

RE -INVENTING GOD

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INTRODUCTION

Today we are living in a world that is playing dice with its future. Economic rationalism, or economic fundamentalism as it is also called, whatever merits it may claim for enabling a more prosperous world, has helped to bring us to the brink of disaster with its singular vision that economic growth and development and the market are the solution to the world's needs. It has paid no attention to the fact that life is more than economics, that the earth's resources are finite, and especially that the human species is not independent of its natural environment.

This macro drive for growth and development as "God" is the source and motivator for individual greed and self-centredness that found its supreme expression in Maggie Thatcher's mantra that "There is no such thing as society".

Market economics and individual greed have brought us to the brink, where the natural environment which is our life-support system ("The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment") is about to spit us out through climate change which is set to become irreversible and which within 10 years will make this planet uninhabitable for the majority of us along with innumerable other species and biodiversity itself.

The lack of a moral compass or moral leadership in society (i.e. a concern for the "other" as much as for myself) is locking us in to social, economic and international systems that are so seductive that we fail to question or challenge this uncritical "worship" of economics. As a consequence we naively believe that all problems can be solved by the application of law and order, punishment, aggression and violence, rather than questioning the very systems that help to create the problems that beset us.

So, how can we help to make a better world ?

Does the Christian faith no longer speak intelligibly to our secular world ?

And if that is true, then in Bonhoeffer's words, "How can a Christian, who is himself a secular man, understand his faith in a secular way ?"

Is the decline of religion at the heart of the problem ? Are we in trouble because God is no longer at the centre of people's lives ?

Is there a future for religion and the Christian faith ?

Do we need to restore God to his rightful place in our lives, or is the God concept itself the biggest obstacle to making a better world ?

For much of my life I have believed that the answer to a better world is to be found in the Christian faith (including the church), but understood not as a focus on salvation from sin (though there is plenty to be saved from) but rather as "following Jesus of Nazareth".

Unfortunately the ethical insights of the Judeo-Christian faith, especially those of Jesus of Nazareth, have for too long been overlaid, and to a degree obscured, by their religious framework. At the heart of this religion is a theistic or literalist or realist view of God,

and the doctrine that we need to be saved from sin for "eternal" life - commonly misunderstood as everlasting life in heaven.

A more liberal, compassionate, ethical understanding of Christian faith unfortunately is fading and dying in the West, and religion everywhere is becoming more fundamentalist, aggressive and dangerous.

I am sad because the human species, the "peak" or "crown" of creation, is either ignorant of, or ignoring, the knowledge essential to the survival and well-being of our planet and ourselves. Instead, both in spiritualizing religion, and seeking refuge in the God idea, we are denying our capacity for both human insight and cooperation, and as a consequence are hell-bent on the destruction of both our planet and ourselves.

Is there a solution ? And if so, is it a religious one or a secular one ?

We have had some thousands of years of religion. At its best it has served to give humanity comfort in the face of ignorance and suffering, and has taught an ethical and compassionate way of living. But not only has it not brought us peace, harmony and well-being, but today in both West and East we find leaders claiming the authority of an external God as justification for their own interests and purposes.

In educated and democratic secular societies (what we call the Western world) religious ideas and organized religion are declining, and are seen to be largely irrelevant to our daily lives; even though, at their best, religions call for justice and compassion. Where religion persists it is increasingly confined to the personal and so-called "spiritual" dimensions of life, its language and ancient theology outdated and irrelevant. In the popular secular mind it is all about our "soul" and the afterlife and not about this world. So much is this true that when religions take a stand on issues of social justice and compassion they are told to stick to their core business of the spiritual life.

In less educated, undemocratic societies religious adherence is much more universal among the population, but most forms of religion are inimical to freedom, enlightenment and progress, and a justification for authoritarian regimes, just as they were for centuries in the West. Worse, in fundamentalist garb (widespread and popular), it represents a threat to the peace and security of the world. Anti-secular and anti-Western, it believes it is called by God to destroy what it believes to be evil.

In spite of a new focus on inter-faith dialogue and understanding, religion, instead of being a unifying and ethical force for good, is a vehicle for conflict and competition (our truth and our God versus yours).

The God concept and much orthodox theology has always presented difficulties for me, and this has increased with the passing years. It is, of course, central to the religious view of the world. For many it is increasingly an incredible or irrelevant concept, or both. Perhaps the God concept is not only inappropriate in a secular age, but may indeed be an obstacle rather than the solution to the problems facing our world.

In the course of examining the God concept I will look critically at its Christian form, and the relationship of Christian faith to its founding **hero**, Jesus of Nazareth. In that enquiry, modern scholarship suggests that what became Christian faith and church is in fact very close to the opposite of what its founding hero taught and lived.

So, is a solution possible, and where can we turn for hope and a way out of our dilemma ? There are two places to look that are secular rather than religious.

a) In a secular society our understanding/knowledge comes from secular, scientific enquiry, not belief systems. The critical areas for study are evolutionary biology, ecology and psychology.

b) The critical question therefore is an ethical one, not a religious one; not what should we believe, but what must we do ? how should we live ?

To address that question I believe we need a society or institution which exists specifically to nurture people in the ethical life, and to work for a society/world in which all of life is ethically based.

But before we take a look at ethics and the formation of an ethical society let us first take a brief excursion into the idea of God and the difference between religious and secular views of the world.

RE - INVENTING GOD

I wonder how many of us realize that humans have had to re-invent God many times throughout human history. The God idea began way back in the dawn of human history when our forebears sought to find explanations for both the natural world and the moral world. There seemed to be powers at work in life, which we could neither see nor understand, directing our destiny. We began, of course, with lots of gods, perhaps a god for rain, and one for sunshine, and one for thunder, and one for fertility, and so on.

These God traditions took many different directions. The Christian God, of course, comes directly out of the Hebrew tradition. By the time of the Hebrews they had whittled it down for them to one tribal god who seemed to be in competition with the gods of other neighbouring tribes, especially in war. In time, because they were successful in battle, they came to the view that their god was probably the only real and successful god, and the gods of other tribes and nations were just idols and hence powerless.

Gods seemed to this point in history to be all about power; so it payed to keep on-side if you wanted to be successful.

Then the Hebrew people began to come unstuck. Their earlier triumphs were replaced by a series of defeats, and occupation and or translocation into captivity by foreign powers - Syrians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and finally Romans.

So they re-invented their god - to match the times and circumstances.

But oddly their logic misfired at this point in their history. One could imagine them concluding that their God could no longer be relied upon to save them, and they would transfer their allegiance to the superior god of their conqueror. But because their god had been so good to them in the past, rather than doubt his power, they concluded that their suffering was because they had let him down. Indeed, he was punishing them through their defeats at the hands of foreign powers because they had failed as individuals and as a nation to live lives of justice and righteousness.

So they came to believe what their prophets had been telling them, that their God was a moral God who expected them to live morally, not only in their personal lives but in their national life. This morality was to be expressed in social justice, fairness and equality, and compassion for the poor and less fortunate.

The prophets knew that as a people they had not so lived, and therefore they interpreted their defeat by foreign powers as God's punishment. In other words the foreign god wasn't really powerful at all. Rather it was their God directing and using the foreign power to punish them for their sins. (This is largely where the Christian emphasis on sin and salvation comes from).

Unfortunately their religious leaders, ignoring the insights of the prophets, insisted that the way back into God's favour was by stringently fulfilling the religious and priestly demands of their faith - religious observances, purity requirements, sacrificial offerings and temple taxes.

In time, after many centuries, during the Roman occupation, there arose among them in the rebellious lawless countryside of Galilee a man called Joshua (Jesus, in the Greek). He reminded them that their God was better than they gave him credit for. Sure he was a just God, but above all he was a compassionate God as some of their prophets had taught them. He had made a covenant with them. He would look after all of them, just and unjust alike. He was in fact a forgiving God, and generous and compassionate to a fault. He would love them in spite of their failures, and keep on loving them till he won back their loyalty and love.

The way back into God's favour was not therefore a matter of meeting religious requirements, but in God-like behaviour - that is in generous and compassionate love towards those who could not earn it or deserve it, but whose need was greatest.

But once again this re-emphasis of their prophets' view of their God was to fall on deaf ears. Instead of focusing on the *moral* requirements of their faith they believed that if they were faithful in their *religious* requirements God would save them and restore their national sovereignty. They were keen on the restoration of national sovereignty, but not through the path of social justice !!!

After many centuries of subjugation by foreign powers and waiting for God to save them, rather than re-inventing God, a small number of them broke from their religion and re-invented it, (or rather recovered its prophetic heart) declaring allegiance to this Joshua. Joshua broke with the religious leaders of the day, insisting that God wasn't interested in their religious requirements but in justice and compassion, the ethical dimensions of their faith. This was the beginning of Christianity - a reform movement among Jews.

Within a few decades of Joshua's death on a Roman cross some of his followers decided to re-invent God so as to incorporate this extraordinary man into their understanding of God, or perhaps more correctly ,to see their God at work in a special way in the life of this man. Perhaps this compassionate God had himself somehow been present in the man Joshua, perhaps he was the messiah, or Joshua himself was the image or incarnation of the invisible God.

A few centuries later came Constantine, the Roman general who became Emperor and a Christian as a result of a battle in which he won the imperial crown, he believed, by putting his trust in the Christian God.

At the time there were a number of views among Christians as to the nature of God and whether the man Jesus was somehow God. Constantine wanted a unified church and empire, so a unified view of God was essential, and so God was re-invented and re-defined as a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now this God was still a God of power, a God who controlled the world and kept us all in line, and who intervened as required in history and in our lives; a God who was running

the show. His primary interest was our sins, well let's say our goodness, and so because we really couldn't stop sinning He was re-invented as a God who fixed the sin problem forever by letting his incarnate Son suffer for us, take our punishment upon himself. All we had to do was believe and repent and all would be well.

And because the Roman Empire and the Christian church became co-terminus, so to speak, under Constantine and his successors, it wasn't necessary or possible to re-define or re-invent the Christian view of God for over 1000 years.

Not long after Constantine codified Christian faith, a Bedouin tribal leader called Mohammed decided it was time to re-invent God again. God told him that there was only one God, (he liked the Jewish God even though his own tribe worshipped many gods). Therefore the Christian idea of God as Trinity or as incarnate in the man Jesus was wrong, because certainly a man couldn't be God.) So Mahommed introduced his (re-invented) new image of God which was once again to emphasize God's jealous power and his arbitrary justice which would be exercised on whom he will. This view of God also was authoritatively imposed, and like the Christian one has remained unchanged up to the present day.

About 500 years ago came the beginnings of modern science, and with it the inevitable challenge to religious ideas and so-called religious truth and the other-worldly authority (namely God) who was the source of this truth and authority. With science came the European Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. It slowly became clear to many that God wasn't doing and saying much that was attributed to him, and that scientific method and the power of reason were leading us to new understandings of our world, rather than the so-called "revelation" of truth by God, mediated by priests and religion.

Either God would have to go, or we would need to re-invent him in a form that didn't do violence to science and reason.

For a while, in response to scientific evolutionary theory, God was re-invented in what is called deistic terms. That is, sure, God was the creator of it all, but he then left the creation to itself and to us for its day to day running. God is like a clock-maker. He made the world, like a clock, wound it up, and left it to keep running on its own via the evolutionary process, etc. I'm not sure whether God's power was thereby diminished, or whether he just withdrew in our favour.

However, before long the theistic view of God re-surfaced. You can see why. It is pretty terrifying to be left alone to run the world - that's a lot of responsibility !

OK we said, science hasn't dismissed God. It's rather that he uses scientifically understood ways to run the world. We just need to up-date and modernize our understanding. God didn't make the world in six days. That is just a story that declares God as creator; the details are not to be taken literally. Obviously God creates through evolutionary processes, and so on, and continues to intervene in creation and in our lives to carry out his plan for the world.

There were, of course, those at the time of the Enlightenment, and since, who asked us to consider whether an idea that regularly needs re-defining and re-inventing to match the times, may perhaps have passed its use-by date. Perhaps the God idea served well enough for unenlightened times, but maybe it's time to give it up and move on. Again, that prospect proved to be too demanding and too daunting.

Nevertheless, God was in big trouble. Increasingly people began to lose interest in him. You could ignore him and life seemed to go on much the same. He was obviously a pretty indulgent guy. Anyway, the rich and powerful seemed to be his friends and supporters, so for many that was a good enough reason to leave religion to them. And if perchance you do need him you can always try a bit of prayer when in real trouble or do a death-bed repentance act and all will be well.

But science went on giving us more and more answers, and God seemed to play no significant role in our everyday lives, so he became restricted to an interest in our souls and our personal and spiritual lives. So the great majority went on living their lives without reference to him (or Her, by this time.)

One of the huge problems with attributing the creative process to God is how to account for the problem of suffering and evil in the world. Theologians say that it is an inevitable accompaniment of free will. What do you think?

Our universe throughout its history has been characterized by immense indiscriminate suffering which has nothing to do with free will but is the result of natural causes. To ascribe such a world to a loving God makes no real sense at all. On the other hand, such suffering is entirely consistent with a universe that has struggled for aeons of time through an evolutionary process of chance variation and natural selection and survival of the fittest. If the only way God can give us freedom and moral choice is to condemn the cosmos to thousands of years of mindless suffering, at least for sentient beings, undeserved for many, if not most, then we must surely reject Her, or the view that there is an intelligent loving reality behind it all.

As the modern world became more educated and hence more secular significant intellectuals asked whether She belonged at all in our modern world, and whether we could get along quite well without Her. Her followers could see that perhaps the writing was on the wall; at least the scientific and intellectual wall, if not the church wall.

Time then to re-invent Her to match the realities of our modern or post-modern world.

So it was decided that perhaps the ideas of God and power don't go together. God doesn't seem to have much power, or at least doesn't exercise it. Quantum physics appears to explain the sub-atomic, sub-particle physical world; perhaps God is like that - an unseen spiritual energy that energizes and explains the spiritual world.

So some philosophers and theologians have attempted to save the God idea for us by inventing "process thought" and "panentheism". This is the idea that God is not a separate being, but that God interpenetrates all of life. God is in everything, and everything is in God.

God is indeed powerless. She is not only the life-force, but indeed the Love-force, not intervening in or determining our lives, but as Persuasive Love calling forth our response to Her to be the best that we can be. However, it is not made clear how the life-force becomes the Love-force, as if love is some spiritual energy that exists in the universe apart from its active expression in us.

God is certainly getting squeezed out of the picture. The panentheist re-invention makes Her seem even less relevant or useful. Now She has no power to help us, only to persuade or inspire. It is all up to us.

Oh dear ! We are back to that again ! The prospect of having to do it all ourselves, of coping with our own lives and the world without heavenly assistance, of having full responsibility for our own future, is just too daunting.

If I can't have a theistic powerful personal God, He or She might as well be dead !

Perhaps (s)he is !!!

But in most local churches the above discussion hasn't even been heard !

IS GOD A PERSON ?

For the last few centuries there have been a number of eminent theologians and philosophers who came to the conclusion that God is dead, or if you prefer, that the God idea was dying. On the other hand many hung on to the God concept but sought to redefine it. The idea of God as a person like us who intervened in our lives was becoming no longer intelligible. So God isn't a person then, well not a real person like us with a body. Is that right ? Yes, that's right. Theologians generally would agree about that.

This very common view of God as a person is that he is a Supreme Being or Supreme Personal Being, or ultimate Spiritual Being or reality. This idea of God is of a Being who thinks, feels, wills, and acts in both creation and redemption. He made the world (and the universe) and he keeps it going; and he intervenes from time to time if we need his help and if we are faithful, especially in prayer. And when we die we return to the God who gave us life.

If we think of God in this outdated personal or theistic way as a "Supreme personal Being" or "Spirit", what do those words mean ?

A "person" means usually a human being as distinct from other beings such as animals, i.e. a self-conscious or rational being. So, when we think of God as personal we see him as like us, but without a human body, and of course supreme in intelligence and power and every other personal characteristic.

And God as a "being" or as "being itself", what does that mean ? To be is simply to exist. So being means existence, a living thing, or life, especially conscious existence.

So this idea of God sees him as a living conscious reality like us. But a "spiritual being" without a body. A conscious, incorporeal being, a spiritual animating life-force in the world and in us.

But today we no longer think like that, and most modern theologians reject that idea of God. There is just no evidence for some reality in us or in the universe that is non-material or so-called spiritual. The life-force in us is wholly material, a chemical cellular process, and our consciousness and self-consciousness is a function of our brain. To speak of a spirit or soul or spiritual world or non-material realities is a carry-over from the past when we could not explain what made us alive or why things happened, whether personal illness or accident or the forces of nature. Today we have other and better explanations for the natural world and how it works, and for the things that go right and wrong in our lives.

So, while the idea of a personal God, a supreme spiritual being, is for many personally comforting and a simple explanation for all those things the average non-scientific person can't explain, it is a concept and a language that no longer refers to anything real in us or in our world.

As one might expect, people still talk today about "spiritual" things or "spirituality" as if we all know what is meant, because they want to talk about what they think of as the non-material aspects of life, like goodness, truth and love. But this is unfortunate and misleading because it suggests that there is a non-material dimension to life when there is not. All of life is material. There is nothing that is not. When we talk of a spiritual dimension to life we are really referring to values, or rather what we could call "positive" values. For example, goodness and love refer to a positive relationship between people, how we feel towards others or how we act towards others. Love isn't some independent spiritual reality or force at work in life and the world; it is something we do, and our feelings that accompany or drive that action.

So, you might think then that people would give up the idea of God, since in its traditional or theistic form it refers to nothing objectively real. But for most in the community at large they are not aware of the incongruence between our new understanding of the world and the idea of God. For them God is taken for granted as part of our cultural heritage (or baggage), but since he plays little or no part in their lives, his reality or otherwise is not an issue.

It is the same too for most religious or church people unfortunately. Their leaders (ministers and priests), by and large, have not enlightened them about the problem of a theistic God.

And what about these leaders themselves, and the theologians who tell us that a theistic understanding of God is no longer credible? Well, for them, God of course is their business. And if the traditional theistic understanding of God is no longer credible, then either they are out of a job, or there is a need to redefine the meaning of God. A few have taken the brave and logical course, but most have decided that the God idea is too important to lose (or their jobs and the God-institution are), and so they have worked hard to re-define or explain God or put new meaning into the concept.

And how successful have they been?

Well, if you examine their preaching and prayers, their language and liturgies, very little if anything seems to have changed. And if their conceptualization of God has changed, their congregations it would seem are largely unaware of it.

And how is this new understanding of God expressed?

For the most part it is expressed in language that talks about the sacred, or transcendent, or holy, or similar. And those who use this language would seem to be unaware that these words do not refer to another realm or dimension of reality, but are value words, just like the word "spiritual".

For some, instead of seeing God as a separate Being or Supreme Being, he is understood as the "Ground of our Being", i.e. the basis of our existence. This is further spelt out in the re-definition of God that has had the most wide-spread appeal which is called pan-**en**-theism, as opposed to theism, a concept based on what is called process philosophy. This means that God is not a being, but the "life-force" as it were that gives life to all existence or being; "god" is **in** everything and everything is **in** "god". In this way the

concepts of "creator" and "redeemer" and purpose in creation are retained. Thus this life is not some arbitrary chance existence, but there is a life-force, indeed a love-force, at work in life, calling us forth to the fullest expression of our being or existence.

As we have already seen, however, while there is evidence for a life-force at work in the universe, there is no evidence that it resembles "God" in any way, or that there are any grounds for describing it as a Love-force, or that it has any objective reality apart from the material cellular life of which it is a part.

Does it matter if the idea of God is no longer credible or appropriate for us ?

If we retain whatever positive value concepts were associated with the God idea and leave behind the now unacceptable concept of an external reality which is the source and embodiment of these values and the energising force to bring them to birth and sustain them in our lives, then we are free to embody these values in our lives in a way that is coherent and consistent with our contemporary knowledge of life.

But before we move on, let me illustrate the dilemma of modern Christian leaders and scholars as they try to deal constructively with the God concept in our post-modern secular world.

Bishop John Shelby Spong has written a number of brilliant books which helpfully reinterpret and explain Scripture and Christian theology in a way that people without academic training can readily grasp. But when it comes to the God concept he cannot let this go, and his attempts to express it in panentheistic terms prove unsatisfactory, as they inevitably must.

On his web site newsletter he is asked a question about his understanding of God as non-theistic, that is as non-supernatural, non-interventionist, not an external or objective reality. Spong says elsewhere that his view of God is panentheistic, that is that God is in everything and everything is in God. God is the spiritual life-force, indeed Love force that interpenetrates all of life.

In this newsletter he answers thus:

We do not and cannot know who God is.
We do not know how God acts.

We can only talk about what we *believe* (my emphasis) to be our experience of God. Spong believes he "encounters a transcendent other", and that in that encounter he "experiences expanded life, increased ability to love, and a new dimension of what it means to be."

He deduces therefore that God is the "source" or "ground" in him of this fuller living, loving and being.

For some unexplained reason he describes this as the "mystery" of God, or "ultimate mystery".

Now all of this language and this interpretation of his experience runs contrary to the secular, scientific world and culture he otherwise embraces.

Further, while at one point he confesses that he has less and less beliefs about God, yet this whole explanation is, he says, what he *believes* to be true. Believing (at least of this kind) is not an appropriate activity for secular people.

His explanation is surely a classic circular argument. He begins with a concept of God in order to explain an experience that has no necessary connection with God, but which he decides to call an experience of God. He must have a pre-conceived notion of God to begin with - that a reality called God exists and is by definition the source of life, love and being. But he insists we cannot know who God is or how he acts; but apparently we can know that he is. How ?

In a secular world we can give other equally or more plausible explanations for his experience. The sources of living, loving and being are not a mystery. Our being is genetically and sexually sourced.. Our living and loving is the result of the response of our genetically inherited characteristics to the quality and quantity of nurturing and acculturation that we receive.

Furthermore there are many who seek this experience and cannot access it, and there are many who experience quality life, love and being without any belief in a "transcendent" source of these.

Spong doesn't elucidate how, why or when this experience occurs. Is it something he seeks or induces by focusing upon it, or by meditation or what? Or is it something he experiences all the time?

What if anything does it add to the reality or value of the experience to call it an experience of God ?

Isn't this description of his experience, by calling it an experience of God, doing exactly what he is denying, namely objectifying God as an external reality, apart from his experience, indeed the "source" of his experience ?

It is almost a kind of theism - a 'personal' being who invokes in us life, love and being. In fact only a personal being could invoke love in us, since love is a quality or act of persons.

To take our language seriously neither life, love nor being exist apart from their expression in each of us and other living things. They are generic terms and concepts to describe a reality that is or can be present in all of us, but has no existence apart from us.

Spong's approach unconsciously reflects the dualism of Plato, - the existence of ideal "forms" of what we experience - but Spong and others call the ideal form of life, love and being, God.

Isn't the heart of Christian faith that we can know and experience whatever is meant by "God" in the man Jesus ? Is this where Spong's God concept comes from ? But of course we can recognise in the man Jesus life, love and being in their fulness, without identifying a source for these, other than his parents, his upbringing, and the other

influences in his life including his Jewish religious values and especially the great Jewish prophetic tradition..

RELIGION AS MYTHOLOGY

All religion is mythological. Religion is the attempt to explain the natural world and the moral world, the reality of good and evil in our lives.

And because to early humans the world and the experience of good and evil were inexplicable to them in natural terms it seemed logical and necessary to believe that supernatural forces and sources were at work here.

Mythology is the attempt to express truth about life in the form of story (or symbol or metaphor). We take the big issues and unknowns of our lives and weave a story about them in which the key values and problems are personified.

The characters are usually larger than life and possess unusual or superhuman powers. We have Mr Good and Mr Evil and Mr Ordinary Man who in his journey through life encounters these personified powers.

We are familiar with the great sagas of the Iliad and the Aeneid, the Bible, Milton's Paradise Lost, and Lord of the Rings. If not those, then perhaps we have read Harry Potter.

When we read a story like "Lord of the Rings" we know the story is about something real in life and in our lives; our real experiences of good and evil, and our struggle to do the good. But we do not believe that the characters in the story really existed or the plot really happened. Why then with religious mythology do we think the characters are real and the theological story really took place in history ?

In religious mythology or story, God, of course, is the central character and the central myth.

And while in the modern and post-modern era we are slowly deconstructing and re-interpreting religious mythology, we still cling tenaciously to the reality of the story's central character, to the central mythology, to the God idea. We still want to believe in some "transcendent" reality or some "ultimate" first cause beyond the natural world, or if not, then within nature.

This shows how deeply the Western world is still captive to Platonic philosophy - whereby we continue to believe that all human or natural experiences, realities and ideas are but expressions or pale copies of ideal forms or realities which exist beyond our human experience of them. e.g there is some reality called "love" out there, and some reality called "evil", rather than recognizing that these words are generic descriptions or labels for things we do, or experiences that happen to us.

People who stand within the Christian tradition derive their God concept largely from Hebrew and early Christian sources, especially as these are known in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Some pagan ideas mixed with Greek philosophical ideas were added in the first few centuries of the Christian church.

Central to the Judeo-Christian idea of God is unequivocally the concept of love,

understood as justice and righteousness (and righteousness means benevolence and salvation). He is also the creator of all that is.

So when the early Christians looked for a way of explaining the uniqueness of their leader, Jesus of Nazareth, one whose life and teaching exemplified love for others in the sense of compassion seeking justice and righteousness, they talked about him as the Son of God, meaning a God-like man, and later as the incarnation of God or God dwelling fully in a human life.

Compassion, justice, benevolence and salvation are our deepest human needs and longed- for experiences; fundamental human values. So it is entirely understandable that we should ascribe these to our God, and that we should see this God in theistic and personal terms because our experience of love is an experience of persons.

Today, in a post-modern secular, scientific world, theism, the idea of a personal God, is widely rejected among leading theologians as a rational acceptable understanding of God. But most religious people continue to cling to a theistic understanding of the ancient God-idea while some seek a new contemporary content for it. What is seldom done is to adopt the obvious conclusion - that the Judeo-Christian God concept points not to a personal being with the qualities or nature of love (justice and righteousness), or to some love- force interpenetrating all of life (a panentheistic God) but to those very qualities or values themselves (love as justice and righteousness) as the pinnacle of human experience, need and endeavour,

Instead of drawing the obvious and logical conclusion we desperately seek to find a way to hold on to God as some other form of external reality, but re-defined in contemporary philosophical or scientific terms. So we look to quantum mechanics and cosmology for clues, or to process philosophy and its panentheistic view of God as the life-force that brings the creation into being, and lures it into fulfilment as it interpenetrates everything that exists.

But unlike the theistic concept of God as personal, this new concept has no basis whatever for retaining the nature and being of God as Love. Love (as compassion, justice and righteousness) cannot be derived from nor be the property of a panentheistic or cosmological life-force. We know indeed from science that this life-force is in fact the very opposite. The forces that have brought the universe and life into being are blind, indifferent, heartless, without any noble purpose other than life itself and genetic survival. The life-force has been the author of chance outcomes and mindless, purposeless suffering, as well as cosmic marvels and intricate life-forms. There is no salvation or moral impulse in the "wow" factor. That is art and emotion, not ethics.

So the choice we have is either the old God of justice and righteousness (the personal theistic God), or the values of justice and righteousness themselves to which the ancient God metaphor and myth has always pointed.

This failure to recognize the God-word as a symbol, i.e. as a label for a class of experiences, actions, values identified in our language by generic terms such as goodness, truth and love, leads to all the problems associated with theism, and with its panentheistic and cosmological replacements.

The principal problem is that as a result we focus attention on the idealized, concretized value (we worship God) instead of the action/experience to which it points.

To take one case in point. The central Christian value of forgiveness is addressed in relation to an objective God whom we are supposed to have offended (we seek his forgiveness), instead of to the action of forgiving others who have offended us, or of seeking the forgiveness of those we have hurt or offended.

One other casualty of the move from a personal God to a panentheistic or cosmological God is that Jesus of Nazareth is so often downgraded from God incarnate (God expressing himself in our human flesh) to simply a Wisdom teacher or holy man or prophet. To leave Jesus behind merely as a Jewish holy man because we can no longer accept a theistic incarnation is to miss the central point about Jesus, that he is nonetheless the incarnation of what the God-word points to, love as compassion, justice and righteousness.

Furthermore, while there is no salvation in or through the panentheistic, cosmological God (life-force), there is salvation in a life dedicated to love as justice and righteousness as we see it modelled and lived and hence defined in human terms in the man from Nazareth. To use the language of the Nazarene himself, to live in "God's Kingdom" is to be saved from sin as self-centredness by being caught up in the service of others, i.e. living the life of "Godness" defined and lived in Jesus. This is the Jesus of the early decades of the Christian story rather than the later interpretations of him as the God-man, the crucified and risen Saviour of the world that we find in the New Testament and the credal affirmations that were to follow. The evidence for the remarkable recent scholarship that confirms this is the subject of a later chapter.

SPIRITUALITY AND THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF LIFE

Religion is understood by most people as being about the "spiritual" dimension of life. And one of the principal reasons for belief in religion or so-called spiritual experiences today is the same as in the beginning of human experience. That is, to the degree that people do not fully understand some aspects of life and experience, especially if they are very important to them, they assume, exactly as primitive people did, that there must be a non-material reality or world beyond the physical, but interpenetrating it.

Experiences that suggest a non-material or spiritual dimension to life include the following :
Consciousness and our capacity for self-consciousness seem to suggest a non-material reality. What is the self ? Do we have a soul ?

The experience of love seems to be a non-material reality. We know that love gives us life, and its absence diminishes or even destroys life.

What about values and the moral sense ? Surely good and evil, truth, kindness, co-operation, honesty, are not natural to us, are not material things, but come from some spiritual realm.

Our response of wonder and awe to art, music, beauty, the natural world, and to mystery, seems to suggest a dimension of reality beyond the material.

Take love, for example. Love is not something we can see, touch, handle. But if we ask how we experience love we come to understand that the word is a generic term or concept which is used to classify or describe actions of persons towards other persons that can be experienced as caring or affirming. It may also refer to the class of feelings or the motivation that lies behind or accompanies these actions. In fact, "Love" has no reality other than its expression in the material/physical actions of a person towards another person.

Consciousness itself, and especially self-consciousness, is another example. Most people who have not studied the matter conclude that our bodies and brain have within them something that directs them called the self. Who am I ? Am I just a body, like an animal, or do I have within me a self or soul ?

Dissect the body and the self cannot be found. Therefore it must be a non-material reality.

As such it seems likely that it may survive the death of the body, and perhaps even exist before the body's birth. So we must really be spiritual beings, temporarily housed in a material body, and therefore there is a spiritual world, and the chief spiritual being is God.

And of course we are pre-disposed to adopt such an explanation because of our cultural heritage. These concepts and words are deeply embedded in our history, our language, and our discourse. Furthermore, these values and experiences do not seem to be subject to scientific testing or proof - another reason for assuming they are of a different order from material things.

So we have leading thinkers talking about mind and consciousness in this way (e.g, Bede Griffith). Leading physicist Paul Davies talks about the possibility of cosmic mind or intelligence. Charles Birch (biologist and theologian) talks about the universe as purposeful. What is happening here is that we look at the material world with our pre-existing language

and concepts that derive from a pre-scientific era. We observe something that looks like or fits our concept of mind or intelligence or purpose or God.

On the contrary, a secular scientific approach to life starts from a different point. Scientific *method* is how we discover truth. It proceeds through observation, hypotheses and testing. If the hypothesis doesn't stand up to testing it must be rejected and a new hypothesis developed from more careful observation that is consistent with our tested knowledge.

What we know today (as a result of using scientific method) is that consciousness (being alive and aware of our surroundings) and self-consciousness (being alive, aware of our surroundings and aware of oneself as an entity differentiated from our surroundings) are functions of a brain, and self-consciousness is a function of a brain that has developed to the degree of complexity that is characteristic of human brains.

Brains are electronic nerve centres receiving impulses from external and internal receptors (eyes, ears, nerves, etc) with huge storage capacity and the mechanism for manipulating the data received. They are very like computers.

Non-human animals have more primitive brains. These brains can :
visualize (retain images of the outside world),
memorize (store the images),
recognize (match the reality to the stored image, i.e.recall).

But while most non-human animals have a brain, they do not have a "mind". That is a *concept* word in our language which refers to the capacity for *thinking*. Most animals don't and can't think about the things they record in their brains, except in very limited ways for some. Why is that ? Thinking, the principal activity of what we mean by "mind", is a function of *language*. So, mind is a word or concept that is used to describe the functioning of a brain that only becomes possible with the development of language.

Now many non-human animals have some elements of language (and hence "mind").
Language is "sounds with meanings".

e.g. birds and other animals have at least four "words" (sounds).

Sound A = Danger

Sound B = Food - come here

Sound C = Look at me - I'm ready to copulate

Sound D = Get out - this is my territory

But this is about the limit. This is language for *communication*, rather than language for *thinking*.

Let us think for a moment about human language.

Humans, for example, use *concrete* nouns and *abstract* nouns, and herein lies the problem of projecting a non-material dimension of reality.

We use terms like mind, soul, spirit, God without thinking or question because they are taken-for-granted parts of our language and culture. They appear to be "concrete" nouns.

They come from our unscientific past in which it was assumed that they referred to "concrete" realities.

Let's consider some examples which illustrate the problem:

"Legs" are a concrete reality, and the word "legs" is a concrete noun..

But "running" is a function/activity of legs, and is an abstract noun.

"Hands" are a concrete reality. But "clapping" is a function of hands, and is therefore an abstract noun.

"Brain" is a concrete reality. "Thinking" (or "Mind") is a function or activity of brains, and hence is an abstract noun.

So, when we go looking for running or clapping or thinking, or for good or evil, we will not find anything concrete, or physically real or material. These are activities or functions or values or feelings of concrete realities. They are events or processes, to use the language of process philosophy, but they are not to be thought of as immaterial or spiritual or indeed mysterious.

What we know from science today is that there is nothing known in the universe that is not material. Energy seems to be immaterial, just as steam does. But energy and matter are two forms of the same material entity.

Water and steam are two forms of the same material entity. There is nothing known to science that is not a form of matter/energy.

As to the possibility of a reality called God who thinks, feels, wills, loves, all these are the properties or activities of living persons, and all are the activities of a physical brain in a physical body. Science knows nothing of the possibility of thinking or loving apart from a material brain, and nothing of a brain apart from a material body.

WHAT IS A SECULAR SOCIETY ?

So, if religion is largely obscurantist and a threat to our world, and the God idea either incredible or irrelevant (theism), or without substance and meaningful justification (panentheism), to what can we turn for our salvation in a modern secular world ?

First, let us try to clarify what is meant by a secular world or society.

Secular means of this world, as opposed to some spiritual or religious world or world view. A society in which knowledge is based on scientific enquiry.

Secularization refers to an historical process by which a society moves from religious control or authority to secular authority based on reason and science.

Negatively, it is the withdrawal of areas of life and activity from religious control and the so-called authority of revealed religious truth.

Positively, it is the assertion of the competence and freedom of men and women and of science knowledge to seek and find the truth about life and to successfully handle human and physical problems of all kinds.

In many respects "secular civilization is the disinterested pursuit of human welfare." [Dr John Mackay, at the Jerusalem meeting of the International Missionary Council (1928)].

Religious states/nations have tended to require submission of all aspects of life to religious truth and authority.

Secular states/nations (where democratic) guarantee human freedoms across all aspects of life, including religious belief and practice, provided those practices do not impinge on other people's freedoms.

Many of the world's great religions are suspicious of and hostile towards secularization . They see the secular as a denial of God and his authority over all of life which characterises all pre-secular societies. So they tend to endorse and sanctify the status quo, because it appears to be the creation and will of the gods, or the inevitable outcome of destiny or fate or reincarnation; or they stress the illusory and impermanent nature of this world, with the result that the goal of life becomes detachment and escape from this world and all material things. In this context social and physical change is contrary to religious belief.

Christian fundamentalism approximates this view on the basis that God has a plan for this world and he is in charge of and responsible for everything. Therefore to take social or political action is to interfere in God's plan. Our life in this world is to achieve salvation of our soul for a better world. This world is just the theatre for that process.

On the other hand Christian religion or faith, properly understood, has in fact been one of the major influences leading to secularization. This is so because of Christianity's doctrine of God as Creator and its Incarnational theology. (God takes on our human flesh in Jesus.) Hence the Judeo-Christian view of God leads to the conclusion that this world

and this life are good and are to be enjoyed because they are the creation of a good God and are the object of his love.

His incarnation in the life and death of the man Jesus is the supreme demonstration of God's love for and commitment to the material world and man's freedom for the fullness of life in this world of God's creation.

The scientific revolution and the accompanying intellectual revolution of the European Enlightenment (18th Century) have been the other principal influences . "The desacralizing of nature is the pre-condition for the development of a vigorous science and technology." (Newbiggin, "Honest Religion for Secular Man", p.33.)

The Christian Gospel in fact claims to be the end of religion (and the end of law) because it is not about life lived under God's authority or religious authority, but about life lived by faith and love (in God's Kingdom).

Secularism . The words secular and secularism are often confused. Secularism is the doctrine, theory, system, practice, belief that rejects all forms of religious faith, authority and worship, or especially their introduction into civil life, in particular education, politics ethics, etc.

or, a theory or attitude that denies the existence or significance of realities other than those which can be measured or ascertained by the methods of natural science.

or, a way of life or interpretation of life that includes only the natural order of things, and denies that God and/or a spiritual realm are necessary for life or thought.

But, in spite of the fact that typically Western democratic societies are secular, and formal participation in religion is low and declining, religious ideas still permeate thought and language and especially the popular mind.

God and/or spiritual realities are assumed by many to exist, though for most they do not actively impinge on people's lives. Why is this so ?

We have already referred to the serious decline of religion in "Western" societies, i.e. those societies characterized by universal education, democracy (based on individual autonomy), a scientific world view, and materialism. In those societies the "God" concept has ceased to have any meaningful currency. Among neither the churchd nor the unchurchd does it bear much resemblance to the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Among the unchurchd it seems to refer to an indulgent creator-father figure, located in some "spiritual" realm, who takes no interest in this world, except to provide for us. We encounter him only in the next world, after death.

Among the churchd, if conservative, it refers to an all-powerful creator-redeemer figure, who is primarily interested in our personal behaviour, and who saves us from our sins. He is not at all interested in society, nor does he expect us to be, for he is working out his great Plan which is beyond this life, and there is nothing we can do about it. Among more liberal Christians it commonly refers either to the power of Love at work in the world, or a spiritual power/ reality with whom we can communicate or commune, and this power was incarnate in the man Jesus.

These lingering God concepts are not seen to be in conflict with scientific knowledge, nor are they supported by this knowledge. For some, science can be said to demonstrate and reveal the awesome design and energy of a Cosmic Intelligence.

This science-based God concept is conceived basically as the Life-force at work behind and in and through all creation, energizing all living things, and drawing creation / life towards its fulfilment. (Behind this image is quantum mechanics and biology, and its philosophical counterpart process thought.)

It is not clear why it is thought helpful to relate the God concept to the scientific reality of a life-force or creative energy in the universe, and how this helps us in any way, or adds anything to our understanding or motivation. It is also not clear whether or how one can attribute any moral dimension or moral purpose to a Life-force or Cosmic Intelligence / Mind.

If it is the element of awe and wonder we seek to retain, attaching God to science makes it no more wonderful, perhaps less so.

Secular Western society seems to live its life as if God, any kind of God, doesn't exist. To the extent he is acknowledged, his reality would seem to be accepted simply because it has always been so. He is part of the world view we have inherited and accepted from the past, and because he makes no difference to our daily lives we have had no reason to question or reject him.

In a pre-scientific era, man's belief in God is understandable. In a scientific era, however, it would seem that we are reluctant to let the concept go, even though it plays no significant role in our lives, and is no longer needed to explain the many aspects of life we once could not explain. And liberal religious people, even though rejecting the old theistic view of a personal super-being, cling still to the God word or concept lest we lose something of ultimate value and significance, opting rather for some new definition or interpretation or image that does not seem to conflict with but rather reflects our scientific world-view.

Historically the God concept began as a natural enough way for primitive people to explain the powers of nature and the vicissitudes of life which to them were inexplicable. In time they also came to ascribe to this power the moral imperatives and forces which they recognized at work in their personal, communal and national lives. Good and evil had also to be explained.

Religious leaders today bemoan the fact that with the replacement of a religious world-view by secularism society is characterized by moral decay. There are several responses to that view:

There is plenty of evidence that moral decay has always been characteristic of all societies at all times. Even if moral behaviour in religious times could be shown to be superior to now, is it possible to assert it was because of love of God among the masses, or was it engendered rather by fear of God? Fear of God for the majority today is simply not an option in an educated, modern society, nor is it ethically acceptable. What in fact characterizes modern society is not merely secularism or the loss of religion, but materialism. Materialism does not imply the loss of religion, but the getting and

spending and consuming and possessing that is the child of technological advance. Lavish materialism also existed in the past alongside of religion, but only for the few wealthy and powerful.

Science and technology have freed us from a religious world view and a religious control of life, but at the same time freed us for living for self and self indulgence. If we want to turn the clock back to religious faith, it is not prayer and preaching that will do it, but only by reversing science and technology. That of course is not an option. So we must find a new basis for the ethical life, not in returning to images from the past, but in the new knowledge itself that science and psychology have given us.

The principal attraction of religion to its adherents throughout history can be described as its provision of comfort, hope and purpose in the midst of life which so often has been and still is without those elements essential to our human well-being.

For most of history, poverty, physical and mental suffering and a short life-span have characterized life for the majority, and still do so for the majority today in third world countries. In those situations one's life found and still finds security in one's community and its culture and religion.

Today, in Western societies, community and even family are absent from most people's lives. Individualism and materialism are the marks of advanced consumer-based societies. People and personal relationships are subservient to one's own well-being, personal goals, ambition and greed. Human values such as the worth of persons (and indeed of the worth of the biosphere), acceptance of all, sharing, caring, and the common good are consequently diminished or lost. And with the loss of belief in God we have not yet found another source for purpose, meaning and security in our lives.

The answer is not a return to the past, but a rejection of materialism as a basis for the goal, meaning and purpose of life. Rather, we must find ways to rediscover mutual dependence or interdependence, and the central value of relationships and community as fundamental to human existence. Meaning and purpose will be found both in those relationships and in having a worthwhile, valued and therefore meaningful role in life and within the community to which we belong.

The answer for me is to be found in what I call ethical ecology or ecological ethics. But before we come to that let us take a closer look at the uneasy relationship between science and religion.

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

At the heart of a secular society is the conviction that the truth about life is not something revealed by a God through religions and their sacred books, but to be arrived at by rational thought and the scientific method.

So, should religious "truths" be subject to scientific scrutiny, or are they different fields of enquiry subject to different standards of proof ?

How do we reconcile the concept of a loving creator God with the evidence of evolutionary biology - i.e. aeons of slow evolution based on chance mutations and natural selection, and life characterized by survival of the fittest, a vast food chain, and enormous wastefulness and suffering ?

Is there a purpose in life and in creation ?

Scientific knowledge has been challenging so-called religious truths from as far back as Copernicus and Galileo, but the overarching authority of the church was able to keep these troublesome heretics in line. However, with the publication of Charles Darwin's "The Origin of Species" the dam wall burst, and the tide of scientific knowledge that was pouring forth almost overwhelmed the church. So the church began to find ways of accommodating and even embracing this new knowledge. Evolutionary theory, they soon came to say, did not contradict the Biblical creation story, but rather spelt out the detail of how God went about it all. Later, the more liberal theologians were able to assert that the Biblical creation stories were never intended to be understood as scientific accounts, but were theological affirmations about God as creator told in the mythological or story form appropriate to religious truth.

It is even more true today that science is no longer seen by many Christians as the opponent of religion or at least of intelligent religion. It is, however, and ought to be, the opponent of fundamentalist faith in all its forms. Rather, science is now the happy hunting ground for those who would seek a contemporary and intelligent basis for their faith, and especially for an understanding of God. And physics seems to be the science par excellence in this endeavour. Recent books on science and religion have focussed principally on the physical sciences, and especially physics and cosmology as the keys to the way forward. To a much lesser extent biology and ecology have received some, but not much attention.

This concentration on the physical sciences as support for religion is, I believe, seriously flawed, indeed a sort of blind alley. The physical sciences, especially physics and cosmology, are certainly relevant in providing the knowledge base to free us from the myths and superstitions of the past based on incorrect understandings of the world and the cosmos. But they cannot take us forward to new insights about religion. This is a false trail. Just as the Bible is not about science, so scientific knowledge cannot be made to produce theological insights.

Some leading scientists who are also Christians see science as confirming faith in a wonderful creator God. The theologically liberal ones see evidence of cosmic intelligence (God); while the theologically conservative ones see evidence of "intelligent design". (two different things). But does this fit our image of God ?

Why is physics a blind alley ?

Cosmic intelligence is a leap of faith, not a deduction from the evidence.

The only reality we know is matter/energy. There is no evidence of an immaterial world. As we have said in an earlier chapter, mind, which might seem to us to be immaterial, is a function of a physical brain. There is no evidence for mind apart from a brain.

Theologians who believe the wonders of creation support their belief in a Creator God or Cosmic Mind are being selective in their use of the evidence.

We need to ask what is the "fruit" of this cosmic mind ? The evolutionary process is not a benign act of a loving creator, but horrendously wasteful, a survival struggle that involves indiscriminate predation (a giant food chain). The human animal (the so-called crown of creation) is marvellously complex, yet seriously flawed both physically and emotionally. Self-consciousness has a tragic downside. For most humans life is basically animal behaviour, and contains little quality of life and lacks meaning (other than survival). We are still highly territorial, and settle differences by aggression and killing.

Faced with this troubling evidence, theologians have to deal with the problems of evil and suffering. So they resort to the old argument that suffering is a necessary outcome or accompaniment of free will. While this is true, the history of our planet would suggest that the gift of free will comes at a cost that only a heartless, perhaps diabolical Creator could devise. Suffering has been universal and exponential, and much of it unrelated to free will, but rather to ignorance, accident and the vagaries of the natural world. The logic of God as creator is that he must be the cause of our problems and our pain.

If it is argued, as it commonly is, that life had to be thus for free will and moral choice to be possible, that must be seen for the nonsense it is. In a moral civil society we don't allow complete freedom of moral or any other choice. We, as a society, and as good parents, take intervening action to prevent or help diminish the worst aspects and outcomes of unbridled free will. Just so, a loving God would intervene to stack the cards in the direction of good and the limiting of evil and suffering, rather than leaving our fate to evolutionary accident or the slow immensely wasteful and destructive aeons of time till some rudiments of moral development began to blossom, only to be overwhelmed by the very legacy of that evolutionary process. It is not good ethics anyway to suggest that the end justifies the means.

The God of science, if he exists, is a technical genius, but he cannot, by any evidence drawn from science, be the same God as the God of the Bible, and especially of Jesus. To be so, the act of creation and the process of continuing creation has itself to be a moral act. Rather, science reveals the very opposite, a process in which respect for life itself is absent.

Can we worship a creator God who is the author of this heartless cosmic game ?
Indeed, there is no evidence here for a moral God. Creation seen through the lens of evolutionary biology is not a moral act.

Is there a purpose in it ? Evolutionary biology reveals no evidence of purpose in the sense of an aim or intention or design. Its "purpose" is the survival of the accidentally "fit". If we granted that purpose is operating at all in evolution that purpose is axiomatically connected to competition for life resources for survival, and nothing else.

A plan that operates over millennia on the blind, competitive, exploitative drive for survival, builds into all living things a fundamental self-first mechanism which almost renders impossible any grander enterprise based on concepts like cooperation, sharing, altruism, the good of all, reconciliation, forgiveness and so on.

The way forward is rather to be found in the much neglected disciplines in the field of contemporary knowledge, what we might call the human sciences, namely psychology (the study of human behaviour, of the creature that is asking the questions), ecology (our place in, and relationship with the cosmos), and ethics (the only relevant branch of philosophy, because it asks not 'what is the meaning of life?', but 'how should we live?').

We should first begin by seeking knowledge of ourselves - through the study of psychology and evolutionary biology and brain research. It is thus that we will come to an understanding of who we are, why we have sought the help of the gods, and our need to make for ourselves an answer to the question "How should we live ? This is the task of our next chapter.

A Note on Evolutionary Biology.

1. A replicator molecule occurs by accident.
2. Its copies begin to spread rapidly.
3. Replicator mistakes make change or improvement possible.
4. These replicator molecules are coded (genetic DNA) for reproduction.
5. Replicator molecules create or build "survival machines" - bodies or creatures for themselves.
6. Most living things share 90% + of the same genes.

If we say genes are not purposive, but God is, we are declaring that God is a magician. Genes are "unconscious blind replicators" which have no purpose or foresight.

Altruism must be taught. It can't be derived from our biological nature or process.

However, our brain is sophisticated/developed enough to permit self-consciousness, and thus has the potential to "rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators". (Dawkins).

ETHICAL ECOLOGY

A BASIS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE LIVING

So, how do we arrive at a universal secular ethic or a cosmic imperative for our lives and our world ?

One of the problems in arriving at a universal ethic, or finding an answer to how we should live in this biosphere, or discovering a cosmic imperative to drive us to do the good, is that many people think that the answer is to be found in the religious supermarket. So they go shopping. Perhaps Christianity is found wanting, so they turn to Buddhism or the Muslim faith, or Hari Krishna, or some version of New Age thinking. If you keep trying or shopping, it is believed, you will find the one that is right for you. This is the essence of what is called post-modernism, an age in which there are no absolute truths or even universal truths, but only what is true for me.

Unfortunately there are several basic problems with the search for the best religion.

First, whether in their traditional or contemporary garb, all religions are open to a variety of interpretations. This means immediately that they fail the primary test. They may be right for you or me, but they cannot therefore be a universal ethic or cosmic imperative.

Second, the popular practice of all religions, including Christianity, is found upon examination to be, for large numbers of people, unexamined beliefs which in practice amount to forms of magic and superstition. These beliefs often contain primitive animistic and pagan elements. Much of Christian prayer life falls into this category, including prayers for travelling mercies, which unconsciously derives from ancient Roman religion. The basic form of most religions is some type of ritual through which it is hoped to relate to, and generally appease and persuade the god or gods to ensure positive benefits for the practitioner. Ritual and prayer are to ensure god's favour and blessing, rather than one's behaviour in the world and towards others.

Third, most major religions have become deeply identified with a particular culture or society. This expresses itself in the popular view that Indonesians are Muslim, Chinese are Confucian, Japanese are Shinto, Western nations are Christian, Thais are Buddhist, and so on. So national and cultural loyalties and interests are often pursued as expressions of a particular religion. And political or ruling elites manipulate religious loyalties to achieve political ends and popular support for hostilities against other nations and internal dissidents.

Across the world, from Ireland to the Middle East, to South East Asia to Africa, to Europe (e.g. Bosnia, Croatia, Yugoslavia), cultural, economic, tribal, national differences or ambitions are expressed through so-called religious wars and conflict. In spite of the current flurry of inter-faith dialogue, there is no prospect here for a universal ethic.

Fourth, at the core of all religions there is to be found, in addition to rituals and beliefs, wisdom from the past as to how we should live. While some of this may appear to be common to all, the same English words may in fact refer to quite different values or meanings. For example, the compassion and non-violence of Buddhism is frequently quoted as akin to Christian love. This is in fact a quite facile comparison. Buddhism's fundamental philosophy is a withdrawal from life so as to avoid evil and suffering, and the consequent involvement in the endless cycle of re-birth. Buddhist exhortations to compassion and non-violence derive from the maxim to do no harm, rather than the maxim to do good. Their motivation is, as with most religions, the "salvation" of the devotee, rather than the good of the other. Christian love (agape), on the other hand, is the transcendence of self, indeed the sacrifice of self, in the service of others. It is active good-will expressed not only in caring for the neighbour, but in political, social and economic activity for the good of all. I make this comparison, not to suggest one is superior to the other, but to highlight the difference, so easily confused by well-intentioned comparisons. So, quite apart from the superficial tendency to propose that there is a common ethical basis to all religions, in fact the ethical dimension of any religion is seldom at the centre of belief and practice.

Fifth, the popular understanding and practice of most religions, and indeed the official dogma, is that it is something I do for me. It is about my salvation, my sins, my forgiveness, my karma, my enlightenment, my security, answering my prayers, ensuring my good, and my future (whether it be my escape or release from the cycle of re-birth, my assurance of eternal life in heaven, my rewards in paradise, my enlightenment, my absorption into or identity with the Great Self or Spirit or Brahma or Atman.) None of this is primarily an ethical stance, in which the purpose is duty, responsibility, and the greater good of all.

Sixth, this religious focus tends by and large to lead to a withdrawal from the world, rather than to a saving involvement in and responsibility for it. Popular Christianity abhors the idea of one's faith getting involved in anything other than personal religion and, for most, personal morality. And it is usually other people's personal (especially sexual) morality that is at stake rather than my own. Christian faith is commonly seen as an intrusion in the fields of business and politics. It is certainly seen by the average believer as a personal, indeed private, matter between the individual and God, rather than something with corporate and social dimensions; and often not even about the individual's body, but rather his or her "soul".

Finally, religions so easily succumb to the temptation to see themselves as guardians of truth, rather than the channels of love. Not only then is our version of the truth right (we have it on the authority of God or a sacred book), but we are thereby empowered to impose it on others and defend it by force. The aggressive political action of the religious "right" (Christian fundamentalism) in Western countries such as the USA and Australia is testimony to this mind-set.

The point I am seeking to make is not that religions cannot or do not have moral implications and teachings, but that by definition morality must be something done for its

own sake, not because commanded by a god or religion. Supernaturalist religions of any kind will inevitably incorporate in their teachings some injunctions about human behaviour, derived from their community's experience of life, but attributed to the will of their deity. But by definition morality cannot be morality if based on the arbitrary will of any source, however "ultimate". We end up with as many moralities as religions, and we are left to argue which is right. Further, if we do not accept a particular religion, or any religion, we are not obliged to accept its moral code. Morality, by definition, is a human enterprise based on reason, and an attempt to understand and apply what is seen to be the common good.

On the other hand, and in stark contrast to all religions, including Christianity, the Jesus Way (as opposed to the Christian religion) at its inception was a call to give life to others, not a call to find life for myself. Finding "eternal" life (correctly translated as "God's quality of life") was a consequence of the Way, not the purpose of it, or the reward for it. The same logic appears in my quote from Hugh Mackay later in this chapter. Jesus' call was to give life to others, especially the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed. Jesus called men not to come and seek or find salvation for themselves, or forgiveness, or a right relationship with God, but to be the bearers of new life and hope for others. People joined the Jesus movement, not to receive or find, but to give. He brought "healing" to troubled people, and then immediately challenged them to go forth to give "healing" and "hospitality" to others, who were then to be challenged to do the same.

There was no program of searching for God, or cultivating the soul, or finding inner peace, or ultimate meaning in life. God was a living reality (source of life and love), not to be sought after or propitiated, but to be taken for granted, and to be expressed in and through our lives in relation to other's needs. This world was his domain (not some other world), because it was his creation, and he loves unconditionally everything and everyone in it. Jesus' Way was the call to live the life of love (agape), i.e. doing good to all without distinction, and in so doing entering into the life and domain of God. Jesus' Way was world affirming and life affirming in its fullness.

In circumstances other than those of Jesus' own day, Jesus' Way would inevitably have led to social and political action and change. As we have seen, his Way was profoundly counter cultural, and led to his death, but serious social change was not an option for him as a citizen of a country occupied by a cruel, rapacious, and all-powerful occupying power. In that circumstance he chose the way of non-resistance, while encouraging and nurturing structures of community as places of healing and life and hope for those suffering from the social and economic deprivations of the occupying tyranny. That he could and would have been a social activist in other circumstances seems abundantly clear from his strident criticisms of and attacks upon his own religion (especially its quisling leaders), which he saw as adding to the burdens and oppression of those for whom it should have brought solace and strength for living.

If we separate the Jesus Way from official Christianity, and if we translate the religious assumptions of Jesus into our contemporary understandings of our world, at last we have a basis for a profound ethic, rather than a religion.

Our world has reached the point where it needs to turn away from all its religions and their gods. While each has some wisdom for living, we can retain the wisdoms for what they are worth, but discard the vehicles which have brought them to us. Those vehicles

are not equipped to show us how to live in this post-modern world and into the future. Their calls to us to relate to another world rather than this one, and to focus inward instead of outward (which is the role of ethics) mean they are impotent to face and challenge the modern world's roller-coaster ride to death and destruction. They are not only impotent, but indeed a dangerous distraction from the threats that surround us; and indeed, as rival searches for truth (rather than ways of doing the good) hold within them the seeds of conflict and hence destructiveness. An other-worldly religion, especially when linked to the power of the state, can be the agent of cruelty and oppression, and produce terrorists and suicide bombers instead of peace and love, when the clerics and the religion find their authority in some untestable external source, and offer the rewards of paradise.

For some, perhaps many, there will be the need for withdrawal into times of renewal, rest, empowering, re-acquaintance with self; whether it be via meditation, relaxation, pleasure, creativity, emotional enrichment of many kinds. There will certainly be the need to pause and examine our motivations and values. But the job that has to be done is to tackle the structures of evil and greed destroying our world, and to go about doing "good", and to heal the damaged and broken hearted, and to save the very physical life-support systems (the natural environment) on which our lives depend. What the world needs now is a universal ethic; an answer to the question "How should we live?"

Religion at its best, gets people to do good, be good, provides a moral basis for their lives. But this is true only where that religion is itself moral, and encourages, or requires such from its adherents. So, in making such a statement as that, we are suggesting that morality is not only a category in its own right, but one which can be used to make judgements about religion.

What we need to understand today is that religion has been an inevitable, indeed essential step in human development. It is a primitive way of enabling primitive people to understand and respond to the world about them, in a controlled and ultimately moral way. It is an activity for humanity in its uneducated childhood.

Children need a source of authority and discipline in their lives; they need to know that that authority has the power to give or withhold (threats and promises, grace and favour, justice and mercy). Children need parents, a father figure, the comfort and love of a mother, in order to learn socially acceptable behaviour, and to know acceptance and forgiveness while doing so, and while developing the self-discipline and autonomy and responsibility of adulthood.

But if the need or the reality of this parenting persists into adult life, or needs to, the child is unable to become, or is prevented from becoming, a free, responsible, autonomous being. That is, one who has worked through and tested one's own value system, and internalized the once externally supplied values and disciplines, and who lives by their implicit authority and rationality. I say rationality, because internalizing someone else's authority and values does not make an adult. Subjecting them to one's own reality checks, confirming them for oneself through experience and knowledge, must complete the transformation. We do things at first because we are told to by some significant authority figure. We do things as adults, because we see it as right to do so, and because we must take responsibility for our own lives.

To need religion, understood as I have earlier defined it, and the God concept, in adult life, is to have failed to grow up, to be unable to operate without the security of external authority, consequences, structures, to remain dependent upon the need for rewards and the threat of punishment, or the comfort and assurance of being loved, though undeserving.

There seems to me therefore to be an internal contradiction at the heart of Christian theology which runs counter to the fundamental insights of secular ethics. Central to Christian theology is the doctrine of Grace, i.e. that is that in the eyes of God we are of ultimate worth. He loves us, redeems us, justifies, forgives, accepts us for what we are and what we can become, not because we deserve it or can earn it. Certainly this concept of "grace", preferably understood in secular terms, is profoundly relevant for how we relate to one another if we are to break through the limitations of "tit for tat" approaches to human relationships. But Christian theology then seems unwittingly to deny this very doctrine by asserting that while God loves us for ourselves, we are to love others derivatively, or for an external reason - namely, because God loves us, or because God commands it or wills it to be so. If we are to be God-like, or certainly if we are to be moral, we should love others for themselves, or at least for their own sakes. Understood "mythologically" of course, "we should love because God loves us" can be seen or interpreted as a way of asserting the truth that we cannot love unless we first have experienced being loved by another.

It is clear that if religion disappeared from the face of the earth, we would not thereby find ourselves without a basis for ethical living. The reason is simple. The ethical life is in fact self-evident and self-authenticating. It is finally a systematised way of acting in life-affirming and life-enhancing ways. Its authority lies in the recognition that to live thus is to be in tune with reality, to advance the good of all, whereas to live for self first (i.e. without a moral code), is to diminish and destroy both ourselves and our planet.

From the beginning of human communities people have developed moral codes (with or without a religious foundation) to direct and safeguard their communities, - rules governing behaviour and relationships, to prevent communities degenerating into chaos, anarchy and self-destruction.

Commonly these would govern matters like property rights, relationships, marriage and so on.

Communities have grown into nation states, and today into a global community. or potentially so. The great ethical issues of today cross all boundaries, whether they be issues of oceans policy, global trade and business, international relations or global warming.

All the motivation we need to do the good is the recognition that life works best this way for all, not just for some; whereas the pursuit of self-interest can be readily shown to be finally both self-destructive and destructive of the good of all living things. If we have known as children the sacrificial love of another, and the acceptance and sense of worth that it bestows, we know as adults that it is our turn to be the givers rather than the receivers.

Let me spell out then a basis for constructive living that is not derived from, or dependent upon, a religious foundation.

First of all, let me make you an offer. Which will you take; which would you prefer for yourself: love or hate; kindness or indifference; life or death; co-operation or competition; truth or lies and deception; justice or injustice; peace or conflict; forgiveness or judgment and condemnation? Which would you prefer to see active in the lives of other people, responsibility or irresponsibility; sharing or greed; respect for others or exploitation of others; the care and conservation of nature, or its exploitation? And we could add much more.

The choice of the positive values in each of the above alternatives would surely be close to universal. All of us on the planet want them for ourselves, unless we are psychologically damaged or mentally ill. If we want them for ourselves, it is self-evident that they must be afforded to all.

Goodness, truth and love accorded to all living things is the self-evident and self-authenticating basis of life. It needs no external authority, no philosophical or theological underpinning, no God, to give it credence and authority.

Today, the scientific study of ecology adds a new dimension to our understanding of life. Ecology is the study of the structure and function of nature. It is about the planet's species- diversity, grounded in shared life elements and common life support systems. Biodiversity and nature- in- balance are grounded in interconnectedness and hence interdependence. We begin life by being given the gift of life. The life we receive is not only a gift from others, it is made from the very life of others. It is not only made from the living cells of our parents, but every living thing on this planet is made of stardust and, among other things, the remains of dinosaurs. While the natural system is a life support system of interdependence, it is also a food chain in which we exist and survive by taking the lives of others, and in which all forms of life, including our own, become the nutrients or life-giving elements for the lives that follow us. All living matter breaks down finally, to become the source and sustenance of other lives or living things.

We need to face the fact that parts of this system, especially that in which the human species is involved, include cruelty and exploitation, where we use other sentient beings for our life support. We need to make up our minds whether we should vastly reduce or strictly limit the population of our species and the need for others as our food, or whether we should work towards sustaining our lives from non-sentient living things, such as plants and vegetable matter.

Our interdependence and interconnectedness implies, therefore, that we should live in harmony with the rest of nature, which means the minimum of interference in natural systems.

Next, while in most natural systems there is interdependence or "co-operation", there is also competition for life space and resources. As the only self-conscious creatures, however, i.e. capable of responsible behaviour, we humans should replace competition with co-operation and sharing. Capitalist system economics, and especially economic rationalist theory, flies in the face of all ecological insights and values. The human species is seen as the only species of value. And some are of more value than others. Some can be "used" for the good of something called the economy. Some can be

discarded because they cannot contribute or pay their way. All else exists and is available for human use. There is no understanding of our interdependence with all of life. Competition is trumpeted as the fundamental basis of the economy. Economic rationalists obviously have no idea that they are thus claiming for our so-called superior species the lowest common denominator, the law of the jungle, as the sole motivator for successful human endeavour. Here is the assertion writ large in economic theory, that the human species is either amoral or immoral. We are capable of doing our best only when motivated by self-interest or greed, or the desire to eliminate the competition or opposition. How tragic!

In contrast to this view of the world of economics and commerce we would do well to pay attention to someone like Anita Roddick, founder of the very successful global cosmetics business, "The Body Shop". Her success and her book, "Business as Unusual", are eloquent testimonies to a secular and ethical approach to business. She says "Maybe we should redefine profit. We need to measure progress by human development, not gross national product." She refers here to the Council on Economic Priorities' auditable social accountability standard, and the United Kingdom's ethical trading initiative.

And from Albert Einstein : "It is high time the ideal of success should be replaced with the ideal of service." (Roddick. pp. 24-28).

Peter Singer, probably today's most well known philosopher and ethicist, says that most people live largely self-interested lives, mostly because they don't believe they can make any difference to the course of events. He argues persuasively that self-interested behaviour isn't an inevitable consequence of our biological origins and evolutionary history. He shows how historically humans readily subordinate self-interest to the interest of their group, whether it be family or tribe, and later even of large impersonal groupings like the nation. While it can be argued that these actions are ultimately acts of self-interest (my survival depends on the tribe or on its survival) they still indicate a capacity for "caring" about and for others, and sometimes at least at the expense of our own interests or lives; a recognition that my interests and well-being are bound up with the greater good, or the good of others or of "all", however defined. And globalization gives us an opportunity to enlarge that vision.

Singer suggests that the answers given by philosophers over the past 2000 years to the questions "Why should I be moral ?" or "Why act ethically ?" are in the end unsatisfactory. These answers propose solutions like the only ethical action is to do "good" for its own sake, or because an action produces the maximum pleasure out of all possible choices of action (utilitarianism). Unlike Kant, for example, Singer says that acts can be identified as ethical if they are altruistic (seeking the good of others, or of ends beyond or greater than ourselves or our own ends), regardless of whether we have other motives for doing them.

The ethical life is to live "at odds with the narrow, accumulative and competitive pursuit of self-interest .. ". It is also "to act in a way that one can recommend to others .. " "that could , in principle, convince any reasonable being." Our actions, to be moral, must be universalizable. They must take account of the interests of all who could be affected.

In commenting on the 'New Age' movement he speaks of 'dead-ends', where those involved focus on looking inward into their lives, when they should be looking outwards; a focus on the self rather than the needs of others or the greater good of the cosmos. He says that we need to adopt, in Henry Sidgwick's phrase, "the point of view of the universe." Linked with this, of course, is the precept found in some form or other in the major religions and ethical traditions, namely the Golden Rule, "Love your neighbour as yourself", or "Do unto others what you would have them do to you." (How are we to Live? pp.170 - 232).

Ethical ecology asserts that the rational person's knowledge of the world, and of himself or herself, can lead to the understanding that the good of each depends on the good of all, and that our capacity for love and good can direct our energies towards successful ecological outcomes.

Finally, in a system of ethical ecology, the study of psychology is equally important. Behaviour is judged as ethical on the basis of whether it is life-enhancing, rather than life-diminishing or life-taking, and whether the beneficiary is one or whether it is all. These all-embracing criteria can be applied universally. Does each action I take enhance life or diminish life? Through the study of human behaviour (psychology) we have come to know what enables us to reach emotional maturity and responsibility, what is the basis of self-esteem, how we can achieve trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity (creativity), integrity, independence, and so on. (With acknowledgement to Erik Erikson.)

We know that without first receiving love (i.e. affection, respect, acceptance, regardless of deserving), we cannot become mature human beings; indeed, we are incapable of giving love. Rather, we become self-centred and dangerous to ourselves and others. This insight lies behind whether we become directed outwards to the needs and good of all, or whether we become self-centred, inwardly focused at the expense of others and of the good of all.

M. Scott Peck talks of four basic life techniques : delaying gratification, assuming responsibility, dedication to the truth or reality, and balancing (giving up in order to grow and develop). The strength, energy and willingness to use these techniques are provided by love.

And "love is an action, an activity, ... not a feeling." "But since it requires an extension of ourselves, love is either always work or courage. If an act is not one of work or courage, then it is not an act of love." "The principal form that the work of love takes is attention."

(The Road Less Travelled. pp. 81, 124, 128.)

The study of psychology has taught us that love is the source and sustainer of life. It also teaches us that all behaviour has consequences. Quantum mechanics has taught us that everything that happens affects everything. Ecology has taught us that we are all bound together in the web of life, and that unless we all learn to live together, we will all die together.

So the fundamental life question that ethical ecology or ecological ethics asks is not what is the meaning of life, or what is the ultimate meaning of life, or why am I here, but the question that is the title of one of Peter Singer's books, namely, "How are we to live?" , or as I have put it, "how should we live ?" The need to ask the question, is not because God requires it of me, but because the cosmos requires it of me, the life around me that gives me life requires it of me. An absolutely sufficient reason is because I am here. Nothing more. And the motivation to do the good is not only because we are here, and because my good is dependent upon the good of all, but because the alternative is death and destruction, (I like to call it enlightened self-interest), and because the good of all is eminently achievable, and eminently worth achieving. If you closely examine this paragraph you will perhaps be surprised to discover that in fact these questions are in a very profound sense "ultimate" questions; and that all the great Biblical/theological themes are there - "God" as creator and life-giver and sustainer of life, salvation, eschatology; grace, being in Christ - understood now not in supernatural images, but in terms of the womb of life from which we spring and to which we return.

Hugh Mackay, probably Australia's best known social researcher, tackles this question from another angle. He says that the pursuit of happiness is the first step in a long journey to personal and global peace. Let me quote some of what he wrote: " ... ancient wisdom suggests that the selfish pursuit of happiness is actually counter-productive.....: the more you seek it, the less likely you are to find it. But there is another possibility, illuminated by a different question; whose happiness is worth pursuing? ,, you achieve your goal indirectly, by first attending to the needs of others. The more assiduously you (seek the other's good), the more likely it is that (others will eventually decide to seek yours). ...even the golden rule has always had a collateral benefit buried in the subtext: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" might sound like unbridled altruism, but there is a strong implication of reciprocity there. If you treat others the way you would like them to treat you, you improve the chances that they will indeed treat you just like that. But reciprocity is a moral minefield. It all comes down to motive: if you treat others well only because you expect reciprocal treatment, that comes dangerously close to exploitation, and the satisfaction you seek is likely to elude you. The trick is to embrace the central paradox of human happiness; we are generally at our happiest when we strive for the happiness of others. "Look out for No. 1" was always a dark, seductive con. "I've never been happier" is the almost universal cry of (those who) relieve suffering, hardship, poverty or despair in any way. It is also the common experience of those who devote their working lives to professions like teaching, medicine and counselling – where the entire focus is on the well-being of the pupil, the patient or the client, and where remuneration is a peripheral issue. The pursuit of happiness, it turns out, is a worthwhile exercise, provided we remember whose happiness we are pursuing. Perhaps that is the first step in the long journey to personal, and ultimately global, peace". (Melb.Age 22-3-03).

A Christian (or rather Jesus) ecological ethic will, of course, go that one step further. The really saving element in the cosmos will be those who aspire to live by an even more radical ethic enshrined in Jesus of Nazareth; i.e. people who not only live primarily with the good of all as their goal, but who if need be will sacrifice their own good in the pursuit of that greater good.

In practice, this will mean putting compassion, forgiveness, and self-giving ahead of mere justice and equality; and understanding the need of all for acceptance, trust, respect, affection, and above all for community (community defined by those very qualities).

What might be the source of such altruistic or rather sacrificial behaviour? Psychology and human experience would suggest that the primary, perhaps only, way of generating such behaviour is simply by experiencing it, by receiving it from another, by being its recipient. To have been deeply loved is to have been given the power or capacity to deeply love others. And all this needs to be nurtured and practised in a community dedicated to such a way of life, and reinforced by the great stories of love and goodness and self-giving and compassion, especially those of the man from Nazareth.

Among the pioneers of this community will be those who have been fortunate enough to have been unconditionally and deeply loved in their infancy, childhood and adolescence. They will have the greatest strength and resources of love to love others, especially the unlovely and the unlovable. But unconditional love can also change adults who have been denied that love in their formative years, provided they are not too emotionally damaged. It is especially in the loving community that this miracle can become a possibility.

At the end of this chapter I set out for comparison a number of ethical systems or lists of basic ethical values or principles. These include the Ethic of Jesus, Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path, the findings of a global survey by the Institute of Global Ethics, a statement of what I call the rational scientific world view, and a list of basic ethical principles formulated in recent years by a secular study group.

But why should we bother ?

From time to time I ask myself this question. Is it worth the effort ? Is that effort really going to make any difference to a world of individuals, each of us hell bent on pursuing our own self-interest, and by implication our mutual destruction ? Is it in fact too late ? Why not just maximize my own life and enjoyment in the time that is left, not just for me, but for this biosphere ?

And the answer is a simple one. And it is a moral one. It is because my opportunity to enjoy this world, my life, my freedom, my security and comfort, my pleasures, my health and well-being, my job, my education, and so on, have been given me as a gift by others. I could have none of these had others not gone before me.

And the very best things I value have been given me not by the market or private enterprise, but by my parents, and before them, by the struggles, the blood, sweat and tears of those who fought against the various systems of domination and exploitation and slavery that the powerful of this world would always impose upon us.

You and I can leave it to others if we like. You and I can walk in and enjoy the National Parks that others fought for at great personal cost to set aside for us. You and I can take for granted the better working conditions that history tells us the "bosses" would never have freely given us. You and I can exercise the vote that had to be won by the struggle and indeed the lives of others. You and I can live without giving it a thought, in the

security that we owe to the lives of young men and women lost on the world's battlefields (because not enough of us were busy at justice and peace-making). Or, you and I can join the battle for justice and peace and the environment. The choice, of course, remains yours and mine. But the results of our choice are no longer in doubt.

SOME SOURCES FOR AN ETHICAL SYSTEM

Some definitions:

ETHICS - The principles of morality
- A system of moral principles by which human actions may be judged good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust.

MORALITY - Human behaviour judged against an ethical system, or a set of principles of right and wrong conduct

The Jesus Ethic (according to the New Testament). “Overcome evil with good.”
(See Matthew Chapters 5-7; also Luke 10:25-37; Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 22:35-40)

Have a higher loyalty than self. Be selfless.

Make God (goodness, truth and love) your highest values, and your goal in life.

The inner motive of love (goodwill to others, seeking their highest good) should direct all your actions, including those towards your enemies.

People and relationships are more important than things. Be a peacemaker.

Remain detached from material possessions.

Have compassion for and identify with all those who are poor, deprived, exploited, suffering. Fight for, even suffer for, their rights, their good.

Be trustworthy.

Be responsible.

Be generous.

Be self-critical, humble and self-controlled.

Do not judge others.

Avoid prejudice, jealousy, self-deceit, meanness.

Do not be angry, insulting, contemptuous, defamatory, a gossipier.

Never show resentment.

Never retaliate

Overcome evil with good.

Heal quarrels, differences, rather than seeking legal redress.

Be grateful.

Avoid temptation and evil.

Both practise and seek forgiveness, without limit.

So live that your goodness is both “salt” and “light” for the world. But don’t flaunt your goodness; let it be as inconspicuous as possible.

Buddhism. The Noble Eightfold Path.

Right belief
Right purpose
Right speech
Right conduct
Right livelihood
Right effort
Right mindfulness
Right meditation

The goal is the end of attachment, and desire, and ultimately the individual self, so that we enter into communion with the whole universe.

The Institute for Global Ethics – Results of a survey of 24 men and women of conscience from 16 nations.

Love – as indestructible good-will in action
Truthfulness – as the foundation of mutual trust
Fairness – treating others as we would be treated
Freedom – of conscience, expression, opportunity, with accountability
Unity – a global vision leading to cooperation and sharing, in contrast with individualism
Tolerance – as listening to others' viewpoints and embracing diversity
Responsibility – for self, others, and the planet / cosmos
Respect for life – as distaste for killing, cautious use of force

An Australian Discussion Group

Respect for life / others
Honesty (leading to trust)
Commitment
Responsibility
Fairness / justice
Having enough (rather than more than one needs)
Compassion
Avoid hurt / harm
Tolerance
My good must not diminish the good of others / all
Care for the environment
Long term perspective

The Rational Scientific World View as a basis for Ethics

Our evolutionary and ecological understanding is that all things are interconnected and interdependent.

We are all receivers of life.

We are all dependent on others, and the planet's ecosystem biodiversity and integrity.

We are formed or malformed by the gift or denial of love.

Our life choice is to be life enhancing or life diminishing.

Signs of Transformation

Jim Wallis, in his book *The Soul of Politics*, lists what he calls "**Signs of Transformation**" (pp.159-258), in which he seeks to translate concepts from the Judeo-Christian tradition into secular terminology. They could provide a check-list for ethical living.

Conversion - The priority of the poor

Compassion - No more us and them

Community - A moral foundation for economics

Reverence - Honouring the whole creation

Diversity - Beyond integration

Equality - Beyond inclusion

Peacemaking - The path to real security

Justice - The hunger that heals

Contemplation - The inward journey

Courage - Taking the first step

Responsibility - How change begins

Integrity - The quality of leadership

Imagination - Dreaming new possibilities

Reconstruction - From protest to rebuilding

Joy - The unmistakable sign of life

Hope - The doorway to change

JESUS OF NAZARETH

Has Jesus a role to play in a world without religion ? In earlier chapters we have answered that question in the affirmative. But the Jesus we are looking for is not the person we find in the religious interpretations in the New Testament, but the actual historical Jesus that scholars have recently recovered for us.

Christianity has at its heart a world-changing ethic, quite apart from its religious dimension. In our scientific secular world to continue to speak of Jesus as the divine Son of God or God Incarnate is no longer tenable. If God is still for many a benevolent old man in heaven largely disengaged from this world, then Jesus is hardly his incarnation. If for some he remains the personal super-being of traditional theism, much of society will these days view that simply as superstition.

If, in a secular society, religion and a theistic God are no longer intelligible or appropriate, and the word God rather is to be understood as an image or symbol for the power and value of Love in our lives, then it becomes meaningful and accurate to speak of Jesus as God (Love) incarnate.

But if we seriously believe that God is no longer a useful concept in the 21st century, nor religion an activity appropriate to a scientific age, then who for us is Jesus of Nazareth ?

He is and remains what he was for his earliest followers, before Jewish religious and Greek and other pagan beliefs were used to explain his unique life in terms of divine connection and intervention in the affairs of human kind.

Who was Jesus for his earliest followers ?

Recent scholarship has shown that the New Testament records about Jesus, especially his miraculous birth and his resurrection from the dead, are later interpretations that were developed to try to explain his unique life, and to present this new religion (Christianity) as plausible and attractive in the religious supermarket of the First Century world.

Modern literary, textual and other academic disciplines and tools, along with the discovery of new texts, have enabled scholars to identify within the New Testament records an earlier strata of original material which had no accounts of a magical birth or resurrection from the dead, nor any understanding of Jesus as Messiah or Son of God. Instead they are records of his wisdom teaching and his program of justice and compassion for the poor and the marginalized.

These records reveal Jesus as a man, yet a man of powerful magnetism and charisma. He was a Jew, steeped in the prophetic and wisdom traditions of his people. Those traditions were focused absolutely on this world and this life, and how we are to live; not on some other realm beyond this life. They were about love and justice and right relationships. They were not about religion.

The records show that Jesus had little interest in religion. In fact he saw the cultic and legal practices and requirements of his own historic religion as placing intolerable burdens on people's lives, rather than setting them free. He echoed the great prophets of his people's past: God is made to say; "I hate your feasts and your solemn assemblies; rather let justice and mercy roll down like the waters.."

He believed in God, for all people of his time took that for granted, but for him God was gracious, costly self-giving love. And for him, the corollary of putting God first in one's life, ie living in God's Kingdom, letting God (Love) rule in one's life, was to live out that Love in sacrificial service of one's fellow men. "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself."

In other words, Jesus taught and lived a radical ethic, that no one else had taught before. His "Way" was inclusive and compassionate. In his time people of other races, women, the poor and the ill and diseased were second class citizens or outcasts. For him they were of equal value in the sight of God. His "Way" was active caring for the poor, oppressed, the marginalized and the outcasts. And he broke new ground with his revolutionary call for forgiveness of all who wrong us, including our enemies. Prior to Jesus, calls for forgiveness, love, compassion were confined to the members of one's own race, tribe or religion.

So the Jesus "Way" is love of the enemy; reconciliation between all who are separated, divided, estranged; living simply and gratefully, satisfied with enough (personal wealth, riches, possessions were simply for him incompatible with his "Way". "A rich man will find it hard to enter the Kingdom"), and physical sustenance and healing for the poor, oppressed and marginalized.

Some have summarized his "Way" as "healing and hospitality". And I would summarize his ethic in the words of St. Paul as "Overcome evil with good".

So, he and his Way stand as a beacon over against the materialism and the accompanying dehumanization of our age; he is the archetype of the New Man, the Man for Others. To walk in his way is to be hope and salvation for our own lives, our world, our secular age. He speaks to us not of heaven, but of our freedom to be truly human, and our calling to free and renew our biosphere and the cosmos from the greed and destruction our species has visited upon itself and its home.

THE ETHICAL SOCIETY

A NEW WAY TO BE THE CHURCH.

The death of religion and the “God” concept in its theistic form need not, indeed does not, require or imply the death of the “church”.

As we remarked elsewhere, the great tragedy for the church was its takeover by the state under the Roman Emperor Constantine, and its consequent institutionalisation and accommodation to the influence and power of the state. Membership of this once subversive, counter-cultural movement now became mandatory, rather than being an expression of commitment and loyalty to its Leader who stood over against both the state and the institutionalised religion or state “church” of his day. (While Jesus honoured the “Law” and the “Prophets” of his religion, he was strongly critical of its current form and practice, and its priesthood’s identification with its own oppressive practices and those of the occupying secular state.)

Under Constantine, however, its counter cultural ethos seemed no longer necessary, for it had captured the halls of power and the levers of authority, or so it believed. Its God had been chosen to replace the Roman gods, and it believed it was in the box seat to both influence the secular power and the masses at large who were now required to submit to church and faith.

However, emperors and all in positions of national and international authority do not readily accept and adopt ethical stances that conflict with their personal or imperial ambitions, or submit tamely to the direction of others who claim to speak for God.

So, under Constantine, theology and worship were standardized, indeed sanitized, an act of acculturation and accommodation to the needs of the state. Theology was fixed in creeds, and heretics identified and removed from influence. Roman and other “pagan” shrines were replaced by Christian shrines or places of worship. Buildings large and small were erected everywhere as the locus of this new worship of this new God. Houses of worship and great cathedrals sprang up in cities and towns where previously Christians had gathered in homes and other places. And these buildings, rather than the community of believers, began to be called “churches”. (When Paul wrote to the various churches he had founded in Asia Minor, he was addressing the small Christian community or fellowship in each place, and not referring to a building or institution.)

In the New Testament (i.e. the writings about and by the early “church”, those early Christian communities) the word “church” (ecclesia in Greek) never refers to a building. The word means a gathered company, a community. It refers to the fellowship or community or company of believers or followers of Jesus. They understood their faith to be a matter of relationships – they belonged to Jesus Christ, their “Lord”; or to God through Jesus Christ. They therefore belonged to one another, to all who were his disciples. This common unity or community was the vehicle for, and the expression of, their relationship both to God and to the world, to the needs of humanity. Very early on some took this to its logical conclusion, and literally formed communities or communes

in which they lived together, sharing their material possessions, - “they had all things in common.” Acts 2:44-45. Such communal arrangements made it easier to incorporate into that community either new converts or the poor and dispossessed to whom Jesus had commissioned them to give both healing and hospitality.

Commune-type communities have seldom been successful through human history, though “religious” communities of “nuns”, “priests” or “brothers” have successfully persisted. However, these have usually been religious communities of celibates, neither working in the world nor having spouses or children.

So the first thing to clarify about the meaning of “church” for Christians is that it refers to a particular type of community, not a building. Buildings may be useful for certain activities of the church, but they so easily become both the meaning and focus of church, and readily suggest that the church is what happens in that building, especially worship, prayer, and perhaps Sunday school for children. It further tends to suggest that church or being Christian is something that happens on Sundays, and that it is primarily an individual activity between each Christian and God, even though it is undertaken together with others. Christians thus commonly talk about “attending” church, or “going to church”, and as a consequence fail to understand that together they are the church, that they are called to share a common life with Christ and one another. They are to express what it means to be fully human and fully Christian in those relationships so that they can be the church, i.e the living expression of their “Lord”, in the life of the world.

The Constantinian takeover called for great acts of *public* worship, a concept foreign to the New Testament church. “For them (the earliest gatherings of the followers of Jesus) the whole necessity of religious acts of worship – for a cultus – had been abolished by Jesus.” (Harvey Cox. *God’s Revolution* etc. p. 87). Under Constantine every citizen was a Christian by edict of the state, and all were expected or required to “attend” public worship. Thus began the era of Christendom, where church and state became co-terminus, which has continued almost to the present day. This displaced the counter-cultural community, meeting in homes, where they gathered to strengthen and support one another over against a hostile or indifferent world, and in which gathering they provided healing and hospitality to the needy.

What did the early church do ? Why did this community gather in this way ?

To answer the second question first, they needed the strength and support of each other; and new converts needed to be welcomed and embraced in a community where they could be strengthened, supported and nurtured in this new relationship with Jesus as “Lord” and with one another.

What did they do ? “They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

So the principal activity was *learning* from the “elders” about their new faith, which originally meant about their “Lord” and his teaching, especially his mandates of healing and hospitality. That was part of the over-arching task of building one another up in love, - caring, sharing, supporting, accepting responsibility for each other as brothers and sisters.

At the heart of this informal gathering was *a simple shared meal*; not originally a sacrament. But obviously as they shared daily bread and wine, they remembered their Lord who had so shared with his disciples (and perhaps especially that final meal before his death).

Let me quote here from the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar. (Funk and the Jesus Seminar, “The Acts of Jesus”, p.141-2).

“The last supper as it is depicted by Mark was not a historical event. Nevertheless the Fellows (the Jesus Seminar scholars) were clear that Jesus often ate meals with his disciples and others

and that these meals had symbolic value. They were expressions of egalitarianism: Jesus ate indiscriminately with rich and poor, powerful and weak, clean and unclean. He undoubtedly taught at meals, in the manner of the symposium. His behaviour at meals was viewed by outsiders as scandalous, so much so that he came to be known as “a glutton and a drunk”. Since Jesus ate frequently with his followers, there must have been a last meal with them. Mark’s narrative is not a report of that meal.”

Later we encounter a training manual called the “Didache”, which was developed to induct new converts into not only the faith, but the life of the community. It was a manual of church order and discipline.

And they shared in “*the prayers*”. The prayers were probably largely derived from their Jewish prayer life, and therefore “God-centred”, but intercession (prayers for others in need) would have been at the heart of their life together.

The other key image of the church in the New Testament is “the body of Christ”, rather than that out of which it grew, namely “the people of God” (Israel). So the church is a body; a body of disciples. New Christians are immediately incorporated into this body, this fellowship, this community. They are not individual believers making their own way, living out a new philosophy or religion or “way” in their individual lives. By definition they are members of a body. They are the hands and feet and voice of their Lord, Jesus.

This body’s focus is not God, through Christ, but rather their Lord, Jesus. That is not to say that God was not a basic assumption of their lives, but that this community’s way of doing God’s will, of living in God’s Kingdom, i.e. under God’s rule, was by obedience to the Lordship of Christ in their lives. Jesus, his teaching, his example, his commands, were what the church was all about.

To summarize then. The Christian church today, were it to be faithful to its pre-Constantinian origins, would be characterized by four things : some form of shared life (fellowship or community); teaching or study (learning); shared meals (symbolic of relationship and hospitality); and reflection /meditation gathered around the needs of members and the needs of the world (what we used to call prayer), and leading to action programs and commitments to specific ways and tasks directed towards meeting those needs.

The new or re-constituted form of the church for the 21st century, or what we might call the “ethical ecological community”, might well learn from the early Christian communities, or model itself on their life together.

1) Study and Action.

At the heart of this community would be regular study and discussion about the meaning and content of ethical ecology. This would imply a study of ecology, of ethics, of the radical ethic of Jesus, of the world in which we live, and in particular the key areas of life in which ethical ecology needs to be applied. And finally, there would be study and skill development in the ways and means in and through which ethical ecological insights could be applied for the peace, well-being and harmony of this planet and all of life upon it.

Children and young people embraced within this new community would learn and grow in their ethical ecological insights and behaviour by the behaviour, lifestyle and political action of their parents and other significant adults, and their own involvement in this lifestyle of their parents and the ethical community to the extent that it was appropriate and possible. Discussion in the home and in the life of the ethical community would reinforce these values.

Indeed, story telling for children and formal learning opportunities for young people and adults would enhance the community’s life.

Restored to its true counter-cultural role, the church would cease much of its timid and fearful anxiety as to whether religion and politics should mix, and cease to berate its politically active and courageous preachers, leaders and synods. It would quickly learn the most effective methods of politics and political influence and lobbying, because it would know that the primary method of change in society today is through the political process. It would learn from the right wing, economic rationalist, think tanks around the world that have had a profound influence in dehumanising society, opening up ever deeper divisions between haves and have-nots, manipulating fear and racism, exploiting the powerless bottom end of the workforce, and marginalizing and disenfranchising the poor. As it is possible to plan, organize, lobby and propagandize for greed and self-interest, so it is possible to do so for the good.

Worship of God would not be a part of this. As we have seen, this was not a principal activity of the early Jesus movement, (except perhaps for the ritual requirements of their Jewish faith - they began as a Jewish reform movement). It was not something Jesus taught or emphasized in its formal, ritual form, but rather an attitude of life he took for granted. Acts 2:42 certainly makes no reference to it as significant, or as the weekly ritual the church has practised for centuries. The earliest "Jesus" followers were soon forced out of the Jewish synagogues and so formed communities which met and practised the activities described in Acts 2:42. Carried over from the synagogue was especially the reading and exposition of the Jewish scriptures, which were soon complemented by the teachings and stories about Jesus. (Spong makes a fascinating case for this in his interpretation of how the Gospels came to be written). In any case, today belief in and language about God is no longer relevant. If we want to retain and express

whatever "God- worship" has meant in a religious age, we will need to re-express it in secular terms.

We are constantly reminded that people are not merely rational; that we need also to nurture and express our deepest feelings, values and commitments. So in our being together we might want to find, at least for some, a place for ritual, or at least for story. Whether this would fit best with our times of study, or at our common meal, would be the occasion of experiment. It might suit some groups to do this at each occasion, or perhaps only from time to time on special occasions.

Such a time of ritual, celebration or story might include simple life-affirming affirmations about our oneness with all of life and with one another; about our mission to be bringers of good news and good deeds to the world (i.e. our unity and interdependence with all of nature, and our commitment to "love" the planet and all in it, i.e. our commitment to life affirming behaviour.)

It could include the telling and re-telling , the acting out and dramatizing, of key stories that encapsulate our "faith" and move us to emulate the heroes of that "faith", especially Jesus of Nazareth. It could include readings from the great works of literature that inspire, challenge and comfort us, in so far as they are seen to be consistent with our ethic and our mission. It might include music and song where that was seen to be fitting.

2) **Community / Fellowship**

All the great human movements for good, and for change, have been grounded in the community or meeting together of their "true believers". Nothing much happens until great ideas or convictions are grounded in a committed membership of those who pledge themselves to work out these values in the world. Values become programs when they are rooted in committed organizations dedicated to their achievement. This truth has been the genius of the church, and of all successful movements for change, whether social, political, environmental, or whatever.

This, I believe, is the true meaning and understanding of the theological concept of the "Holy Spirit". Christians were from the beginning aware of a power outside themselves, empowering and guiding them, present always when they gathered together in community, seldom as an experience of individuals, and then usually as a derivative of their life in the community. The so-called Holy Spirit is of course not a divine person, but the inspiration, strength and guidance that comes from belonging to and sharing in a community of those committed to not just common values but to one another.

This then is a movement that is based on the concept of our interdependence with all of life, on the corporateness of life as the basis for and generation of our individual being and worth, the intention to "love" not only one another, but all of life, to heal what is damaged and broken. It therefore implies a community in which these values are *lived and learned and supported* in relationships, in togetherness, in give and take, in sharing, in decision making, in learning and growing, and in and through the loving and respectful correction of one another.

So, we will have in the new church some form of community, of organization, of membership, and we will have mechanisms for caring for one another, and for both individual and corporate expressions of both caring and political action in the world, and ways of reporting and feedback and de-briefing if you like, to keep us honest and to refine and correct our ways of doing love.

3) Simple Shared Meals.

There is much to be said for a *simple* shared meal, at least from time to time, at the heart of this new community. For most human communities over time this was the way of welcoming strangers, of symbolically and actually expressing community, of sharing material, life-giving, life-enhancing things. It bonds and binds beyond what a formal or informal meeting can do.

And it is important that it is a *simple* meal; a nourishing meal and a scientifically healthy one, not an indulgence. It is important that it expresses our respect for other forms of life, that it is not more than we need, but perhaps even expresses the discipline of “less”, or at least “enough”, and not more. It is important that it is scientifically sound, i.e. good for us, and not bad for us. And it will need to find a way of acknowledging that others may be going hungry, and so incorporate the basic values of both giving and receiving.

4) Reflection / Meditation / Quiet Time.

Study, research, strategic and action planning, is hard work, and involves much time, and especially much talk; fellowship and caring involves doing; the meal will be an active occasion preparing and sharing good things, - enjoying food, drink, stories, humour (especially humour), and growth in knowledge of one another through personal communication and conversation. And doing the work of love in the world is exhausting and often wounding. So, we will need a time of quiet and reflection, out of which healing and renewal, and wisdom, direction and insight can emerge, and we can be re-energized for the living of our lives.

5) Leadership / Ministry.

The concept of a priestly class as the “religious” specialists, as intermediaries between God and ourselves, and ourselves and God, has been one of the fundamental impediments to change and reform in religious communities. A class of persons that claims to be the mouthpiece and guardian of ultimate truth, and the leader and dispenser of the sacred rituals essential to this divine / human dialogue or transaction, has a profound vested interest in the status quo.

Leadership in the new community will need to be “ministry” in the true sense, i.e. see itself as “serving” the needs, objectives, and best interests of the community. In group dynamics terminology it will be equally as concerned about group maintenance and individual needs as it is about the task. Or, to put it another way, it will be as concerned about process as it is about content. Its role will be primarily that of facilitator or enabler. It will need to ensure that the group can access a range of knowledge, expertise and resources either from among its members or by importing these from outside from

time to time. Basic will be group leadership skills (group dynamics), effective meeting skills, human relationship skills and insights, political skills, and of course the best available research and knowledge in understanding our world (including ourselves) and in the field of ethics, especially what we mean by ethical ecology.

Formal appointed or elected leadership is generally more successful than informal or shared leadership, provided the group has agreed about clear objectives, has defined the leadership role, and has a program of leadership training and development for members who show the potential for leadership. Such leadership will however be voluntary and unpaid; though the group will need to ensure that proper support is provided for the leader or leadership team, and that could involve a small honorarium or at least the covering of costs involved in the job.

If these groups or communities are linked into some federation of ethical societies they will be greatly strengthened by having a headquarters structure appropriately staffed by paid expert and administrative staff who will be able to resource local groups, particularly through research and training.

6) And We Need A Name

That is much harder. It needs to be something that focuses our mission, and in a way that is *unambiguous*. The problem with religion and church in all their manifestations is that they are open to a multiplicity of interpretations, and can almost mean anything to anybody. So “good” churches or forms of religion are given a bad name by “bad” churches or forms of religion. Both the public see them, and often the membership see themselves, in the light of distorted and ignorant popular images.

Perhaps we could be called the Compassionate Society, the Ethical Society, the Ethical Ecology Society, , the Interdependence Movement, or the Jesus Way or Society or Movement. Maybe it doesn't matter. I think I would favour “The Ethical Society” or “The Ethical Community” or “The Jesus Movement”. Someone will crystallize it for us.

The important need is just to get started now, and to link up with others of like mind. Our lives and our life support systems are hanging in the balance. The time for discussion is past. I hope that this book may become a useful resource, and perhaps a template, for those who are ready to make a beginning.

AN ETHICAL MANIFESTO

We accept the proposition that acts can be identified as ethical if they are altruistic, i.e. seeking the good of others, and of ends beyond or greater than ourselves and our interests.

We recognize that ethical behaviour is not only about our personal lives, but about all of life, be it political, social, economic, business, environmental, local, national, international, global.

Acting ethically involves acting "from the point of view of the universe".

We desire to act ethically not only because we care, but because we are persuaded that life works best that way.

We recognize that we are bound up in the bundle of life, and we are totally dependent on this biosphere's life support systems; that we are the recipients of life, and that a proper response is to be the givers and enhancers of life.

A life-stance in the pursuit of self-interest is ultimately by definition destructive of relationships, of community, and of the natural world upon which we depend for life itself.

We accept the need and responsibility to care for ourselves; and equally the need to love others as we love ourselves.

So we agree that before acting from traditional, cultural, national, religious, economic or other important reasons, we must ask ourselves the question :

"How should we live and act so as to advance the good of all (all living things, including the biosphere and the universe.)"

Questions that will help answer this basic question include :

What are the facts ?

Does it advance the common good ?

Does it enhance the life of the community ?

Is it sustainable ? i.e. Does it disregard or diminish, or does it enhance the good of the natural environment ? (Biodiversity, nature in balance, interdependence of all of life.)

Is it life-enhancing or life-diminishing ?

Is it an act of self-interest or sectional interest ?

Is it an act of goodness, truth and love ?

Is it just, is it true, is it kind ?

Does it enhance unity, community, and trust ?

Is it an act of respect for others ?

Does it contribute to peace and harmony, rather than conflict ?

Is it an act of humility, responsibility, co-operation and self-giving ?

Is it an act of love (understood in the "Jesus" sense as the transcendence of self in the service of others; unconditional, unsolicited, unmerited, indiscriminating acts of good-will).

Does it seek to overcome evil with good ?

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