusivism to the fact and manifestation of diversity; a denial of diversity/otherness in favour of uniformity and ‘tradition’ and the corresponding tendency to take extreme actions. But there have been other responses to diversity.

Religious Diversity: the secular solution

At one time, in western European society, problems of diversity and extremism were resolved largely by the post-Enlightenment process of secularisation involving the rise of secularity (qua state of affairs) and invoking secularism (as the governing ideology concerning said state of affairs). However, secularism itself is now a problem to the extent its more vociferous advocates often seek to exclude religion and the religious voice *per se*. So we may speak today of secular fundamentalism, for example; that is, a position on being secular that is as dogmatically narrow and exclusionary – especially of religion – as any hard-line religious fundamentalist is inimical of secularism (Pratt, 2013). By contrast, secularity remains a much-needed paradigm shift within many contexts. Secularity means, primarily, the allowance for, and affirmation of, diversity. A secular society as such need not be opposed to the presence of religion. As Chris Nicols, key-note speaker at the 2012 New Zealand National Interfaith Forum, notes: “Secular society...is not anti-religious...the secular society is religiously neutral and refuses to be ideologically committed to any one faith, despite the ardent hopes of dominant faiths all over the world” (February, 2012, unpublished). It is the secularity of a secular society that allows for religious diversity. As Nicols contends: “A wholly secular society would embrace religious pluralism. It would recognise that there will be a range of different religious views, none of which will have precedence (and) the secular society (at its best) would be respectful of this religious range” (2012, unpublished). Nonetheless, the utopian vision of a secular society positively predisposed to religious diversity is under threat from both religious extremism and reactionary forces that may be either religious or non-religious.

The point is rather made by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2012) in her recent book, *The New Religious Intolerance*. With reference to the contemporary upsurge of reactionary intolerance she observes: “Our situation calls urgently for searching critical self-examination, as we try to uncover the roots of ugly fears and suspicions that currently disfigure all Western societies. At this time we badly need an approach inspired by ethical

philosophy in the spirit of Socrates” (p. 2). Such examination should focus on three principal ingredient principles: equal respect for all citizens and transcending religious differentiation; rigorous critique of inconsistencies and exceptions; the cultivation of an imaginative capacity or the exercise of a sympathetic imagination and critical empathy. She notes, of the burqa and niqab bans implemented in France, Belgium and Italy that, rather like the Swiss minarets, the numbers involved are quite small. The numbers of actual wearers of the burqa and niqab is a relative tiny minority. But in this case there is a further irony: high fashion may even mimic, parallel or otherwise replicate the veiled couture of the rejected Muslims. There are many instances – the ski Pistes of the French Alps for example, where women are entirely ‘veiled’ from sight, and no query is raised that this might suggest something of a cultural threat. And as with the Swiss minaret ban, such rejections of a couture are more symbolic than real, as also the banning of kebab shops in parts of Italy; what appears to be occurring is varying forms of a *rejectio ad absurdum* exercise. And Nussbaum concurs that Breivik’s expression of extreme rejection amounted to a reactive co-radicalization, albeit one that evoked a disturbingly mixed response from a wider western public: his actions were virtually universally condemned but his cause received wide sympathy and his real intention of “fighting the Muslim invasion” even celebrated (Nussbaum, 2012, p. 6). Nussbaum remarks are now endorsed by the decision of the Court:

Norway’s tragedy was not the work of a psychopath... Breivik writes lucidly and ideologically...he is an extremist with a paranoid view of the world, but he is capable of articulating a rationale for his deeds that is comprehensible... Breivik...used the occasion of his crimes to draw attention to a rationale for violence he would like to commend to the world (2012, p. 48).

Nussbaum (2012, p. 13) notes disturbingly similar attitudes and actions in America as evidence that “religious fear in the United States is on the rise, particularly against Muslims.” Paradoxically this has been reinforced in recent times with the tragic shooting incident at a Sikh Gurdwara. Modern pluralist

societies are heterogeneous; yet pressures to assert homogeneity (as in dress-code limitations) are on the rise. Nussbaum points out that fear, as a narcissistic emotion requisite for self-preservation, is at the same time destructive of heterogeneity and the acceptance of ultra-alterity – especially when based on falsehood and enflamed by propaganda and prejudice or ideologies, whether religious or otherwise, such as anti-Semitism, for example. “First, fear typically starts from some real problem... Second, fear is easily displaced onto something that may have little to do with the underlying problem but serves as a handy surrogate for it... Third, fear is nourished by the idea of the disguised enemy” (Nussbaum, 2012, p. 23). Nussbaum (p. 244) concludes:

Our current climate of fear shows that people are all too easily turned away from good values and laws, in a time of genuine insecurity and threat. Our time is genuinely dangerous... many fears are rational, and appeals to fear have a role to play in a society that takes human life seriously. Still, at this point, the balance has all too often shifted in the other direction, as irresponsibly manufactured fears threaten principles we should cling to and be proud of.

Religion, extremism and terrorism: the problem of fundamentalism

If dialogue and the quest for social harmony and mutual respectful understanding are positive drivers of interreligious relations, then ‘fundamentalism’ may be identified as the spoil-sport, with exclusivism and extremism conspiring against any form of religious détente by opposing, or at least undermining, the very idea of interreligious engagement. The problem of fundamentalism lies in it involving an ideological development that begins with the relative harmlessness of an idiosyncratic and dogmatic belief system, moves through exclusivist withdrawal and oppositional positioning, and arrives at the harmful reality of religiously driven and fanatically followed pathways of extremism and allied terrorist activity. Not all fundamentalists are terrorists, of course. There are many religious fundamentalists who are pacifist in outlook and demeanour. Nevertheless, fundamentalism may lead to terrorism, and in some cases it does. The question is: how and why? As itself a complex

phenomenon, religious fundamentalism, I suggest, comprises an interconnected sequence of factors which collectively and cumulatively describe the development of an ideology and its accompanying mind-set. I have analysed some twenty factors into a progression of ten sets – or ‘features’ – of linked pairings of these factors. These features may be grouped into three ‘phases’ so as to yield a paradigm typology involving a sequence of Passive (or ‘normative’), Assertive (or ‘hard-line’), and then Impositional (or ‘aggressive-activist’) forms of fundamentalism. I shall not repeat in full what I have published elsewhere on this (see Pratt, 2007b), but instead give an overview and highlight some particular aspects.

All forms and expressions of religious fundamentalism begin with, or at least include, the three features which denote the passive phase. Much conservative religiosity would identify with this phase and would not be overly troubled by that. Indeed, variant forms of reactionary conservatism across both Christianity and Islam, as well as other religions, would easily classify as expressive of passive fundamentalism. However, some religious groups or movements go beyond this such that we may identify them as belonging to the second, hard-line assertive, phase. Most typically sectarian movements, for example Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Unification Church, the Exclusive Brethren² (at least until recently – see further below) tend to fit within the more overt ‘assertive’ phase. But arguably there are some which, having incorporated all the marks of a hard-line assertive fundamentalism then go further to manifest what, perhaps, can be best described as variant forms of an ‘impositional’ fundamentalism. It is here that we discover the propensity for fundamentalism to yield to terrorism. A passive fundamentalist group to all intents and purposes ‘minds its own business’ so far as the rest of society is concerned; an assertive group perhaps somewhat less so, but an impositional group does not. An impositional fundamentalism wants to see things change to fit its view of how things should be, and will take steps to make its views known and, if need be, act imposingly to bring about change – by covert or overt interventions, including fomenting revolution or enacting terrorism.

² This offshoot of the English Plymouth Brethren is active in Australia and New Zealand, as well as elsewhere. It is a highly sectarian and fiercely exclusive group that exercises tight control over its members.

As indicated, passive fundamentalism may be regarded as comprising three features. The first, that of 'principal presuppositions', includes two factors: *perspectival absolutism* and *immediate inerrancy*. The fundamentalist presupposes the absoluteness of his or her position – the very idea that it is but one of a number of possible perspectives is inadmissible – and that the applicable authoritative text or scripture can be read as providing immediate inerrant knowledge. There is no intermediary or mediating lens through which variant interpretations may result; what is presented in terms of absolute text is without error. Knowledge based thereon is sure. These two interconnected factors comprise the foundational or principal presuppositions of religious fundamentalism which, on their own, might simply indicate one among many options for the expression of religious belief. Most often a secularist, an agnostic, or a religious liberal in the West would view these factors to be the essence of fundamentalism: proof positive that religion amounts to no more than fairy-tales; easily ignored, of no consequence or significance in the greater scheme of things. But, I contend, this is not all there is to fundamentalism, even in the passive phase.

The second feature, 'authority derivation', extends the presuppositions by way of an *assumption of apodicticity* – that is, the authoritative text is unambiguous with respect to meaning – together with what I call *narrow narrative indwelling*. As argued above, all religious people 'indwell', to a greater or lesser degree, their respective religious narrative – it provides for life references, points of meaning and frameworks of understanding that inform a religious individual's existence. A telling mark of the indwelling of a fundamentalist is that the narrative base is distinctly narrow. The resultant indwelt religious life is correspondingly confined; indeed, this very narrowness often marks a fundamentalist out from the wider religious tradition and community which, by contrast, will have a tendency to admit a wider reading of its narrative and so a capacity to indwell it with a greater measure of interpretive flexibility. The third feature of passive fundamentalism is 'implicit verification' which combines the factors of *narrative correlation* and *rhetorical corroboration*. The former denotes a deepening of the correlation between the religious narrative

espoused and the reality, or *Sitz-im-Leben*, of the religious community concerned. The latter indicates an intensification of corroborating rhetoric that situates, endorses, and justifies the fundamentalist perspective vis-à-vis the judgements and assessments made about the external world in terms of narrative correlation. It is these three features, with their paired sets of factors, denote the essence of religious fundamentalism *per se*.

The second or 'assertive' phase deepens and strengthens the ideology of fundamentalism and its application both real (in terms of fundamentalist groups) and potential (in respect to the wider society in which the fundamentalism concerned is situated). It involves four features, each again comprising a pair of linked factors. The first feature, 'epistemological construction', involves as one of its factors *hard factualism*. Fundamentalism hardens, and becomes more self-assertive, as it tightens its own grip on what is understood to be knowable, and how what is knowable is known. The range of what is admitted as genuine knowledge is truncated: 'real' knowledge is reduced to facts that are held to be true – all else belongs to the realm of falsehood. The emergence of a distinct 'identity structure' is the second feature of the assertive phase of fundamentalism, and the third has to do with an ideological hardening by way of what might be called 'contextual scope'. This latter involves the holding together of an *ideological exclusivism* with an *inclusivist polity*: on the one hand, religious fundamentalism excludes, virtually automatically, anything that relative to it appears 'liberal'; that admits of, for example, any limitation, provisionality, otherness, openness or change. It excludes religious liberalism of any ilk. On the other hand, this same fundamentalism displays a propensity to include, in respect to considerations of the policies and praxis of social organisation, all others that fall within its frame of reference or worldview understanding. Thus, paradoxically it would seem, the excluding of all other ideological variants and perspectives necessarily implies the wholesale inclusion of a society in terms of the outworking of polity considerations. At this juncture a fundamentalist ideology does not wish to see itself as one among many, nor even a dominant yet still one among many; but rather the one to which the many are subsumed and so gathered into the fold, as it were, such that there is no room for alterity of any

sort. The fourth feature of hard-line fundamentalism denotes a move into negative values as opposed to value-neutral descriptors. It is the feature of 'condemnatory stance' that has as its factors the holding and articulating of *negative judgemental values* and the exercise of what may be called a *pietistic tyranny*. Assertive fundamentalism is distinguished by strident assertions of a condemnatory or judgemental sort; it is in the expression of judgemental values that such hard-line fundamentalism displays its real stance toward any who would dissent from within, or oppose from without.

We are brought now into the third and final phase whereby what began, as it were, as 'merely' or 'benignly' fundamentalist ideology has transformed or evolved into something of a distinctly radicalized and impositional nature such that extreme actions, including violent behaviours and even terrorism *per se*, may be contemplated, advocated, and eventually engaged. Impositional, or aggressive-activist, fundamentalism has negative discriminatory value application as its first feature. It is manifest where *alterity*, or 'otherness' as such, is negated. The discriminatory negation of otherness is perhaps critical at this juncture, for the scene set by the feature of contextual scope – the contextualising exclusivism and inclusivism – together with the feature of condemnatory stance, now emerge into a devaluing and dismissal of 'otherness' as such, whether in terms of rival community or competing alterities, ideological or otherwise. Indeed, such alterities may be – and in fact often are – demonised. The second feature is the claiming of 'explicit justification' for both the ideology espoused and any actions it implies and involves the application of both sanctioned imposition and legitimated violence. The sanctioning of the fundamentalist's programme of imposition leads naturally to the next factor: extremist violence is legitimated; a platform of justification is established, at least in the mind of the impositional fundamentalist. So we are brought to the final feature of the sequential paradigm of fundamentalism, 'enacted violent extremism', with the penultimate factor of *manifest contempt* and the end-result factor: a *terrorist* or otherwise *violent event*.

Conclusion: Putting it all together

Religion today is at a crossroads: in response to the current realities of diversity religious communities will either fall-back in to fundamentalist exclusivisms and extremisms, or advance into education and dialogical engagement so as to gain new religious self-understanding and understanding of religion. In response to diversity, extremist reaction and interfaith engagement occur already; but it is the latter which offers the prospect of promoting an affirmation of diversity thereby ameliorating the chief contemporary problem of religion, exclusivist rejection of alterity. Fear of the 'other', of difference and diversity, is the root problem besetting the contemporary context of religious plurality. A healthily secular society is accommodatively pluralist; difference is not just 'tolerated' but embraced and valued. Correspondingly, and to the extent religion sits within secular society, a healthy religious identity is likewise accommodating of diversity – not treating religious and other alterities as implicit threats or invalid interruptions. Religion is diverse and persistent, and manifests persistent problems. A genuine religious education promotes understanding with critical empathy; neither explaining religion away through the application of reductionist hermeneutics, nor idealising religion in some quasi-re-enchantment fashion, nor dodging the harsh realities and problematics that require rational critique, but rather presents religions objectively in regard to their complex diversity and dynamic depths of insight, impact, and values. Such an education – the hallmark of good Religious Studies in my view – equips for discernment and for proper discrimination between that which is authentic, congruent and of value, and that which is not. And such an education must attend to the interaction of narrative, pragmatic and metaphysical dimensions of religion if, in the end, both the persistence and the problems of religion are to be understood and properly addressed.

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