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# On Being Religious: Towards an Alternative Theory of Religion and Secularity

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## Abstract

Responding to Charles Taylor's question, 'What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?', this essay sets out to develop an alternative engaged theory of religion and secularity. It comes back with three alternative questions. Firstly, how can we find a way to understand the social whole without reducing the complexities and contradictions of social life to that of a singular age—in this case the notion of a secular age? Secondly, what is the social basis of religion and secularism? Here the approach treats both faith in the transcendental and 'opposing' arguments that God does not exist as social belief systems, each originating from different dominant ontological valences emerging at different times in human history. Thirdly, the essay asks, how are we to live in our time? Human flourishing, it is argued, will require re-embedding and substantially qualifying the hubris of the modern within a holistic matrix of ontologically different and often contradictory ways of relating. This essay will suggest that we need to recover forms of relations that arose out of analogical and genealogical ways of being present in customary ways of life (though not necessarily the cultural content of the ways in which those relations were once lived). It requires a politics of ontological limits. This train of argument leads us to a general proposal that lies at the heart of this essay. The social whole can better be understood in terms of changing intersecting assemblages of ontological formations—life-ways formed in tension with each other. In these terms, ontological formations are themselves understood as patterns of practice and meaning constituted at different dominant levels of abstraction. These formations are always in tension with each other—sometimes creatively, often destructively.

**Keywords:** Religion; secularism and secularity; modernity; ontology; cultural meaning

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? This simple question, the first sentence of Charles Taylor's extraordinary book, *A Secular Age*, is deceptively complex—and a bad place to start (2007, p. 3). Any approach that begins with a question that presumes so much, and then continues without changing the terms of that question is bound to reach an *impasse*. Even when developed with sophistication, such an approach is limited either to homogenising *our time* or to qualifying its big picture by tortuous (or elegant) intertwined lineages of competing cultural description. Even if that approach unpacks the complex phenomenology and history of the concept of 'a secular age', it is bound to remain caught in an assumption that mapping the condition of *an age* can be done by first characterising the social whole in singular

and epochal terms, and *then* addressing the manifold qualifications which do not fit or, which complicate that whole.

Responding to the problem of treating our time as an epochal singularity is one of the tasks of the present essay. The bigger task is to develop an alternative approach to understanding religion and secularity as a phenomenon responding to existential tensions and contradictions across changing social conditions. This task entails thinking about what it means to live on this planet in the twenty-first century at a time when crises of existential meaning parallel an encompassing crisis of ecological sustainability:

I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests;  
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans;  
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard;  
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard ...  
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? For all that it is framed badly, the question tells us a lot about the modern search for meaning. The quest for an over-bracing dramatic characterisation of 'our time' has become a consuming part of that search. Even the phrase 'in our time' has a parallel lineage, though with more twists. Ernest Hemingway famously used it in 1925 to bring together his first collection of writings. From Karl Jasper's *The Spiritual Situation of the Age*<sup>2</sup> and Martin Heidegger's 'The Age of the World Picture' to Martin Albrow's *The Global Age*, one dominant line of analysis has been that our time, like so many others, can be critically understood in terms of a singular overriding characterisation or *zeitgeist*—albeit with qualifications. In a wondrous case of reductive exaggeration, Albrow argues that the modern age has passed: 'the Global Age involves the supplanting of modernity with globality' (1996, p. 4). This move gets many things wrong, including conflating an ontological formation-in-dominance—that is, 'modernity'—with a spatial process moving towards a descriptive state - 'globality'. The expressive confidence of the claim shows up the limits of such characterisations, argumentum *ad absurdum*.

In a parallel process towards the end of the twentieth century, some writers began to do the same thing with the concept of 'society'. Book titles evoked the coming of the technological society, the information society, the transparent society, the risk society, the knowledge society and so on (Ellul, 1964; Lyon, 1988; Vattimo, 1992; Beck, 1992). And if a writer really wanted to make a big point they could redouble the age-society nexus. Manuel Castells' book was accordingly called *The Information Age: Volume 1, The Rise of the Network Society* (1996). This move draws both tropes—age and society—into its orbit. If nothing else, the book signalled that we had arrived at the age of big book titles.

An alternative post-structuralist lineage came to proclaim the impossibility of such characterisations. However, this was neither the clear break that it appeared to be, nor an

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<sup>1</sup> The lyrics of Bob Dylan's 'It's a Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall' (1962) was written as a conversation between a mother and her son, with Biblical references, including to the Flood. In the 1970s he converted to Christianity while continuing to observe basic Jewish ritualistic practices.

<sup>2</sup> Here I am reading Jaspers through Jürgen Habermas' edited volume *Observations on the Spiritual Situation of the Age* (1985). Jaspers developed the concept of the *Axial Age* to encompass the period 800 to 200 BCE, variously an *interregnum* between empires in China, India, Persia, Judea, and Greece, when independently in different places at the same time, 'the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid' (Jaspers, 2003, p. 98).

adequate way of proceeding to an alternative rendition of social complexity. Early in the post-structuralist turn, an apparently modest new concept entered the lexicon—the ‘condition’ of our time. However, as it was developed in writings such as Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1986), the concept carried forward much of the sensibility of earlier reductive epoch-designating phrases. It solved little and added new problems. Even if the postmodern *condition* was a condition of instability with a small ‘c’, the early writings of the post-structuralists carried forward the epochalism they at the same time rejected. For Lyotard, the postmodern condition was more than an ontological dominant or an emergent level of the social that was coming in contradictory ways to remake other levels of the social (as this essay will argue).<sup>3</sup> It was ‘*the condition*’ of our time, ‘*the postmodern age*’ to use his words (emphasis added). It was the condition that cultures entered into, he argued, just as ‘societies enter what is known as the post-industrial age’ (1986, p. 3; see also Harvey, 1989). I have added the emphasis to the definite article ‘the’, but Lyotard might as well have also done so. As we shall later see, this was not so different from one of the other great classic texts of that time—Fredric Jameson’s innovative and rich, but in the end overly simplifying account of postmodernism as *the* cultural logic of late capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

A number of questions arise out of this discussion of the search for an overriding characterisation of our time, including the place of religion and secularity. The first is theoretical, the second is about the limits of social theory, and the third is cultural-political. Firstly, how can we find a way to understand the social whole without reducing the complexities and contradictions of social life to that of a singular age? Responding to this question will take us through the problems of talking about epochs, ages, *zeitgeists* and conditions. Except when projected as provisional and deeply qualified descriptions of a period, naming a time-span in terms of a social dominant tends, on the one hand, to downplay the consequences of that social dominant and ignore that it co-exists with *and dominates* other ways of life. On the other hand, in examples such as Ulrich Beck’s ‘risk society’ (1992) or Zygmunt Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’ (2000), naming a period tends to reductively over-accentuate a singular dimension of the contemporary world, make that domination singular. It then distorts our understanding of that singular dimension. This is a complex problem from which it is difficult to escape.

This train of argument leads us to a general proposal that lies at the heart of this essay. The social whole can better be understood in terms of changing intersecting assemblages of ontological formations—life-ways formed in tension with each other. In these terms, ontological formations are themselves understood as patterns of practice and meaning constituted at different dominant *levels* of abstraction.<sup>5</sup> These formations are always in tension with each other—sometimes creatively, often destructively. This alternative approach of *engaged theory*—a ‘levels approach’—is neither epochal modernist nor post-structuralist, but it will have particular consequences for understanding what Taylor calls the ‘immanent frame’. Taylor defines this contemporary framing of social life as a naturalised order of things that

<sup>3</sup> These two phrases ‘ontological dominant’ and ‘level of the social’ hint at the position from which I come, influenced profoundly by other writers associated with the *Arena* editorial group: Geoff Sharp, John Hinkson, Alison Caddick, Simon Cooper, and others.

<sup>4</sup> Jameson (1991) begins by saying that he is describing postmodernism as a ‘cultural dominant’ (p. 4) and his approach might be described as one of ‘periodization in dominance’, but within a few pages he begins to describe the ‘death of the world of appearances’ (p. 9), where ‘depth is replaced by surface’ (p. 12), we see the ‘disappearance of the individual subject’, and the ‘well-nigh universal practice today of what might be called pastiche’ (p. 16).

<sup>5</sup> For an early development of the ‘constitutive levels’ approach see Sharp (1985).

arose over the last century or so, imbued with the key value of instrumental rationality. In the terms presented here, the immanent frame becomes *a* way of describing *one* set of responses to a dominant modern matrix of orientations (complicated by emergent postmodern orientations) rather than *the* frame understood as a standalone formation.

Secondly, the levels approach seeks to understand the social basis of religion and secularism. The approach, as developed here, treats both faith in the transcendental *and* ‘opposing’ arguments that God does not exist as social belief systems, each originating from different dominant ontological valences, emerging at different times in human history, but carrying forward to the present. It seeks to understand (rather than definitively explain) their animating core in terms of different ways of responding to cultural and ontological contradictions as part of the human condition. In this sense, the levels approach is very aware of its own limitations. For example, it provides a way of understanding the social image and meaning of ‘God’, but it makes no claims to understand the transcendental being of God. That is where social theory stops and theology begins. It can elaborate an answer to the question, ‘Why do we understand God as we do in our time?’ But it remains completely silent in relation to question such as ‘Who is God?’ The only thing that might be said here is that *modern* theology would do well to be less certain about this question as well. It is indicative of the unreflexively fashion-framed nature of modern theology and its parade of culture-dependent answers that each new theology requires an adjective in front of it: process theology, God-is-Dead theology, liberation theology, eco-theology and so on (Barber, 2012, p. 30).

Thirdly, the levels approach has consequences for a related question: how are we to live in our time? The positive argument implied in an argument about levels-in-dominance is that human flourishing depends upon completely reassessing the patterns of social relationships between people as they live across different ontological forms of practice and meaning. At the foundation of a politics of positive social change, human flourishing will require negotiating a reflexive ethics of care concerning our relations with others and our embeddedness within nature. One of the key points of negotiation here concerns the dialectic between needs and limits. Currently we are obsessed with desires. Needs are either defined as wants or treated as minimal codified rights. Human-rights regimes or environmental-protection agreements can only be the surface of this process, and sometimes such regimes serve to mask what actually needs to be done.

Human flourishing of the kind being argued for here will require re-embedding and substantially qualifying the hubris of *the modern* within a holistic matrix of ontologically different and often contradictory ways of relating. This essay will suggest that we need to recover forms of relations that arose out of analogical and genealogical ways of being present in customary ways of life (though not necessarily the cultural content of the ways in which those relations were once lived). These terms will be defined later. Specifically, it points to the reclamation of relations of mutuality, reciprocity, continuity and embeddedness in social life and in nature. It requires a politics of ontological limits. Elaborating that argument comprehensively and defining its terms is too massive to be the focus of a single essay, so we will first come at it tentatively and side-on, through a critique of modern epochalism related to a focus on the changing nature of religion.

Linking the three themes, the orienting opening to this essay argues that epochalism as currently expressed, and however qualified, is part of an epistemological dominant—a *modern* way of knowing—that relates intimately to the contemporary dominant hubris about what it



means to be human. For all of the new liberal modern sensitivity to ethnocentrism, arrogance and egotism, proponents of this way of knowing feel in their bones that ‘the modern’ has provided, and will continue to provide, a way of progressing beyond the limits of other ways of life.<sup>6</sup> Its true believers believe so implicitly in progress, development, growth, and breaking the shackles of the past into future ‘freedoms’ and ‘happiness’ that they would never think of what they do as a kind of proselytising.

The problem with this approach is much more than theoretical or even ideological. It is intensely practical. Modern globalising ways of life have a profound tendency to colonise, reframe and distort all *other* ways of being in the name of this progress. Other ways of life which do not come quickly and compliantly to the *modern* dialogical table tend to be reduced ideologically to past anachronisms, romantic others, irrelevant bystanders, marginalised threats, or terrorists. Future possibilities and grand imaginaries are defended, all the while bringing the world to the brink of nuclear warfare or irrevocable climate chaos.

It is not that being modern is bad in itself. Modern ways of being and knowing offer subtle and powerful possibilities. Secondly, it is not that the modern can ever be something in itself. In our time, and in the times of others, modern ways of being and doing are always in intersection with ontological different ways of being and doing. Colonising life-worlds, whether through soft consumption systems or hard war-machines, tends to be done by ordinary people, themselves formed at the intersection of different ontological conditions (ordinary, complex and contradictory people). Sets of contending values come together to explain and legitimise an invasion, an intervention or a quiet take-over; and there is no central ideological contender that rules them all. Instrumental rationality, the orienting value that Charles Taylor and Jürgen Habermas single out for critique, could never stand up by itself if it were the only ideological strut in the modern frame.

Therefore, it is not just dialogue through interpretative rationality that we need. Recent high-profile serial offenders in this system of ontological imperialism include George Bush, Tony Blair, Silvio Berlusconi, Nicolas Sarkozy, Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama. They are all syncretic blunderers rather than single-minded rationalists. The War on Islamic Otherness that two of them initiated, and a third continued under another name, was far from being framed by instrumental rationality. Why would clear-headed instrumental rationalists waste so many lives and burn so much money on a small group of criminals? As decision-makers, Bush-Blair-Berlusconi and Co. were witless modernists who, at the same time as conducting (tragic) wars of global defence in the name of modern ideologies of rational order, homeland purity, market freedom and the ‘Common Word’,<sup>7</sup> also reached back to, and distorted, Christian truths. These truths such as the ‘Will of God’ are *traditional* in their epistemological form even as the propaganda machines were modern/postmodern. Tony Blair very deeply believes in the Roman Catholic God, but at the same time he did not formally seek acceptance into the Catholic Church while he was prime minister because he also believes in modern sectarian politics. Being a Catholic in multicultural Britain is not the best way to power.

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<sup>6</sup> Some go further in a post-structuralist vein, usually overlaying a modern confidence about change, to project a postmodern liberation from life as we now know it or have known it—the post-human world of cyborgs and signs.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Common Word’ refers to an interfaith dialogue that Tony Blair’s Faith Foundation supported ‘to bring Muslims and Christians together to find a common basis of co-operation and mutual respect through scripture’ (Hitchens and Blair, 2011, p. 44). It involves an ecumenical emptying out of the differences between the faiths by finding bits of text that have similar inflexions.

The essay begins with a preliminary foray into the question of periodising, and then goes on to develop a definition of changing forms of religion that connects to an understanding of changing dominant ontological formations. Before taking these next steps, my colleagues have asked me to name my place in this process—to be personal. Why do I appear to be so critical of Charles Taylor? What is my response to the secular age that he theorises? And, where do I stand in relation to the religion that he implicitly espouses as bringing intensified focussed meaning back to a world that is swirling with often-empty consumer-oriented choices over meaning? I am critical of Taylor's *Secular Age* because it promises so much, but unfolds into a messy approach that countermands its own intentions. For me, our time, given the current manifold cultural, economic, ecological and political crises that threaten the very existence of humans on this planet, demands a more comprehensive theorising. It requires a theoretical politics that firstly offers (even implicitly) a stronger practical-theoretical alternative to the *poetry of faith* with which Taylor concludes.<sup>8</sup> Even good poetry and reflexive faith is not enough. Secondly, it requires an epistemology that qualifies its own certainties, truths, and dogmas without descending into postmodern relativism. Thirdly, most importantly it requires that we reconstruct the relation between different ontological formations, including the relationship between different ways of knowing and believing, such that more grounded valences of social life (embedding our relations to other and to nature) are brought back into balance with our current capacities to construct and deconstruct the world in which we all live. The essay as it unfolds will make more sense of these standpoints.

### **What does it Mean to ask 'What does it Mean that We Live in a Secular Age?'**

Underlying the classically *modern* analytic mode of enquiry was (and sometimes still is) a desire to understand the social whole. In particular, theorists wanted to understand *this* or *that* social whole as occurring in a distinctive time in the history of the human condition. It remains an important if vexed task. Theorising the social whole without reducing it to an epochal singularity, for a brief moment the holy grail of social theory, unfortunately came to be relegated to one of the display cabinets of the theory museum. The theorists associated with that search were important, but never central enough to generate a lineage of theory or even to find connection between each other. They ranged from Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu to Michael Mann and Maurice Godelier. However, intellectual passions changed and, in the years of the late-twentieth century and into the present, social enquiry largely gave up on that question.

Enquiry has tended to bifurcate along two dominant lineages. Along one lineage, post-structuralism, particularly its postmodern variant, increasingly made it a sin to characterise the social whole. Michel Foucault, for example, could write a brilliant account of the metamorphosis of punishment from the traditional to the modern—and indeed quite happily use the term 'modern society'—while studiously avoiding making any claims to a social whole. Along another lineage, social enquiry saw a revival of the fortunes of empiricism. Empirical generalisation as the ground of modern analytical enquiry had never gone away. But now its (fetishized) ideological dominance meant that legitimate enquiry could only make generalised claims about specific fields, regions, themes or instances.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of a 'poetry of faith' is mine rather than Taylor's, but it is intended to encapsulate the way in which he (and others) use a belief in their God to stand in for a recognition of the ineffable.

<sup>9</sup> There is a beautiful irony in this retreat from generalising theory that is worth noting. At the same time that generalising theory lost its hold, a generalising category of social relations gripped the imagination of both

In this context, what does it mean to ask about the meaning of living in a secular age? Both Taylor's and Lyotard's responses to the question of periodising throw up complementary problems. This is despite their apparently antithetical standpoints. Lyotard writes:

From this point of view, we can see that historical periodization belongs to an obsession that is characteristic of modernity. Periodization is a way of placing events in diachrony, and diachrony is ruled by the principle of revolution. In the same way that modernity contains the promise of its overcoming, it is obliged to mark, to date, the end of one period and the beginning of the next. Since one is inaugurating an age reputed to be entirely new, it is right to set the clock to the new time, and to start it from zero again. In Christianity, Cartesianism or Jacobinism, this same gesture designated a Year One, that of revelation and redemption in one case, of birth and renewal in the second, or again of revolution and reappropriation of liberties (1991, pp. 25-26).

It is an apparently elegant reprise: the modern has to epochalize itself: hence concepts such as the Anthropocene. It even has to mark its own end with a prefixed concept that is self-containing of the period it surpasses—the postmodern. However, there are deeper problems with this approach. Historical periodization is certainly an obsession within the modern (constructivist) sense of time, and Lyotard is right both to historicise it and to criticise the way in which it fetishizes new beginnings. However, Lyotard succumbs to his own critique of the modern tendency to flatten difference. In particular, he comfortably flattens out the difference between Christianity, Cartesianism and Jacobinism, as if they have the same ontological foundations simply because they can be found co-terminously in human history. Even if Christianity, at one level, now works with modern time, the ontological basis of its entire belief system is cosmological rather than modern. Christ is the realised eschatology of an embracing universal time in which God is atemporal, the maker of time. By profound contrast, and for all their traditional roots, the Jacobin notion of Year Zero was part of a modern attempt to decimalise time—with ten hours in the day and ten days in the week—to get rid of all Christian and pagan references within the temporal system.

By contrast to this move by Lyotard, Taylor is usually careful to distinguish the stages or phases of Christianity. The big shift in his terms is from what he accurately characterises as reorientation in the focus of the dominant social imaginary from 'the cosmos'—in his terms a pre-modern understanding of the moral metaphysical order—to 'the universe' of abstracted laws and secular time. He reminds us that even the term 'secular' comes from *saeculum*, meaning century or age (Taylor, 2007, p. 54). However, the unintended flatness of his methodological approach catches him up, and we find later that instead of maintaining some consistency with his narrative of a cosmos-to-universe transformation, he begins talking about the '*modern* cosmic imaginary' (emphasis added, 2007, p. 351). Again, to draw upon the approach that will be elaborated later in this essay, using such a phrase requires a theory of

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academic analysts and journalistic commentators—this, of course, was the category of 'the global'. In this emerging imaginary, globalisation was understood as a process of social inter-connection, a process that was in different ways connecting people across planet Earth. Globalisation as a practice and subjectivity connecting the (global) social whole thus became the standout object of critical enquiry. In other words, globalisation demanded generalising attention at the very moment that residual ideas that an all-embracing theory might be found to explain such a phenomenon was effectively dashed. This irony has profound consequences for the nature of globalisation theory and how we might understand different approaches. However, that is another story and cannot be pursued here. See Steger and James (2011), from which the present section of the essay draws its argument.



ontological contradiction. Can something be cosmic—in the sense that is framed by a traditional cosmology—and modern at the same time? Yes, it can, but not in the terms that Taylor gives us. Expressed in these alternative terms of ‘levels in contradiction’, Catholicism today is a globalising modern institution which draws upon the *modern* organisational techniques and structures at the same time that its belief system is *traditional* cosmological and its marketing arm is *postmodern*. Like a modern corporation, the Vatican is a body/machine that, like all contemporary corporations, takes capitalist profit, at the same time as its executive takes communion by eating the body of Christ. Understanding how a religious organisation can be so structured—let alone the world so cleaved—requires an approach that can handle formations in tension and contradiction, related to the unevenness of various modes of practice.

A related problem for Taylor concerns how he defines the time of the universe as the time of ‘secular time’. There are a lot of ‘times’ in that sentence, but each of their uses points to a problem of explanation. In other words, the very thing that he is trying to explain, ‘the secular’, becomes the name of the form of temporality in which a temporally specific phenomenon arises which frames how people live: ‘People who are in the *saeculum* are embedded in ordinary time, they are living the life of ordinary time: as against those who have turned away from this in order to live closer to eternity’ (Taylor, 2007 p. 55). ‘There is a risk here’, he says, ‘because I am already using the word ‘secular’ (and in three senses already!) for features of our age’ (p. 54). And indeed there is. However, this stain on Taylor’s methodology is quickly passed over by him as he rushes on to make a new narrative connection.

## Defining Religion

As a way of exemplifying the methodological problems with Charles Taylor’s approach and beginning to describe an alternative approach developed by the editors of *Arena* and others, the next section after this one moves to define the ontological formations that have been implied in the discussion thus far: customary tribalism, traditionalism, modernism and postmodernism. But first there is the issue of defining religion. Taylor adroitly declines to do so. His gentle refusal takes a similar series of steps to those taken in his recognition that he uses ‘the secular’ in a number of competing ways: first, we get a disarming admission that there might be a problem; second, we read a couple of intriguing methodological allusions; and third, we move on, allowing the inconsistencies to be clothed in an aura of narrative elegance where methodological inconsistencies become the source of interpretative insight.

There is no doubt that Taylor’s writing is brimming with brilliant interpretative insights. He is right, for example, to bring in the key concept of ‘transcendence’ as central to a possible definition. He begins by recognising, very importantly, that the usual definition tends to be reductive:

But if we are prudent (or perhaps cowardly) and reflect that we are trying to understand a set of forms and changes which have arisen in one particular civilization, that of the modern West—or in an earlier incarnation, Latin Christendom—we see to our relief that we don’t need to forge a definition which covers everything ‘religious’ in all human societies for all ages (2007, p. 15).

He refuses to overgeneralise the concept of religion and wants to emphasise how it is located historically. But then we do not get a definition at all, not even for the modern West. This

would appear to be a reasonable move—except that, firstly, 400 pages later, he ends up drawing heavily on someone else’s generalising definition.

Secondly, there is the issue that treating Western ‘late-modernity’ as a temporal-geographical region which can be examined in itself is astoundingly naive. Taylor may not have read Jack Goody’s *The East in the West* (1996) and similar volumes when they began to be published nearly two decades ago, but it is now generally recognised that processes of globalisation, imperial extension, regional interdependence and local change, at least from the time of Latin Christendom, mean that Europe has long been part of shifting global and postcolonial inter-relations.

Thirdly, there is the sticking point that the whole narrative framework of *A Secular Age* needs a general definition to make possible the epochal claim that *religion* (not just Christianity) becomes a choice across Western ‘late-modernity’, while the immanent frame becomes the predominant setting for that choice, including the choice to be secular. The definition that Taylor appears to accept in general is as follows:

Religion for us consists of actions, beliefs and institutions predicated upon the assumption of the existence of either supernatural entities with powers of agency, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose which have the capacity to set the conditions of, or to intervene in, human affairs (Taylor, 2007, p. 429, citing Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce<sup>10</sup>).

What this definition is trying to implicitly do is handle differences in religious practice and meaning. It puts its emphasis on unnamed supernatural entities or powers with moral purpose—in other words, the other-than-human. The connection to the social is rightly built around the acknowledgement that it is predicated on an ‘assumption’ of the existence of something beyond the human. However, the definition has problems that Taylor himself hints at. It cannot, for example, encompass a wonderfully contradictory religion such as Buddhism which, in its classical post-traditional form (or to be more accurate, its modern-framed neo-traditional form), assumes no supernatural entities or powers with moral purpose. The definition also has difficulties in helping us to understand customary or tribal religions<sup>11</sup> where conceptions of ‘purpose’ are not self-evidently ‘moral’.

Arguably, a better way of setting up the definition involves putting the emphasis on *the nature* of the practices and meanings of religion. That is, a different and perhaps better starting point for defining religion is to emphasise the relations of religiosity rather than the objects of worship or dedication. Thus, in terms of the levels argument being developed here, *religion is defined as a relatively-bounded system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence through communion with others and Otherness, lived as both taking in and spiritually transcending socially grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment, and knowing*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The problem is compounded by Taylor in also favourably citing David Martin’s definition that, in effect, requires (modern) science as the counter-force to the religion: ‘By “religion” I mean the acceptance of reality beyond the observable world known to science, to which are ascribed meanings and purposes completing and transcending those of the purely human realm’ (cited on p. 818).

<sup>11</sup> This point refers to those tribal religions which have not been thoroughly traditionalised through encounter with Christianity or other processes.

<sup>12</sup> This definition comes from work that I did with Peter Mandaville (James & Mandaville, 2010).

This alternative definition is intended, for example, to avoid the usual dichotomous understandings of supernatural and natural beings, or the split between sacredness and secularity. It takes into account the issue that the modernist dualism of immanence and transcendence is a socially framed dualism that would make no sense to a *customary* elder or *tribal* sorcerer, and limited sense to a *traditional* shaman, pujari, cleric or lama. The question of how different religions handle the relation between immanence and transcendence is, in other words, ontologically context dependent. Moreover, by using the term ‘relatively-bounded system’ it curtails the sense that any-old personal or momentary spirituality constitutes a religion. By the same phrase, the definition makes no claims about the distinction in any particular social setting between a religious and non-religious practice, or between one religion and another. In its creed Buddhism has no gods, but in practice in India and Japan, Buddhist temples are full of syncretic spiritual icons and animist gods. These are similarly context-dependent questions. Thus, without going down the path of Peter Beyer’s version of systems theory (1998), it allows for a full recognition of his argument that the process of differentiating religious expressions/communities *as* distinct religions was in practice and theory a modern and modernising process.

The definition also points to the issue that many contemporary religious communities have a contradictory relation to basic ontologies such as time, space and embodiment. One dimension that distinguishes *traditional* religions from conventional conceptions of political community is that traditional religious communities are not generally premised upon, or limited to, a particular territorial space. For traditional religions, transversality has been part and parcel of the formation of their sense of spatiality. We see this, for example, in the context of the Jewish diaspora, a chosen people dispersed across the face of the earth. In the emerging dominance of *modern* sensibilities, the traditional conception of Zion, once a transcendental claim to being close to God wherever one was, became a desperate modern search for an abstract territory to call home. Almost any territory would have worked for the purpose of modern political Zionism. But one worked better than the rest. ‘Israel’ became the place to settle by a mixture of imperial subterfuge and the possibilities that it offered for being the transcendental traditional Zion *and*, at the same time, being an immanent modern home that could be legitimised by completely rewriting the ancient history of the tribes of Israel in terms of the Chosen People of that land. Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees became a Jew, and Israel became at once cosmologically eternal *and* part of modern, ‘continuous’, rewritten, self-legitimising history. It is true that this passage has been written to emphasise the clash of ontologies, but you get my point.

### **Defining Different Ontological Formations—and thus Different Forms of Religion**

All the preceding discussion is pushing towards a single claim: that understanding religion (and secularity) is best served by analytically distinguishing different ontologies of practice and meaning, including examining the lived contradictions that pertain when in practice people live across those ontologically different ‘levels’. The designation of levels is analytical and provisional with all the weight of those words taken seriously.

The words in the definition of religion presented above—*transcending socially grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment, and knowing*—point to the next steps in setting up the counter-approach. That is, just as a full definition of such a complex phenomenon needs to be ontologically grounded rather than just based on either the phenomenal experiences of religious

believers or the doctrines of their religious philosophers, so, too, when it comes to defining formations such as modernity or postmodernity. When they are understood in phenomenal or factorial terms there is, arguably, no solid basis upon which to build the historically specific understanding of their many variations. The variations turn into Hindu elephants with badly explained or weird body parts. In the case of the *modern* elephant, its eyes flash with ever-constant self-reflexivity, its legs always run fast, it has a body like a serpent that twists and turns, and its trunk reaches out to accommodate all the qualifications. One can only marvel at how a *liquid modern* elephant might act. Responding to this problem, different gatherings of writers—the ‘multiple modernities’, ‘another modernity’ and ‘second modernity’ advocates—complicate things further.<sup>13</sup> They decide that one elephant is not enough, and sets a whole herd of them running across the global landscape, trampling everything before it into the category of the ‘premodern’.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect upon why it has become so hard to find an actual, let alone good, definition of modernity or the modern, or of postmodernity or the postmodern condition. Apart from a short period of intense focus at the end of the twentieth century, most writings defer the process of definition in favour or evocation of this or that characteristic of the phenomenon. Perhaps this deferment provides a clue to part of the problem of explanation and the issue of projecting an alternative politics. Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, for example, have written challenging book-length evocations of the phenomenon, but those books contain no direct or ontologically grounded definitions. A bevy of other relevant books either define the terms loosely and phenomenally—for example, sometimes the modern is equated to increased speed and expansion, begging questions about how fast or extended social life must be to be modern. And, sometimes writers defer the task with sophisticated self-consciousness. Anthony Giddens, for example, begins: ‘As a first approximation, let us simply say the following: “modernity” refers to modes of social life of organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards’. And then he immediately acknowledges the limits of his non-definition. All this passage does, in his words, is associate ‘modernity with a time period, a particular mode of practice [organization] and with an initial geographical location [Europe], but for the moment leaves its major characteristics locked away in a black box’ (1990, p.1).<sup>14</sup> This Eurocentrism is not dissimilar to that presented by Charles Taylor—both writers know that they are being Europe-focused, but they can do little about it.

Taylor’s exposition slowly opens up the black box, as does Giddens’s analysis. They are both too good as scholars to do otherwise. However, like Giddens, Taylor gives us not a definition but a list of associated forces. The *modern* social imaginary, Taylor suggests, has been built upon three dynamics: the lifting out of *the economy* as a distinct domain or objectified reality; the simultaneous emergence of *the public sphere* as the place of increasingly mediated interchange counter-posed to the intimate or *private sphere*; and the recognition of the sovereignty of *the people*, treated as a new collective agency even as it is made up of individuals who seek self-affirmation in the other spheres (Taylor, 2004). These are three historical developments, among others, that are relevant to what we have been calling a *modern* ontological formation. But they are just important historical factors. They do not help us to

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<sup>13</sup> See Eisenstadt (2000). This seminal and sophisticated text, later taken up by many others, rightly sets out to counter a tendency in the literature to conflate modernisation and Westernisation. The problem, for all its sophistication, is that it defines modernity in reductive Weberian terms that presume its own outcome. See also Lash (1999).

<sup>14</sup> Giddens’s institutional dimensions of modernity are enhanced surveillance capacities, control of the means of violence, capitalism and industrialism.

ground the nature of the modern, nor do they explain, either singularly or synthetically, the changing nature of religion across the changing dominance of different formations from the traditional to the modern.

The most direct definition of the classical discussions is Jean-François Lyotard's. 'I will use the term modern', he says, 'to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative.' (1986, p. xxiii). Hence, he says, 'I define the postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives' (1986, p. xxiv). One of the many problems with this interconnected definition of the modern/postmodern is that other means of enquiry including *traditional* science (otherwise known as the 'pre-modern' sciences; sometimes called magic, alchemy or sorcery) also appeal to meta-narratives about the nature of things. In terms of the engaged theory presented here, they are ontologically different kinds of meta-narratives, with the traditional sciences drawn together as cosmologies and the modern sciences drawn together as universalities.

Another problem with Lyotard's definitions is that they limit the defining of a complex formation to a single ontological category: namely, knowing (or to be more precise, the grounds of knowledge—epistemology). Admittedly, the present approach only works with five such categories—temporality, spatiality, corporeality, epistemology and performativity—and many more could be chosen.<sup>15</sup> But at least, in the present approach, this is done though a reflexive analytical claim that the number of chosen categories is contingently determined, firstly, in consideration of the fact that they are ontologically foundational, and secondly through the usefulness test. Does the number and combination of the categories chosen provide a sufficient sense of the complexity of the human condition without becoming too unwieldy and heavy? More importantly, is this done in relation to an argument that these categories are basic to being human?

A few other things need to be said before the alternative definitions are laid out. Ontological formations are not treated as ideal types, but neither are they ever understood as standalone formations, at least not in post-tribal history. They are formations-in-dominance, co-existent and co-temporal. Secondly, the names for these formations—the customary, the traditional, the modern and the postmodern—are old conventional names used in various ways that are now sometimes uncomfortable or awkward. However, rather than inventing neologisms, the approach works with given names and seeks to redefine them in terms of their ontological bases. Thirdly, rather than defining a formation in temporal distinction to other formations, using a term such as 'pre-modern' to designate all that has come before the modern, formations are defined both comparatively and for themselves. All of this means that they cannot be treated as four great epochs fading into each other, but that we can talk of dialectics of continuity and discontinuity across our time on this planet. Fourthly, it means that, in order to distinguish between different formations, we need a notion of valences or orientations—ways in which different categories of being are lived (this last point will be elaborated in a moment).

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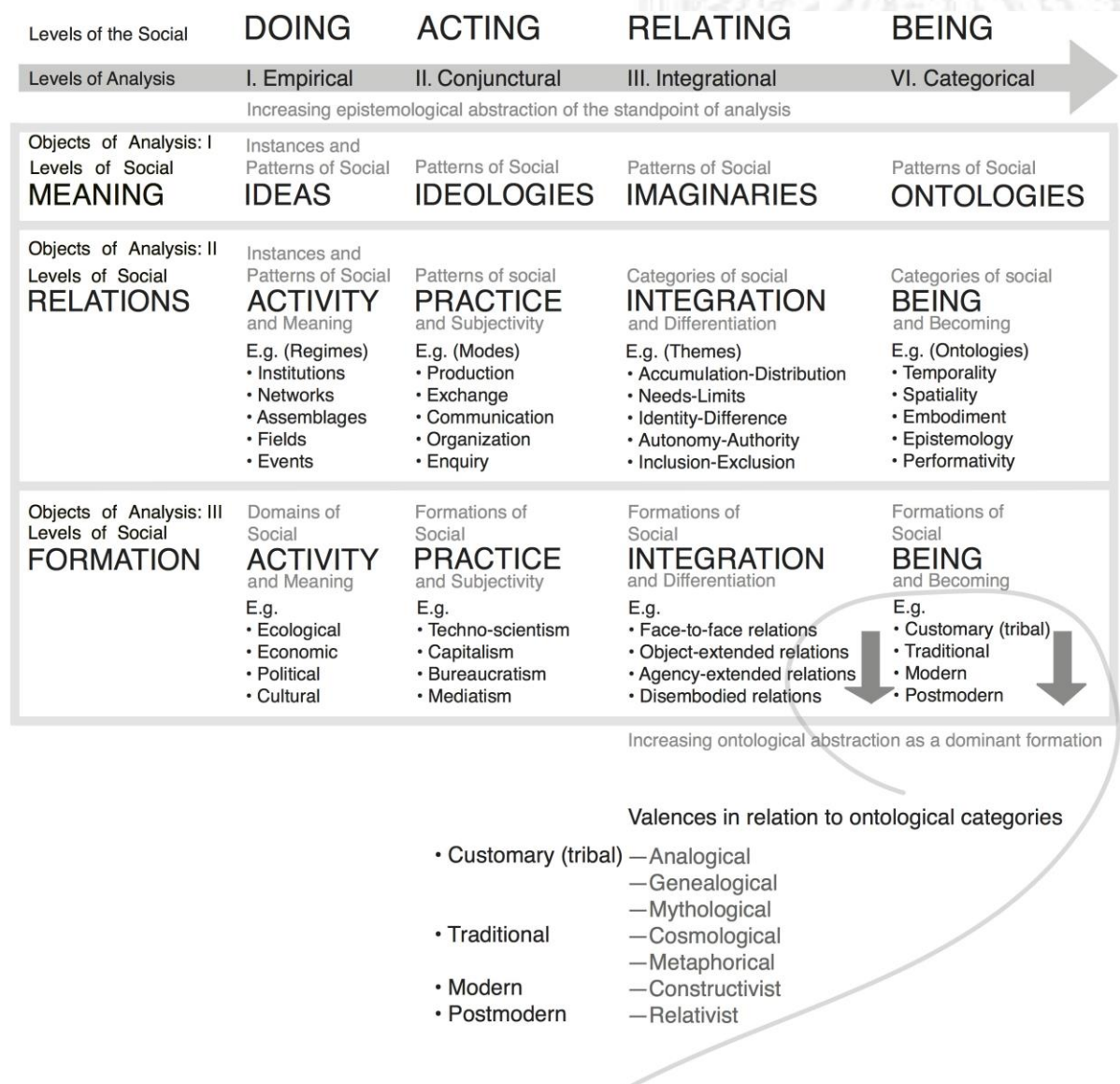
<sup>15</sup> In *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism* (James, 2006) and related writings prior to that time, I used the categorical list of temporality, spatiality, corporeality, and epistemology as sufficient for the task at hand. If performativity were added to the list, then it would need to be seen quite differently from some postmodern theorists use of it. Judith Butler, for example, says that 'Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed' (cited in Loxely, 2007, p. 118). By contrast, the present approach does not treat a single ontological category as so foundationally in itself as to make it *the* basis of an analysis, nor does it treat its relationship to the 'real' as singular.



These moves can be compared to how Charles Taylor both uses terms such as ‘modernity’ and ‘pre-modernity’, and calls his social forms ‘ideal types’ where they are defined in terms of phenomenal characteristics. Although he hints at customary relations—and given that he lives in Canada it is hard to see how customary relations could be so buried in this particular analysis. His first ideal type is the *Ancien Régime* type, in his words based on ‘pre-modern’ ideas of order during a time when the world was enchanted. We had porous selves, and our relations were grouped around constituent orders: nobility, peasants and so on. It ended around the turn of the nineteenth century, but has an unspecified beginning. The second is the Mobilization type, the basis of the ‘Age of Mobilization’, which ended around ‘1950 (perhaps more exactly 1960)’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 471). In terms of the millennia of world history it is hard to be more stupidly exact. And the third is the Authenticity type, the basis of the ‘Age of Authenticity’ from the 1960s to the present. It is characterised by expressive individualism, consumerism and a buffered self who seeks his or her authentic life based on the right to choose. This double move—treating social forms as epochs and then as ideal types—means that numerous qualifications have to follow, and they do—hundreds of them. At the same time, Taylor also makes some unsustainable epochal claims about beginnings and ends. The *Ancien Régime* has gone. ‘All this have been dismantled and replaced by something quite different’ (2007, p. 61). The porous self has been ‘replaced’ by the buffered self; the older worlds are ‘lost’ to us; and ‘modern social forms exist exclusively in secular time’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 207). Later in the book, Taylor is forced back to this point and says, in contradiction with himself, that ‘We cannot understand our present situation by single ideal type’ (p. 514). This problem is more than the need for a good editor.

Overall, the lineages that Taylor traces are fascinating and compelling, but his method does not serve him well. In particular, it cannot systematically handle the question of contradiction within and between his different ideal-types. By contrast, defining life-forms in terms of their ontological form, as I want to do here, is a quite different exercise from setting up ideal types. Each of these life-forms is defined in terms of socially specific modes of time, space, embodiment, knowledge and performance, intersecting unevenly across various modes of practice and integration. In other words, rather than being defined in terms of each other or beginning with the modern as the starting point or master epoch—with the past relegated wanly to a singular ‘pre-modern’ and the future projected as an end-of-the-modern ‘postmodern’—the levels method defines each of these life-forms in terms of their orientation to a common set of categories. These are categories lived in foundationally different ways across different settings of the human condition. In this kind of engaged theory, when such ontological categories come together as patterned, sustained relations, they are provisionally called *ontological formations*. When, in a particular time and place, an ontological formation becomes a social dominant, then that time and place can provisionally be characterised in terms of such a dominant. Connected to these two points, what I hope to show is how this method handles something that Taylor’s method cannot—issues of social and ontological contradiction: both creative and destructive. (See Figure 1 below.)

Figure 1. Levels of the Social in Relation to Levels of Analysis



## The Customary as an Ontological Formation

The customary is defined by the way that analogical, genealogical and mythological valences come to constitute different social practices—production, exchange, enquiry, communication, organisation and enquiry—in relation to basic categories of existence: time, space, embodiment, performance, and knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The three defining valences have been chosen because they arguably give a minimal sense of the complexity of customary (including tribal) formations. They have overlapping consequences, but they can be analytically distinguished. An orientation to an *analogical* valence has its primary embedding in the relation between the natural and the social, or what is called the ‘nature-culture’ contradiction; a *genealogical*

<sup>16</sup> Here the term ‘valence’ comes from the Latin *valentia* meaning strength or capacity. It comes via chemistry, where from the nineteenth it has been used to refer to the ‘combining power of an element’. More recently it has been used in psychology to express an orientation.

valence is primarily embodied in the relation between birth, becoming and mortality; and a *mythological* valence is primarily expressed in the relation between practice and meaning. Speaking broadly, these valences are treated as foundational for the human condition, even today. Configured tightly together as social dominants, they are the basis of an ontological formation, provisionally called 'the customary'. A customary tribal religion in these terms tells stories and practices mythologies about the intimate natural-social realm. The subjects of those mythologies are genealogies (relations of mutuality) in animated social nature. They are narratives bringing forth ever-present origins, ongoing reciprocal connections and deep continuities.

Within a constitutive frame understood in terms of the primacy of such valences, time, for example, moves *analogically* with nature, linked to diurnal patterns, seasons, years, but is also embodied in life-stages and life-times through *genealogical* rituals and cycles. Time, like space, *is* nature-culture. It is expressed in *mythological* sequences, severally connecting past and present, though without those connections expressing something singular beyond themselves. In such a setting, the immanent and transcendental are not phenomenally distinguishable, though at times of intensified meaning and rites of passage a sense of the sacred is lifted into relief.

These different valences are rarely in a simple one-to-one relation with each other. It is possible under certain pressures and at certain times, for example, for mythic relations to be disembedded from analogical and genealogical relations. Similarly, it is possible for customary relations to be in dominance, even though certain modes of practice in that setting have been traditionalised or modernised. The most obvious example here is the way in which a mode of production framed by customary relations can largely be supplanted, while other modes of practice remain firmly in place. Nevertheless, none of these relations, by themselves, make for being customary or tribal. Without being continually re-embedded in a relatively complex matrix of customary relations, analogical and genealogical meanings and practices can gradually be emptied out. It is not just the (modern) immanent frame that has the potential to empty out meaning in this world. The (traditional) transcendental claims of Pentecostal evangelists claiming a direct experience of a universalising God can be just as destructive in relation to their customary brethren as modernising colonialists. It continues to be their mission on earth, self-consciously and proudly proclaimed. And it is a well-intentioned form of ontological genocide: the systematic and intended destruction of another way of life.

This genocide is now put in much more subtle ways than under the Catholic Conquistadors, or even the more genteel London Missionary Society. For example, the New Tribes Mission, formed in 1942, currently has 3,000 representatives across the world, with the aim of 'reaching people who have no access to the Gospel'. This is a fine mission if it stayed at that level, but it does not take much digging to find more comprehensive aims. In a recent *Mission News*, under the heading from 'Animism to Truth', the authors ask us to pray with them for the end of a certain cultural understanding: 'As the Kendawangan people learn of the truth through the amazing stories in the Bible, pray they abandon their animistic beliefs and that they will have receptive hearts'. Another missionary writes, 'This is a spiritual battle', responding to the lack of receptiveness from the Tabo people (all citations from Ethnos 360, 2014, np).

On the other hand, it is also possible for new forms and meanings to be drawn syncretically back into a customary formation. In situations dominated by customary relations there was (and is), for example, no singular Dreamtime—that is until cosmologically informed

anthropologists such as Baldwin Spencer attributed modern systematicity to these many mythologies and gave them a singular name.<sup>17</sup> The subjects of his anthropological analysis had told, reworked, and retold mythical stories for generations without an emphasis on a singular whole, evoking the meanings of these connections rather than arranging them into a singular cosmology. But, with a new layer of epistemological access to old ways, perceptions changed. It adds to our argument rather than contradicts it that, subsequently, many Aboriginal people came to live that new abstraction, '*the Dreaming*'. It serves well as an integrating description of prior beliefs. This was part of a process of change of a more comprehensive kind from the time of the 'settlement' all the way into the postcolonial present—the customary being overlaid by more abstract formations or practice. It had good and bad consequences.

This process begins to hint at an alternative politics. Against the immanent frame, Taylor wants to return to poetic faith. The reflexive return that I am implicitly advocating here suggests, more broadly, that different cultures should explore different ways of bringing contradictory ontological frames in creative relation with each other, self-consciously aware that more abstract valences have a historically proven tendency to subordinate and colonise 'prior' forms, and this tendency needs to be challenged.

The history of traditional (often religious) and modern (usually capitalist) colonisation has been tragic. Through the invocation of traditional values (often Christian) and modern values (usually liberal rational), 'we' sought to civilise, destroy, bring to faith, or assimilate 'them'. In response, customary indigenous people have done many things: resist, rebel, go bush, get drunk, or lie down and die.<sup>18</sup> They have become middle-class entrepreneurs (Langton, 2012), rejected capitalism, and developed syncretic alternatives. But they have not simply disappeared. Sometimes, such as in the Dreaming example, they have responded in creative syncretic ways. More often they have become troubled. Joel Robbins's book *Becoming Sinners* describes the tormented process of negotiating ontological difference in one community where a customary culture provides the grounds of human security in gardening and hunting, and another culture, a Pentecostal Christian one, 'directs attention away from the earthly landscapes' (Robbins, 2004, p. 33). But cultural negotiation predominates. Damian Grenfell's perceptive work describes the complex negotiation of domains in another community where death brings together three worlds of mourning: the customary (dead ancestors), the traditional (heaven) and the modern (the nation-state):

Yes [says one Timorese woman] the spirits can create problems [for us living persons], because they can ask God—the ancestors are second and God is first—and so the spirits can ask 'Can God open the door for me or not?' And then if God opens the door for the spirits they can enter the world and create problems if the living did not give them [at their burial] *tais* [customary woven clothe] or contribute money, and so this is the way that death causes problems (Grenfell, 2012, p. 92; also, Grenfell, 2015).

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<sup>17</sup> See Charlesworth (1997). In other words, this is not to suggest that '*the Dreaming*' is not a lived way of describing practice and meaning *in our time* among tribal/traditional/modern Aboriginal peoples, just as the terms developed by anthropologists to describe kinship relations—'clan', 'moiety', 'patrilineage', 'matrilineage' and even the concept of 'kinship'—have been taken on as useful for describing connections between people under the dominance of a tribal formation.

<sup>18</sup> The reference here is to Richard Trudgen's inspiring book *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (2000).



In this process, the tribal understanding of the sacred domain of the ancestors (*lulik*) both defers to a traditional Catholic cosmology that needs to be *the One and Only*, even as it folds that cosmology of being first back into a new, customary, mythologically framed religion.

### **The Traditional as an Ontological Formation**

The traditional is defined by the way in which analogical, genealogical and mythological valences are drawn into a cosmological and metaphorical reframing of different social practices—production, exchange, enquiry, communication, organisation and enquiry—in relation to basic categories of existence: time, space, embodiment, and knowledge. This, like the previous definition, is a working definition, but I think that it meets the basic criteria of good method: practical usefulness, analytical coherence, simple complexity and normative reflexivity. In societies dominated by traditional ways of life, the second-order valences of the cosmological and metaphorical tended (and tend) to be lived in conjunction with each other. It is only possible philosophically to separate out or define the terms of these valences of social life; and it is to this end that traditional philosophers have been devoted for centuries.

In this approach, *traditionalism*, as I am using the concept, is quite different from what modernists designate as ‘tradition’. Only modernists invent traditions. In the modern sense, a ‘tradition’ is a regularised event that gains its power through intense regularised calendrical repetition. By contrast, traditionalism as described here is embracing and more broadly constitutive. *Traditional* events, as opposed to modern traditions, are, as we will see, meaningful in relation to the world around. They are repeated for themselves; they do not gain meaning simply because they are repeated.

With an orientation towards the *cosmological*, basic categories of the human condition—time, space, embodiment, knowledge and performance—were and are abstracted in relation to a something else, both immanent *and* beyond (with the emphasis on the beyond): God, Nature, Form, Being. With an orientation towards the *metaphorical*, foundational relations were and are abstracted in related to something enclosing *and* beyond (with the emphasis on the enclosing): the City of Man, the body politic, the *civitas*, the *res publica Christiana* (with none of these yet constituted as ‘abstract communities’ in the modern sense). Through these processes, human relations to Being are often given metaphoric social resonance: the singular King on the day of judgement; the threefold person of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; the threefold Lords (*Trimurti*), their wives (*Tridevi*) and their avatars; the eightfold Pathway. This is living metaphor. It brings together identity and difference.<sup>19</sup> The nature of religion changes fundamentally in this formation, but traditional religions incorporate and reconstitute older customary forms. Traditionalism is the source of what we now call the ‘World Religions’ or ‘Religions of the Book’, but those religions had an imperial appetite for the mythologies of earlier belief systems. In short, traditionalism can be characterised as carrying forward prior

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<sup>19</sup> It is hard for us moderns/postmoderns who have lost empathy with traditional meanings to understand the power of living metaphor. Religious believers are partial exceptions. An interesting example here comes from Bruce Barber (2012, pp. 14-15). Writing about the transubstantiation of bread and wine and drawing upon Aristotle, he suggests, that the objects or *accidents* of bread and wine do not change, but rather the intentionality or *substance* behind the accidents the bread and the wine. Thus, a *modern* understanding of *traditional* meaning finds a way to use traditional metaphor to make bread-as-the-body-of-Christ believable for modern sensibilities.



ontological forms that were foundational to being human, and reconstituting those forms in terms of new cosmological-metaphorical relations.<sup>20</sup>

The reconstitution of analogical valences through more abstract metaphorical modes of relating is not a straightforward process to describe. It is most readily understood through examining the change in the dominant mode of communication from orality to writing that characterises one aspect of the shift from customary tribalism to traditionalism. Writing *potentially* carries forward all the sounds and embodied performativity of orality through written emphasis, rhythm, and through subsequent translation (reading aloud, theatre and mimesis),<sup>21</sup> but it leaves something unfulfilled. It adds an abstract layer of increasingly codified language, lifting meaning out of its immediate embodied context and opening it to wider connections, but it leaves an indeterminate space (Ong, 1982). In particular, it opens up a spreading space between voice and text. The more one enters that space to structure the possible spreading meanings, the more it requires ontological work—and so generations upon generations of philosophers, political theorists, literary interpreters and theologians have been hard at it. Stories once meaningful because they were told in the presence of others by animating story tellers, now have to be narrated in projected times, just as they give meaning to time (Ricoeur, 1984). Just as crucially, because written texts are available for transporting across time, abstracted from their human scribes, they take on new possibilities. And it is this lifting out of meaning from embodied, analogical time and space that gives writing its magical, sometimes sacred, power. In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1). Logos.<sup>22</sup>

This methodological argument can be taken in various directions. One direction is to examine the effect of writing in different language settings. The alphabets of the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, the second without vowels, which some have suggested is linked to the prohibition of saying God's name, would appear to be entirely different in cultural terms. However, both alphabets turn on the capacity, like all writing, to generate a sense of disembodied agency and authority. Writing thus traditionally projects the possibility of both a universalised authority beyond the author who merely pens the words or tells the story, and a universalised reader who defers to the truth of the word.<sup>23</sup> In the world of cosmological and metaphorical abstraction this universalised author becomes the space for the entry of The Author. As Brian Rotman suggests, writing puts us 'beside ourselves', trying to hold together embodied gestures and communication with a disembodied inscribed 'I':

At the beginning of the alphabetic West two figures inhabiting this description emerged. Two quasi-human agencies, master ghosts of the alphabet, who/which have since constituted major horizons of Western religious thought and intellectual discourse came into being. One was God or Jahweh [the God of 'I am that I am'], the external mono-being conjured out of their tribal god [El-ohim, the God that we will meet in a moment who gets his hands dirty] by the Israelites; the other Mind or *psyche/nous*, the internal organ of thought conceived by the Greeks to exist as non-somatic—mental—agency.

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<sup>20</sup> In this, though, the genealogical goes through profound cultural-political-economic changes, it is most ontologically continuous, if only simply because bodies and procreation remain foundational to traditional life.

<sup>21</sup> *Potentially*; but it also loses the embodied presence and engagement of orality and speech.

<sup>22</sup> With the modern overlay of constructivism, this process is abstracted again, giving rise to the parallel possibilities of the 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1967) and 'the death of God' movement (the cover of the 8 April 1966 edition of *Time* magazine, but going back to Nietzsche in the nineteenth century).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Heraclitus: 'Listening not to me, but the logos, it is wise to acknowledge that all is one'. Heraclitus is the archetypical self-deferring teller of metaphoric-cosmological truths (see Eva Brann, 2011).

These two agencies could not have occurred in more different social, historical, cultural and intellectual milieus. Nonetheless, each of the Hebraic and Greek encounters with alphabetic writing gave rise in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to a supernatural, disembodied agency. They did so (as far as is known) independently of each other through the same mediological move of exploiting and being captured by the ghostly possibilities inherent in the writing of 'I' (Rotman, 2008, pp. 120-121).

In other words, according to Rotman, God and Mind were both brought into being as hypostasised effects of the alphabet through a sense of an 'I' and an 'I am that I am': Yahweh. As contra-theistic as that might first appear, the proposition fits the overall argument presented here, though with two provisos. The first qualification is that a fuller account would not confine its analysis to writing as a means of communication. As implied in the surrounding discussion, other modes of practice—production, exchange, organisation, enquiry—are equally important to the process of abstracting a sacred Other.<sup>24</sup> A longer essay would track the intersection of all these processes. The second qualification is that the proposition does not tell us anything about whether or not Yahweh, God, Allah or the Trimurti actually exist. In the levels approach being presented here, that issue is treated as a question of faith rather than one of analytical proof or social theoretical explanation.

All that I am trying to do here—and no more—is point to the beginnings of a social theoretical method that can handle the issue of *why* people believe in gods or God, and *what* are the changing forms that practices and meanings of that belief took hold across human history. It might be personally the case that I am more convinced that the *image* of God was made in the image of humans rather than the other way around, but that is not particularly relevant. And many contemporary theologians would agree. The Otherness of God is ineffable—completely other—and therefore how can we know of His image. I do not contest *the possibility* that my theological colleagues are right about the existence of a God and that He made humanity in His image. However, if I were them I would put the emphasis on the faith rather than what God actually is or does, other than he is utterly 'Other'. In any case, the existence or otherwise of God is irrelevant to this approach, and this cuts both ways. By the definition of religion posed earlier, radical atheism may not be a religion, but it is as much a faith claim as theism—except that it is a less cogent one.

Going back to 'time' as our example again, we can see how the process is much broader than just within the mode of communication, just about an abstract 'I', or even about faith alone. For Christians and Muslims alike, the times of the past, present and future become cosmologically inter-related though an Omni-temporal Being, with the past becoming a foretelling of what is to come, mediated through the present. Linking it to writing in the Biblical tradition, the centre-point of time is God's word. Ecclesiastes 3.1 provides a classic rendition: 'To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die ...'. The older analogical sense of seasonal time features in the first phrase referring to seasons, but immediately it is reframed by the cosmological understanding of

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<sup>24</sup> Lest it be thought that I am only referring to religions of the book (though they are a special case), here is a wonderful example from almost two centuries ago. John Bentley writes: 'We may also see, that Buddha, the son of Māyā, or the year [a sacred temporal period], being the founder of a religious sect in India, is a mere fiction, and that we are rather to take it in a figurative sense; that is to say that *time* has produced this religion, and that person or persons who may have first promulgated it, are now unknown' (1825, pp. 60-61). It does not take away from the philosophy of Buddhism, but it does call into question the ways that its doctrines describe their own historical beginnings.

‘under heaven’, before returning to the older sense of time, this time genealogical. This process is close to what different lineages of writers, including Benedict Anderson and Giorgio Agamben, both via Walter Benjamin and all steeped in the Jewish/Christian traditions, narrowly call ‘Messianic time’. However, the concept of the ‘Messianic’ does not work for our purposes for a number of reasons. Firstly, it signifies only one aspect of time, sacred Christian/Jewish time. Paul’s term for ‘Messianic time’ in the first century is *ho nym kairos*, the time of what is *now* remaining. But this was distinguished even then from chronological time (ordinary time) and eschatological or apocalyptic time—the time of the anticipated sacred end (Agamben, 2005, p. 61). Our definition of the traditional rests on a more embracing sense of time as the given immanent/transcendental location of all being, including all times, ordinary and revelatory.

Secondly, the concept needs to be relevant to other traditions beyond the Abrahamic religions and their proclamation of an actual or possible Messiah. Hinduism is culturally different in a multitude of ways from Christianity and Judaism, but at the level of discussing basic categories of existence we find fundamental convergences. Redolent of the way in which the Christian God is present ‘in the beginning’, so also Krishna *is* time: ‘I am time’, he says, ‘bringing about the destruction of the world’. Hindu time, linked to creation, preservation and destruction, moves through unfolding cycles—ages—both repeating themselves and open to change through the play (*lilāi*) of multiple deities and the activities of humans (Lipner, 2010, ch. 10; Kloetzli and Hiltebeitel, 2004). Similarly, traditional Islamic theology links time to Allah. There are numerous writings, charts and diagrams linking days of the week with letters of the alphabet and the divine names of Allah (Yousef, 2008).

In these senses, traditional time is *cosmological* time in all its amazing variants, brought down to earth in different ways by *metaphorical* considerations. This tension between cosmological time (singular, even if there are many gods, devas and avatars) and different metaphorical times (plural, given the open possibilities of abstracted language), although with the same ontological frame, sets up cultural contradictions that philosophers steeped in traditional life needed and need to resolve. Here the concept of *cultural contradiction*—or economic or political contradiction (these are all kinds of *social* contradictions)—refers to basic tensions occurring *within* a particular ontological formation, while the concept of *ontological contradiction* refers to basic contradictions occurring between ontological formations. Augustine’s *Confessions* provides us with an anguished example of how a philosopher theologian from the fifth century CE handles the cultural contradictions of traditional temporality: the tension between *distentio animi* (the extension of the self into multiple temporal worlds) in a difficult relation with the non-being of time and *intentio* (intention in time) linked to the striving for eternity (Ricoeur, 1984, ch. 1; Drever, 2008). This was never a problem for customary philosophers, for whom time was always variously embodied in persons, spirits and things. For St Augustine, the only answer is God.

Writing a millennium-and-a-half later, Karl Barth similarly finds a way through the problem by distinguishing between ‘God-created time’ and ‘our time’, and then finding a third time that brings both together: the body of Jesus Christ. This revelatory embodied event occurs both in our ‘historical’ time and God’s time (Barth, 1956, Section 14, p. 47). Thus, Christ’s body provides the soteriological synthesis of the transcendental and immanent. Jesus Christ, truly human but born of the Spirit of God, provides a perfect example here. Jesus is simultaneously God, God-Incarnate, and an embodied mortal man. He is Mary Douglas’s boundary-crosser extraordinaire, sacred because he binds together in one body the cultural contradictions that

inhere in struggling with the profane and the sacred (Douglas, 1999). At the risk of repeating my argument too often, this is one of the things that a constitutive levels method allows us to show: namely, how religion finds its deep cosmological meanings and metaphorical expressions in both the cultural *and* ontological contradictions of the human condition. To be blunt, what I am arguing is that our interpretations of Jesus are born of the cultural and ontological contradictions of Jesus's time, and the intensifying ontological contradictions that build across the ensuing two thousand years as traditional and modern ways of life overlaid, and to some extent displaced, traditional and tribal formations from the centre of social power.

Thus, in political terms, while I personally do not follow the notion that Jesus is *the* way, I do understand that *at one level of being* for the Christian-with-faith this is exactly what has to be posited for that religion not to be emptied out of its reason for being. I am thus not suggesting that Christians should give up on that *belief*. What I am arguing for is a reflexive understanding by people of faith that the originating *traditional* belief about '*the way*' (singular) needs to be held in self-conscious and public contradiction with the view that there is no one true way. In modern/postmodern terms, a christian qua Christian (just like a muslim qua Muslim) can only make a truth-claim socially. In traditional/modern/postmodern terms, the sociality of being human gives none of us prior access to *the* one and only truth. This move, I suggest, can be made without resorting to empty relativism. It is a matter of being reflexive ontologically about where one stands as one makes a claim.

The same argument about temporality and embodiment (and specifically the temporal event of Jesus's body) can be made in the domain of spatiality. Contradictions beset religions, as they do all of us, as they/we attempt to resolve the relationship between transcendental and immanent space. The bounds of traditional religious meaning are potentially limitless, or, to be more precise, they are *both* immanent in, and transcendent of, spatiality: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void.'<sup>25</sup> In that passage, written down by a *cosmologically* framed 'priestly' tradition, we see the transcendental nature of God—*being*, before time and space. But, in a second story in Genesis told by an earlier *analogically* driven school of thinkers, we see the immanent effect of the creator God—being in time and space. He is in the earth, getting his hands dirty, and making the bodies of man and woman. This tension at the centre of Genesis seems to be only the stuff of sophisticated theologians, but it needs to be part of the common sense of Christian believers. Contradiction is not a negative thing; handled creatively contradiction is the material of life and death.

All of the world's religions contend with these contradictions, some more intensely than others. We could ask 'How are they resolved?' Alternatively, we could pursue the question as to why some actual places are sacred when all of Yahweh's, God's, and Allah's creations are transcendently placed. And, why in the *journey* of enlightened Buddhists are all places left behind? Particular *places* come to be held as sacred because they become sites of condensed contradiction—the River Ganges in Hinduism, the Holy Land of Judaism, the Stations of Cross or the Holy See for Catholic Christians, Mecca and Medina for Muslims, and the Temple of the Tooth for Singhalese Buddhists. In the monotheistic religions, such places bring the *fundamentally, essentially, absolutely* transcendent down to earth—much as the body of Jesus does for temporality. In Buddhism, they become sacred places pointing the way to travellers on the way to being non-placed.

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<sup>25</sup> The opening passage of the Christian and Judaic Bible: Genesis, Chapter 1:1–2.

St Augustine thus posited, for example, a distinction between the City of God as wholly divine in nature and the Earthly City as the base-worldly polity. What was most important for him was the City of God, but this sets up a major issue. An apparent Manichean tension—an actual cultural contradiction between absolute transcendence and lived immanence—confronts Christianity, just as it confronts Islam. For Augustine, it is solved in the following argument: part of the City of God also sojourns on earth and lives by faith (2009, Book 19, ch. 17). What I am arguing politically is for an extension (with a twist) of this sacred but unsatisfactory reconciliation. To the extent that we live in a world characterised by the intersection of different ontological formations, then it can be said that part of the City of Humanity lives by faith in the City of God, but only at one level of their being, and only through reflexive recognition that it could be otherwise.

### **The Modern as an Ontological Formation**

The modern is defined by the way in which prior valences of social life—analogical, genealogical, mythological, cosmological and metaphorical relations—are reconstituted through a *constructivist* reframing of social practices in relation to basic categories of existence common to all humans: time, space, embodiment, performance and knowledge.<sup>26</sup> The word ‘reconstituted’ here explicitly does not mean replaced. Prior valences continue, even if framed by the new ontological dominance of constructivist meanings and practices.

In constructivist terms, these basic categories of human existence become the terrain of different projects to be made and remade, thought and rethought anew. Bodies, landscapes, genome systems, aesthetic principles, and political systems become projects for construction and reconstruction. From the rise of the divided public self in eighteenth-century England and France (Sennett, 1997) to the globalised autonomous self of the twenty-first century, even the self becomes an object of projected construction.

Other writers have suggested related themes for the basis of their definitions of the modern. In one of his takes on a definition, Zygmunt Bauman makes reflexivity central to its meaning: ‘We can think of modernity as of a time when order—of the world, of the human habitat, of the human self, and of the connection between all three—is reflected upon ... conscious of being a conscious practice’ (Bauman, 1991, p. 5). This is to focus on single ontology as the basis of the definition, namely the social form of knowing. In another take he says it is ordering divided: ‘We can say that the existence is modern in as far as it forks into order and chaos. The existence is modern in as far as it contains the *alternative* of order and chaos. Indeed: order and *chaos*, full stop’ (p. 6). This take fails completely: the order/chaos distinction is redolent of many traditional religions. In another, he says that it is design that distinguishes the modern: ‘The existence is modern insofar as it is guided by the urge of designing what otherwise would not be there: designing of *itself*’ (p. 7). Each of these definitions is within a couple of pages of each other in a single book, and he is not playing a game. It illustrates the difficulty of defining something so basic. The (tertiary) valence of ‘constructivism’ has been chosen to encompass those themes: a reflexive, restless drive to construct and re-make the world, nature, and ourselves because we have no choice but to choose what they and we should look like.

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<sup>26</sup> It seems uncomfortable to take only one additional social theme to have our definition of the modern turn upon, when previously we used three themes for customary formations and two additional themes for traditionalism. However, it seems to be enough for our purposes. Given the methodological principles of simple usefulness and sufficient complexity, I am currently going with it while remaining open to better suggestions.



The present method, with its emphasis on reconstitution of forms rather than replacement of epochs, also helps to make sense of Bruno Latour's counter-intuitive argument that we have never been modern: 'No one has ever been modern', he says: 'Modernity has never begun. There has never been a modern world ... we have never left the old anthropological matrix behind' (Latour, 1993, p. 67). Apart from enjoying the shock value of heresy in a world dominated by modern self-congratulation, Latour's primary concern is that the modern sets up a great divide between the natural and the social, and then offers to translate between them through science. And, indeed, it does in the relative occlusion of the embedded analogical.

However, *contra* Latour and Bauman, etc., the method being developed in this essay puts the emphasis on the reconstitution of ontologically complex forms, and handles this contradiction by showing how prior forms live on in the swirling currents of the new. And it does so without sounding either ornery for its own sake, or refusing to recognise that we are in this time dominated across the globe by a formation that can contingently be called 'modernity'. Of particular relevance here, analogical relations between the natural and social, dominant under conditions of the customary, have been in many ways redefined or blustered aside. They are subordinated, for example, in terms of the dominion over an external nature that needs to be subdued (expressed strongly in both traditional Christian and Jewish liturgy), or later in terms of the reconstruction and reconstitution of nature (expressed as liberation by modern and postmodern science). This is the first major difference in method between the levels approach and Latour's Actor Network Theory. The second difference in method is that his approach emphasises continuity:

Seen as networks, however, the modern world, the revolutions, permits scarcely anything but small extensions of practices, slight accelerations in the circulation of knowledge, a tiny extension of societies, minuscule increases in the number of actors, small modifications of old beliefs (Latour, 1993, p. 48).

This argument seems to be simply empirically wrong. By comparison, the levels approach understands change in terms of a dialectic of continuity-and-discontinuity. It allows on the one hand for the recognition of the comprehensiveness of the new crises that we face in the contemporary world, including the increasingly disembedded sense of our relationship to nature. On the other hand, this same abstracted relationship to nature leaves us floundering to do anything systematic in response to the potential of a calamitous climate-change crisis as it continues to creep up upon us.

The issue of crisis takes us back to our example of time. Time in traditional senses was (is) often described metaphorically—it travels like an arrow, it is spaced like knots on a long string, and it flows like a river, all understood in terms of something beyond itself—but in modernity (that is, in places and times when the modern is dominant) time becomes itself. The emergence of such a level of temporality leads us in two simultaneous directions: the first is subjectivism, for example, as expressed by Immanuel Kant, for whom time was the foundation of all experience. The second is objectivism, expressed by Isaac Newton in 1687 as giving the possibility of 'Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, [flowing] equally without relation to anything external' (Kern, 1983, p. 11). Both converged on the notion of time as time-in-itself, natural with a small 'n', and unable to be defined beyond itself.

This broad process affects all ontological categories and dethrones both of the dominant entities that once gave them meaning: God and Nature. Time becomes the medium of passing or lost moments, mapped day by day onto empty calendrical grids. In positive terms, this is the form of temporality that allows for creative historicity. It sensitises politics. That is, it leaves the space for reflection upon ‘historical time’ as it is measured (tautologously) across time and space. But it is also a form of time in which, paradoxically, crisis-consciousness becomes endemic while actual crises lose their generality and ontological force. Crises become contested points in history. The postmodern takes this proposition one stage further to where social life is reframed in terms of contested standpoints—a kind of relativism, that I would argue, even fragments the possibility of politically projecting other worlds.

### **The Postmodern as an Ontological Formation**

The postmodern is defined by the way in which prior valences of social life—analogue, genealogical, mythological, cosmological, metaphorical and constructivist—are reconstituted through a *relativist* reframing of social practices in relation to basic categories of existence common to all humans. In relativist terms, these basic categories of the human are all open for deconstruction. One of the strengths of the postmodern is that it relativises the certainties of the modern (although it should be quickly added, that modern constructivism already continually undermines its own certainties, albeit always in favour of new ones). The strengths of relativising knowledge are profound—indeed the present analysis benefits from the insights of deconstructive analysis and postmodern critique.

The problem arises when the postmodern comes into ontological predominance. In practice, to the extent that it serves to undermine any standpoint that would argue against the dominance of a relativising epistemology, postmodernism becomes the meta-ideology for the deconstruction of the planet, figuratively and literally. If there is no nature, except for the nature that we project upon stones, plants and animals (a problem for the new materialists), then there are no grounds for deciding on what is right or good in relation to nature. What we do with our own projections becomes a question of agonistic interrogation. There become no stable reference points to guide how humans negotiate the nature-culture contradiction, let alone how we act in and on nature. With the dominance of postmodern science, all deconstruction becomes simultaneous, agonistically contested and essentially uncontestable, including the deconstruction and recombining of the basic elements of nature from atoms to genes. In postmodern religion, the sacred becomes similarly an aesthetic agonistic projection, depending upon the standpoint of the participant. And, in postmodern politics, projections of alternatives are constantly relativised and displaced in favour of constant deconstruction, allowing for new appeals to what is now called ‘post-truth’—the time of Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and Richard Dawkins. It is no coincidence that the genre of modern utopia is now treated as anachronistic in all but a couple of discrete fields. Thus, the substantial and important strengths of postmodern values and practices become the basis for its (and our) deconstruction.

Instead of developing an extended treatment of the postmodern, there is sufficient in that brief discussion to proceed to a conclusion about the consequences of all of the foregoing discussion for an ethics of human flourishing. Postmodernism as a social form carries its own ideologies of transcendence. Against those such as Taylor who suggests, firstly, that there is something special in seeking *the* transcendental and, secondly, that a poetry of faith sensitises us to the problems inherent in the late modern/postmodern turn, I want to argue that religion is very much in the world (even its believers claim that their belief is not *of the world*). Religion faces

all the tensions and contradictions of the ontological layering of analogical, genealogical, mythological, cosmological, metaphorical, constructivist and relativist valences that I have been describing, and does so in much the way that all social phenomena do.

Postmodern time, for example, relativises the standpoint from which time-for-itself—empty modern time—can do its thing in the background while we fill it with (self-constructed) meaning. This, too, has found its unstable expression as Christian physicists argue for the return of a God that is no longer in the machine. Quantum mechanics and God can now be projected as an aesthetic fit. In practical terms and expressed more generally, postmodern (and, ironically, neo-traditionalising) versions of Christianity find their cultural resonance in exactly those same theoretical transformations that Taylor is saying replaced the religious sensibility and brought about the emptying out of the human condition.

### **Conclusion: What does this all Mean for an Ethics of Human Flourishing?<sup>27</sup>**

A parallel history and comparative social mapping could be written for the changing *dominant* levels of ethical abstraction: different ways of thinking about what is ‘good’ and what is ‘right’. Put most briefly, it is possible to show that, like other social practices, the nature of different ethical systems is patterned upon the nature of the society in which they are lived and contested. At the risk of oversimplifying a long and incredibly complex intertwined history of different ethical approaches, it is useful analytically to distinguish a number of dominant modalities in relation to different dominant ontological formations: analogical ethics, cosmological ethics, constructivist ethics and relativist ethics. The first—*analogical ethics*—is dominant in customary societies, although it has residual and subordinate relevance in all societies. Analogical ethics emphasises the right way to sustain embodied relations between persons and persons, and between persons and things—sacred and banal objects, places, features on the landscape, animal species and forces of nature. It is the kind of ethics reinterpreted in living narratives by customary story-tellers on the basis of what has been handed down to them. The implicit emphasis is on care, reciprocity, and mutuality, without necessarily abstracting these practical-sacred relations into reflexively applied principles. The integrative relations carried by each telling works to revivify, reconfirm and reproduce the integrative force of face-to-face relations: that is, facing other persons and embodying the self as part of the circle of nature. This provides one form of an ethics of foundations grounded in the mutuality of the social and natural.

A second major form, *cosmological ethics*, abstracts from analogical ethics by locating the source of meaning elsewhere other than within the perceptually and analogically known social-natural relationships themselves. If, for example, in Navajo or Yolgnu tribal culture the life-sustaining relation between mother and child provides the actual foundation for all bonds of kinship, social and natural (Peterson, 2001, ch. 5), then in Christian traditional culture the mother-and-Christ-child image refers to the sacred life that is at once transcendental and removed from the lives of mere mortals and, at the same time, *returned* to the flesh as a sustaining lived metaphor of the exemplary-sacred. *The Saviour*, by Quirizio da Muranano, for example, shows Christ with one hand opening his wounded chest where a nipple would be found, and with the other hand feeding a Eucharist wafer to a kneeling nun (Bynum, 1987, plate 2.25). Thus, the painters tell us, He *is* the way and the life. He *is* the lived metaphoric

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<sup>27</sup> The paragraphs in this section have been reworked from an earlier attempt to do something similar: (James, 2005).

embodiment of how relational ethics should work. His body is the source and He is the provider. Cosmological ethics provides a more abstract way of approaching an ethics of foundations. It still tries to get to the bottom of the meaning of life, but it abstracts analogical ethics in three ways: firstly, it finds exemplary carriers of meaning (Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, etc.); secondly, it begins to codify rules for living that are written outside the stories of the law-givers (the Ten Commandments, halakha, sharia, dharma, etc.); and thirdly, it begins to reflect upon an ethics of care through homilies. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, etc.

Whether we refer to Islam, Christianity, or Confucianism as examples, the universalising religions of the book all treat ethics as that which is both metaphorically embodied *and* codifiable. An ethics of care is subordinated to the Speaker of homilies. Care and its codification occur through intellectually mediated reflection upon the meaning of a transcendent God, transcendent Nature or transcendent Law. Sometimes the right and the good were passed on by God-sustained edict, such as when Moses was handed the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, or sometimes they were enshrined in natural law beginning with the Greek philosophers such as Aristotle in his *Nichomachean Ethics*, but they were almost always constituted in the overlaying of forms (Vincent, 1987, ch. 3).

This point brings us to the third more abstract kind of ethics, *constructivist ethics*, of which rationalised impartial ethics is one expression. Constructivist ethics was able, more or less, to stand alone by the eighteenth century, even if many documents such as Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* still appealed to natural law. Contemporary constructivism both takes processes of codification a step further, and at the same time makes possible an alternative pathway that is critical of its own rationalism. The lineage of constructivism came self-consciously to project an 'ethics of care', but care took a subordinate place in a crowded literature of ethics dominated by liberal rationalism: for example, liberal rights theory, utilitarian ethics, and liberal cosmopolitanism. The dominant kind of cosmopolitanism today, *abstracted cosmopolitanism*, is grounded in the intellectual force of abstracted modern rationality (or, as a second-order claim, in the reality of the globalisation of politics in the contemporary period). In an attempt to get beyond subjectivism, abstract cosmopolitanism in its different manifestations sought different methods of rational grounding. One contemporary voice of this kind of cosmopolitanism is *rationalist cosmopolitanism*. It is best represented by extensions of John Rawls' liberal theory of justice. Rationalism of this kind projects a hypothetical abstracted condition where a group of unknown individuals, shorn of any particular attachments, can supposedly impartially decide on what are good principles. They thus ground their ethics in an abstracted condition of social 'neutrality' and 'emptiness' rather than a metaphorical dialogue with others or nature.

Thus, for mainstream modern rationalised ethics, rules and rights—now no longer embedded in cosmologies—become things in themselves. Human rights regimes, including the Millennium Development Goals, are the paramount modern examples today, with all their strengths and problems. The latter derive from the intensification and dominance of the codification process. Unfortunately, modern desires to code, monitor and measure outcomes tend to subordinate prior ethics of foundations. In the process, they sideline an ethics of care to the concerns of individuals in their private moments, occasional acts of extraordinary kindness or public rhetorical flourishes.

In the context of the broader ontological emergence described earlier, there has emerged a fourth form of ethics, *relativist ethics*. It is characterised by agonism, that is, the agonising from different standpoints over the relative value of different actions and practices. Such agonism emerged as an important social modality in the twentieth century as professional philosophers of ethics increasingly began to relativise old ethical verities and lay intellectuals increasingly interrogated the grounding assumptions of modern regimes of justice and rights. In the twenty-first century, it became the terrain of private self-reflection for those who care, but do not quite know what to do about it.

All the while, cosmological ethics has maintained a continuing but often reconstituted force into the present. In many areas of life, it has shaded into, been overwhelmed by, or become distorted by constructivist ethics. When this intersection of ethical valences is not handled well it becomes a potential source of horror. The overlaying of forms can even be seen in purifying movements as Wahhabite Islam; arguably, alongside modern intellectual training, one of the strongest influences on the terrorism of Osama bin Laden (Esposito, 2002, pp. 5–6, 73). Aziz Al Azmeh sets this explanation out in its complexity, showing how Islamic fundamentalisms tend to look back to an exemplary cosmology while paradoxically (flexibly) hardening traditional scripture as modern constructed law.

It purports to detail the exemplary behaviour of the Prophet and his contemporaries, and to utilize this register of exemplaries as a character for reform. The fundamentals of rectitude are contained in this register, and the history that intervenes between the occurrence of the exemplary acts and today is an accident that no more than sullies and corrupts its origin, and which therefore can be eliminated, as history is the mere passage of time ... [The scriptural and the historical-contemporary] are set in parallel registers and are expressed in terms of today's fundamentally rights bearings, making the iniquities of today less historical realities than supervening mistakes that can be eliminated by reference to exemplary precedent (Al Azmeh, 1996, pp. 151-152).

Christian fundamentalism is no less worrying.

Buried in the discussion of ethics and ontological formations, including the problems of intersecting modalities, are lessons about what the overlaying of social forms means for an alternative politics. It appears that, by historicising everything, including ethics, my argument ends up caught between a modernist reflexivity and a postmodern relativising of certainty. The tensions are actually more comprehensive than that. What I am arguing is that the grounding of being human is no more and no less than our glorious and inglorious time on this planet from the customary to the postmodern. Yahweh, God, Allah or the Trimurti may or may not exist, but given the contemporary crisis, turning to anyone of them as *the* way is unlikely to provide guidance as to what is to be done. Given that we have become the authors of our own potential destruction, the work of negotiating our future remains ours. And this needs to be done by reflecting seriously on the tensions and contradictions of the past and present.

Ethically it will require going back to basics—an ethics of foundations, qualified but not overshadowed or reconstituted in terms of more abstract modalities. That is, by going back across the valences of practice and meaning that have across human history given us our humanness, there is a chance that we will find a sustainable and vibrant way of living on this planet. Practically, it will entail a revolution in practice that seeks to draw out the strengths of each of the valences of the human condition into a syncretic ethics of care. This does not mean



going back to ways of life or some of their cultural expressions that first gave rise to those valences. That is neither possible (except romantically) nor meaningful. Rather, it requires a leap of commitment of a different kind than asked for by the religions of the world.

First it means leaping to reconceptualize ‘the world’ and reforming ourselves within this new understanding. This is nothing to do with redrawing the geopolitical map and everything to do with repositioning ourselves within our mode of being-in-the-world. It is about seeing ourselves as conduits connected to object-things, animals and human Others, dwelling in every respect in mind and matter. This leap effectively folds into a continual act of a self-world re-creation and remaking (a generalized and unending project of ontological design that learns from how we came into being as an indivisible self/world-formation construction ... [W]hatever affirmative change can be created, we cannot be sure that it will not emanate from an abstract system, no matter of what order or how formulated. Change here can be but the overcoming of nihilism—a designing out of a created wasteland (Fry, 2012, p. 114).

As both Tony Fry in this passage, and Charles Taylor in his work have argued, ‘Much of our deep past cannot be simply laid aside, not because of our “weakness”, but because there is something important and valuable in it’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 771). We cannot go back, but our future depends upon ontological learning from this alterity. Thus, from very different methodological approaches we have ended up in a similar place. However, from the perspective of the argument presented in this essay, it is not critique or an understanding of the secular which is central to meditating on what should be done. What is central is rather the question of how we are to negotiate different modes of being and their different valences. Responding to the immanent frame may be one small part of that process, but the larger task is working out what it means to be human. And that cannot be left to philosophers, historians of ideas or theologians alone.

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