Bob,

I appreciate your September issue editorial but I fear it speaks to a status quo that no longer exists. It is a fact that today's young people are having sex before marrying. Your editorial of 'just say no, leaves that practice theologically unprotected. It ignores the sad fact that more than half of church wedding sanctioned, legally solemnized marriages end in divorce today. It has nothing to say other than 'don't do it' to today's young people, who for all kinds of historically grown, good reasons have to postpone getting married for a decade longer than you and I did.

I also wonder whether your view of marriage is not more R C than CRC. The Catholics elevate marriage to a sacrament on par with baptism and Lord Supper. The Reformation clearly rejected that view. Historically speaking couples who came to love one another simply moved in together at a certain time and only later solemnized their union with a church wedding. Initially Reformed churches sided with this practice but stressed the importance of a formal engagement before the decision to live together was made. Thus, they considered the engagement more important than the wedding.

However, this practice proved to be unsatisfactory. Too many men felt free to leave their spouses without obligation to care for their children on grounds that their union had not been solemnized. This is why over time the churches began to emphasize the importance of the wedding rather than the engagement.

Today we know that there is no longer any guarantee that a marriage begun with a church wedding will last.

All of us, on both sides of the issue of cohabitation subscribe to the importance of the notion that romantic relationships, before and after the wedding must be characterized by troth, intimacy and commitment. That is the norm. The norm is abiding, the form that norm takes over time is culturally-historically changeable.

Coram Deo

Living life in the presence of God
in a Secular Age

ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est

(Where charity and love are, God is there)

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Preface

This book was written out of a deep concern for the current state of the world in which we live. The Western world is facing a number of major problems: the disastrous effects of climate change, the daily dreadful occurrence of gun violence, the heart-rending and perilous mass-migration of people from the third world into nations of the developed world, major conflicts between and within nations everywhere, the rise of racism and the hatred of strangers worldwide fuelled by ideologies of populism, nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism, the opioid crisis creating an epidemic of overdose deaths, and the disappearance of truth speaking in our formal and informal communications, resulting in our inability to distinguish right from wrong.

There appears to be no consensus among world leaders on how to deal with any of these, or any other problem for that matter. The result is a paralysis of decision-making. That, to my mind, is the worst problem of all facing the world today. Consequently, there is a global sense of unease, anxiety even, about how to frame our existence. The way we live and move and have our being is fraught with uncertainty and unpredictability. None of us seem to feel at home in the world any more. We know more about human life than ever before, but we no longer seem to know what human life is all about. What is lacking is an overarching vision that binds us together. In the words of the Hebrew Scriptures, each of us seem doomed to "doing what is good in our own eyes" (Judges 21: 25).

Our fragmented way of living together did not happen overnight. It took an extended historical period of secularizing our Western culture. Our current sense of unrest is largely due to a deliberate attempt to banish God from our public and private lives in order to demonstrate that we are masters of our own fate and are capable of managing our affairs without the need of outside help or direction.

The time span during which the absence of God became a normal part of human life in the Western world is relatively short, a mere 500 years, when compared with the thousands and thousands of years during which the relation of the Divine to the world was considered a commonly accepted religious fact. During that time human life was inconceivable without its relation to the gods. Divine existence structured and gave meaning to human existence. The purpose of human existence was to serve and to worship the Divine.

Something essential was lost when we collectively decided some time ago to live life without God. Secularism represents a loss of religious support and direction for human

life. Without God human life easily becomes a perpetual restless search to serve and to worship something or someone other than God, without the chance of ever arriving anywhere.

Perhaps the time has come to acknowledge that without God we are *not* masters of our own fate, that in living our lives we are addressed by
Someone greater than us, a God who challenges us to live life in ways He has revealed, ways informed by *coram deo*.   The notion of *coram deo* expresses my belief that human life is always and everywhere lived in the presence of God. What human life from that perspective looks like is the focus of this book.

Chapter one

Introduction

quia fecisti ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.

(you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you)

Augustine Confessions: 1.1

We currently live in a secular age, in which the default position for many is the *absence* of God. While a large number of people still profess to believe in God, this seems to make little difference in the way they frame their existence or live their lives.[1] By way of contrast, this book argues somewhat defiantly but without apology, that human life is lived inescapably *before the face* of God, or *in the presence* of God. This is the meaning of *coram deo*. Its truth is expressed in the ancient biblical blessing directed at the people of Israel in Numbers 6:24-26

May Yahweh bless you and keep you
May Yahweh make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you
May Yahweh turn his face toward you
And give you peace

The same sentiment is found in Job 29:2,3, where Job, who feels unjustly treated by God, exclaims

How I long …for the days when Yahweh watched over me
When his lamp shone upon my head
and by his light I walked through darkness

Both texts evoke an intimate, close, face to face, lifelong relationship between God and human beings. *Coram deo* envisions a place where people can lay themselves to rest in God. *Coram deo* is the heart of the Christian religion; and it expresses the central message of the Bible about the human condition. It states that to acknowledge the reality of God in our lives makes life meaningful and that we ignore this reality at our peril. The purpose of this book is to describe what concretely it means to live life *coram deo.*

The question about the presence or absence of God in human life is not an academic question to be answered by experts. Ordinary people in everyday life ask this question, especially when they face tragedies. It is not a logical question, but an existential question, wrenched from our souls in the messy business of actual living. It is the question of why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. It is the question we ask when life does not add up. It is this question that is central to the

biblical book of Job. In the life we live that surrounds the questions we ask the issue about God's presence is decided. There we ask the question: "Is God really there in my life for me?" And *coram deo* answers this question in the affirmative.

Coram deo may have gotten a friendly hearing centuries ago when the vast majority of people living in the Western world were still "religious". But, what once was commonplace is now rejected out of hand. God has become irrelevant for many people. They live their lives without God. Given this cultural-historical situation, it is generally considered foolhardy to argue, as I do, that the presence of God is the indispensable condition of human existence. For some, God and religion are even the source of all that is wrong with the world, a scourge from which we will happily become more and more emancipated.

This secular prejudice can only be maintained because of its inherent lack of respect for the religious history of the Western world. It inaccurately claims that we live in a secular *world*; whereas Charles Taylor, a prominent historian of religion, makes the convincing argument that we actually live in a secular *age*.[2] This makes secularism a *product* of history rather than its inevitable outcome. It creates room for the possibility that secularism is a phase in the history of the Western world that will be superseded in times to come. [3]

The time span during which the absence of God became a normal part of human life is relatively short, a mere 500 years, when compared with the thousands and thousands of years during which the relation of the Divine to the world was considered a commonly accepted fact of life. During that time human life was inconceivable without its relation to the gods. Divine existence structured and gave meaning to human existence, not the other way around. The purpose of human existence was to serve and to worship the Divine.

Something essential was lost when we collectively decided to live life without God. Secularism represents a loss of religious support and direction for human life. Without God human life easily becomes a perpetual restless search to serve and to worship something or someone other than God, without the chance of ever coming to rest anywhere.

Part of the reason for our drift toward a life without God lies in *our aversion to the religion of paganism.* The specific character of most religions during ancient times was pagan and polytheistic. This was certainly the case for those geographic areas in which Western civilization was born, or in what we today know as the Middle East, and in the culture of Ancient Greece. In this pagan world, the Divine was thought to reside outside of our world. God was believed to be a far away, mysterious power, who transcends everyday human experience. One could only access Him[4] with difficulty via a

complicated series of cultic rituals and the creation of a large number of lesser gods, commonly known as idols (hence: polytheism).

Most importantly, this God was believed to have the capacity *and* the inclination to severely disrupt human life by means of natural disasters. For this reason the Divine had to be appeased through regular sacrifices and an ascetic lifestyle. This was the ancient view of the presence of God in human life at that time, in that world. Paganism was a religion of servitude and secularism sought to emancipate mankind from this bondage.[5]

Paganism was not the only religion in our ancient past, however. Alongside the predominance of this religion, the Middle East also witnessed the birth of the worship of Yahweh some 4000 years ago. It was predated in the religion of the arch-fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and more fully developed in the tiny nation of Israel, also commonly known as the *Hebrew* nation. In contrast to paganism, and often in conflict with it, the worship of Yahweh was a religion of liberation and providence. The nation of Israel was born when Yahweh freed the Israelites from the yoke of Egyptian slavery. He cared for them in the wilderness on their way to the land of Canaan He promised to give them. He dried up the Red Sea, fed them manna for food and taught them His ways near the mountains of Horeb. There He established a covenant of *coram deo* with them that stayed with them in perpetuity.

As we will see in chapter two, the Christian religion had its historical beginning in this religious context of Israel. It was sown and grew during a time when the nation of Israel enjoyed the exclusive status of being the chosen people of God and it came to full fruition when the Messiah of God came to live among them in the bodily incarnation of Jesus the Christ. For this reason Christianity owes an enormous debt to the Jewish people of the world. To honour this gift I call Christianity *Hebraic* Christianity.

Over time the Christian religion became a major source of inspiration in the Western world. Throughout its existence to date this religion had to fight against the heresies of both paganism and secularism. The former mischaracterized God as the source of evil in the world that had to be placated, the latter actively promoted the absence and irrelevance of God for public life. Sadly, Hebraic Christianity lost a lot of its cultural power in the Western world to secularism during the last five centuries and came to be replaced by a way of living where God no longer counts.[6]

Notes

[1] Whether or not God exists is largely irrelevant to the way we publicly and   privately make our every day decisions today. Religion has become a matter of personal choice, rather than social prescription. Unlike in times past, people living in the Western world, specifically in Europe and North America, no longer live *for* God. Many Evangelical Christians who still claim to live their lives for God have by and large reduced Christianity to the way one votes on a few social issues. They have joined the Social Conservatives in promoting family values, opposing abortion and outlawing homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Witness also how many Evangelicals voted for Trump in the last USA election.   God does not *materially* make a difference in today's world.

[2]Taylor, Ch. (2007) *A Secular Age*. London: Harvard University Press

[3] We live in a time of history in which the label "post" is popular: post modern, post Christian, post truth. So, why not **p**ost secularism?

[4] For stylistic ease in the use of pronouns about God, I bow to the traditional convention of referring to God as male. But I in no way mean to decide anything thereby about God's gender.

[5] Armstrong, K. (1994) *A History of God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf:
94 ff

[6] For another take on this historical development, see Armstrong, K. (2000)   *The Battle for God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 365-371

I. History

Ever since time out of mind the presence of the Divine in human life has been the default position of every society, major culture or civilization. Only during the last few centuries have people come to ignore the Divine, to deny His existence, to exorcise His presence from public life and to pretend that it is possible to live life without God. This is what it means to live in a secular age.

It is generally believed that the birthplace of the Western world was the Middle East. Life in that region during ancient times was governed by the religion of paganism, a religion of servitude. The meaning and purpose of life was believed to be the worship and sacrifice of pagan gods in order to placate the wrath of the Divine.

Alongside paganism this region also saw the beginning of the worship of Yahweh in the tiny nation of Israel. In contrast with paganism, it was a religion of liberation and providence. The core value of this religion was coram deo, or the awareness that human life is (to be) lived before the face of God.

This was also the core value of Hebraic Christianity, which came into being later in the history of Israel with the incarnation of its founder, Jesus the Christ. It in turn, again much later, became one of the major cultural inspirations of the Western world.

Unfortunately, the influence of Hebraic Christianity declined when the spirit of Rationalistic Humanism became the dominant inspiration. It ushered in a historical process that led to our present secular age. The rise and fall of the presence of God in the Western world is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter two

A brief history of God

In order to describe more fully what it means to live in the presence of God in a secular age, I must first recount in some detail the historical process of how the Western world became secular. The focus of this chapter is to recount the demise of God.

Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age,* states that in AD 1500 everybody believed in God. It was hard not to. But in AD 2000 God had become irrelevant for the vast majority of people living in the Western world. The time in between spells the history of secularization. Taylor views this part of our history as a process of disenchantment, in which everyday human experience had lost the sense of its relation to a transcendent God outside human experience, embodied by the Medieval Church. I believe instead that people lost their sense of the presence of God as an integral part of their everyday human experience. It was recaptured by the Reformation and then lost again under the influence of Humanism. However, both Taylor and I agree that this historical process of secularization took place.

So, to quote Taylor, the intent of this chapter is to show

….why it was virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 [the year Taylor wrote his book] many find this not only easy, but even inescapable".[1]

The birth of Christianity: paganism and the worship of Yahweh

For our purposes we must begin the history of Gods demise in public life by describing the world, as it existed some 4000–5000 years ago in a region we today call the Middle East. According to K. Armstrong (1994), a well-known historian of religion, the view of the Divine in that region at that time was predominantly ruled by the religion of paganism, more specifically polytheistic paganism. People worshipped many gods, mostly to protect themselves from evil forces believed to interfere with ordinary life.[2]

The pagan religions of that time and place had a view of the Divine as an essentially mysterious, incomprehensible, yet all of life determining Being, existing in a place far removed from the world of human existence.[3] In polytheistic paganism the lesser gods were the product of human imagination.[4] They were represented by physical images of the Divine and their function was to safeguard human beings from Divine wrath.

Above all this Divine Being was believed to be a threatening force in human existence, manifesting itself in earthquakes, drought, floods, thunderstorms and other natural phenomena.[5] The Divine was never experienced as a force *supporting* human life. Thus, the main function of religion and of the gods in paganism was to appease and to placate the Divine.[6] This view explains the function of sacrifices and rituals in paganism.

Sacrifices were made to pacify the Divine. For example, people were required to sacrifice their first-born children in order to safeguard ongoing prosperity.[7] The function of rituals and ceremonies in pagan life was to keep the gods *actual*. These manmade gods depended for their continued existence on these ritual acts and ceremonies.[8] Every time rituals were performed the lives of the gods were renewed. An example of this practice was the requirement of sexual union rituals, where men were expected to regularly copulate with temple prostitutes in order to guarantee the continued fertility of cattle, land and family.[9] It is not hard to imagine the strain these required rituals placed on the marital relations and family life of the pagan worshippers.

In addition to paganism the Middle East also witnessed the birth of the worship of Yahweh some 4000 years ago. The worship of Yahweh by the nation of Israel gave birth to Hebraic Christianity, which forms one of the two main sources of inspiration in the history of the Western world, the other being the worship of Reason in Greek philosophy.

The history of Yahweh worship is for the most part recorded in the Old Testament of the Bible. First Abraham, then Isaac and Jacob, and later their offspring, the people of Israel, once they were liberated from slavery in Egypt, occupied part of the Middle East, then called "Canaan". According to the Bible, they were called by God to be a special people, which eventually brought forth Jesus the Christ, who became the founder of Christianity.

For the Israelites Yahweh was not a concept, a belief, or an image, but the experience of His *presence* in their lives. A God who was "there" governed their lives. Every one of the Bible writers testified to this reality.

The *raison d'etre* for their national existence was a longing for a Messiah, the Saviour of the world. He was promised by Yahweh throughout Israel's history from Abraham to the birth of Jesus to appear "in the fullness of time." The Israelites lived their lives in the hope of His coming. That is what gave meaning to their national life.[10]

There was an essential difference between life in nations governed by paganism and life in the nation of Israel when the worship of Yahweh held sway. The relation of Yahweh to the nation of Israel was infinitely more intimate and positive than the relation of the surrounding pagan nations to the Divine. The contrast is striking. Yahweh was not a hidden, mysterious God. From the start of the nation of Israel, beginning with Abraham and throughout its history, Yahweh *revealed* who He was.[11] He talked face to face with His people.[12] He supported His people. He liberated them from slavery.[13] He made covenants with them, and He remained faithful to his promises.[14] In short, He was a God you could count on. He was utterly

trustworthy. Israel's relation to Him was one of obedience, trust and thankfulness.[15] This relation also defined the function of sacrifices to Him in Israel. They were not ways to appease Him, but ways to show how grateful they were.[16]

There is a development in the Old Testament of the Bible in the way Yahweh expected his people to relate to Him. Initially, in response to His goodness, He expected his people to be good to Him via prescribed rituals of worship, chiefly the sacrifice of their produce and animals.[17] But in the long run this was not enough. There came a time when the people had finally learned to worship Yahweh properly. They punctually sacrificed the prescribed first born of their animals (never their own first born children)[18] in worship, as He demanded. But their behaviour in the rest of their lives had become utterly abysmal. They cheated and lied; they robbed the poor and oppressed the powerless. In short, their behaviour, unlike their worship, had become unjust and indistinguishable from the pagan nations around them. At that time God informed His people (via prophets like Amos and Isaiah)[19] that He hated their sacrifices and wanted them to "act justly, to show mercy [toward their neighbours] and to walk humbly with Him,"[20] echoing the familiar "Love God above all, and your neighbour as yourself"[21] so prominent throughout the Bible. The ideal for the people of Israel from here on in until the birth of the Christ was to live a life of compassion.[22]

This is as far as I want to go in describing the early history of Hebraic Christianity. For its history during the Christ's life on earth I refer the reader to the Gospels in the bible and also to what I have written in the next chapter about *coram deo*.

Ancient Greek worship of Reason and Neo-Platonism

So far I have been describing the clear difference in religious or spiritual direction between paganism and Old Testament Hebraic Christianity as it first became manifest in the religion of the nation of Israel. As I mentioned in chapter one, historically Hebraic Christianity is one of the two main sources of inspiration in Western civilization. The other, to which I now turn, is the culture of Ancient Greece, (660 BC-200 AD) which was followed by the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus (204-270 AD) and Stoicism during the Hellenistic period of history (200-350 AD).[23] This historical development formed the cultural context for the emergence of Hebraic Christianity as a dominant religion in the Western world and paradoxically became co-responsible for the ultimate demise of God during our lifetime.

A popular view is that the culture of Ancient Greece did away with religion when it adopted reason as its guiding light. Nothing could be further from the truth. In actual fact, ancient Greek culture was as religious, paganistic and polytheistic as its predecessors. The Greeks were motivated by the worship of these pagan deities, first by a plethora of mystery gods, and later by the worship of Divine Reason.[24]

It is generally accepted that the culture of Ancient Greece originated in two religious (mythologizing) sources of inspiration: the Ionic tradition of Homer and Hesiod, and the

Orphic tradition of Pythagoras. Their myths were attempts to understand the origin and destiny, and therefore the meaning, of everything that exists.[25] Faced via sense perception with the world of everyday experience when they opened their eyes and ears, and touched with their hands, they asked, "Where does all this come from? What is its origin?" And they asked the question "How does it change its form? The question of origins and becoming, like the question of the meaning of existence is essentially a religious question. People who ask those questions want to know what they can count on and what they should live for. Unlike the people of Israel the Ancient Greeks lacked the written biblical account of the creation by God as the ultimate Origin of all that exists. When you miss the knowledge that God created all that we see and hear and touch, your thinking can end up into an infinite regression where you are compelled to ask after the origin of every origin you come to without ever coming to a definite, final answer.[26]

To avoid this, Hesiod answered the question about the origin of the world by stating that it was made and controlled by a family of gods who existed outside our world.[27] As we saw earlier this was a common pagan otherworldly construction of that time. However, in addition, Hesiod taught that these gods themselves also came into being as a result of the action of another, unknown Being.[28] Thus, he did not really solve the problem of infinite regression. The so-called Pre-Socratic Greeks, who followed the Greeks of Homer and Hesiod in time, had an answer for this question. They said that the origin of the world lies *inside* the world and that it consists of only four primary stuffs, or *prima causa*, earth, water, air and fire. The things of this world, or of the *cosmos* we perceive, they held, consist of a combination in various proportions of these four stuffs.[29]

Unhappy with this solution by the Pre-Socratics the succeeding Sophists rejected the belief in this four-factor view of the cosmos. Either the cosmos does not exist, they held, or if it does, we cannot know it. All that human beings can know is what they perceive, i.e. the ever changing, colourful world of individual experience.[30] For one of the Sophists, Socrates by name, that view was too relativistic. He claimed instead that there exists a world of eternal being *behind* our experience, which is the origin of everything. But we can only access it via intuitive reasoning and never by sensory perception.[31]

This was essentially the solution of Pythagoras, who stands in the Orphic, rather than the Ionic religious tradition. Orphism taught that beyond our world of sensory experience there does exists a Divine, eternal, unchanging world of *being*, which is very mystical, and which can only be accessed by following a complicated set of rituals and by living an ascetic life style. In this view they also believed that human beings are made up of two substances, or *prima causa*, a Divine soul that is in touch with, and part of this Divine world, and a transient, changeable, material body. Adopting this view of reality, Pythagoras taught that this Divine soul of human beings is a *reasoning* soul and that human beings can access this mystical, immutable world of being via thinking rather than via sense perception.[32]

This brings us to views of Plato, who was heavily influenced by the Pythagoreans. Faced with this history of Greek thought Plato came up with a worldview, a view of the Divine and a view of human life that included both body/matter and soul/mind.[33]

As the Sophists already noticed, we all experience chaos in our world and in ourselves by virtue of being alive. Life is messy, it does not always add up. But Plato reduced that problem to a matter of *logical (in)consistency*. The source of all our problems, he held, is that our bodies and our senses, our emotions and our passions, are forever disturbing our ability to think clearly and that is why things go wrong in this world. The world is in a mess because people don't use their heads. Because they have bodies they are *il*-logical. This was especially the case for women. Plato did not have a high view of women.[34]

For Aristotle, a pupil of Plato, the relation between soul and body, mind and matter was governed by the distinction between form and matter. All things, he taught, consist of indefinite, potential (matter, body) that strives to become definite, actual form (mind, soul). The acorn is destined to become an oak tree, marble can become a statue, and wood a chair or a table. In the same way the human body has the potential and is destined to become a soul, and matter has the potential to become mind.[35]

It may be that Plato and Aristotle made room in their thought constructions for both order (mind) and chaos, (matter, body) but it is clear that for them order (mind, soul) eventually gains the upper hand. It is what everything aims for. Mind eventually triumphs over matter. That was not what the Hellenistic Greeks, who came after Aristotle empirically experienced in their world. The world of their time was in an uproar, much like our own. It was a world of war, famine and sickness. So, they lost faith in the logically constructed world systems of these two intellectual giants. Instead they opted for a more chaotic view of reality that was in keeping with their world of experience and they advocated a lifestyle of *ataraxia,* or the *escape* from this chaotic reality.[36]

The dominant world and life view of Greek thought and action at the time after Plato and Aristotle was the Hellenistic philosophy of *Neo*-Platonism, specifically the philosophy of Plotinus. This way of thinking about life was all about escaping the unpredictable everyday world we live in, the world of sense perception, emotion and desires via an ascetic lifestyle into a world of pure thought. Thinking about the world of "eternal truths" of Plato's philosophy, became the preferred way to live. Neo-Platonism was a rejection of matter/sense perception, of our bodily existence and a worship of reason, or pure thought. Plotinus was said to be ashamed of having a body and favoured a life of pure thought. This *otherworldly* emphasis continued to predominate in a Christianized form of Neo-Platonism throughout the Middle Ages of Western civilization that followed.[37]

It would be a mistake to think that these thought experiments by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus were merely the products of some intellectual games played by a bunch of Greek academics. For them this was serious religious business. Their thought systems were attempts to answer the religious question of what human beings can count on and what they are to live for. They dealt with questions about the ultimate meaning of human life.

Religious synthesis between Hebraic Christianity and Greek thought

At about the same time the other source of inspiration in Western thought and action, the Hebraic Christian way of experiencing the world, entered the Hellenistic thought and action world of that time via the Christian missionaries, who like St. Paul and his followers brought the Christian gospel. This Christian view was quite the opposite of the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus. These two inspirations of Western thought and action were at odds with each other and in competition with one another, especially in how they viewed the relation of human beings to the Divine.[38]

First of all, the Hebraic-Christian God was a come-down-to-earth God, a Person with feelings, acquainted with suffering, an emotional God who had a body. Furthermore, He was a God who loves and interacts with human beings, makes covenants with them, a God who is reliable and who could be your friend. The Neo-Platonic god was not any of these. He was aloof, cold, inapproachable and out of this world.

Second, for the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus the relation between humankind and the Divine, following Plato, was one of reason and thought. You could only access this God by thinking about him. By way of contrast, for Augustine, who was a contemporary of Plotinus and the representative of Hebraic Christianity, the relation was one of love. The Christian God was a God who loved human beings and one could access that God by loving Him back. This love of God was explicitly manifested in the fact that He came down to earth to become a human being, lived with them in the incarnation, and died for them as a remedy for what was wrong with human life. The incarnation of God made absolutely no sense to the Greeks because it meant that the Divine Mind, the epitome of pure thought took on a body and became matter. This was an affront to the Greeks. As we will see later, this fundamental opposition between Hebraic Christianity and Greek philosophy plays itself out in one form or another in the history of Western thought and action to this day.[39]

Opposites or not, these two incompatible thought and action traditions existed side by side for quite a while during the Middle Ages in a religious synthesis. These were not just two logically incompatible theories, but two incompatible prescribed ways of living life, two ways of viewing God and the world, two *religions* really. Scholars of that time who stood in both traditions tried to harmonize the two.[40] One example of this synthesis was Augustine, who has been called both the last Greek philosopher and first Christian philosopher. His *Confessions* testify to this struggle.[41] The other example was Thomas Aquinas who attempted to combine Christianity with the philosophy of Aristotle in a synthesis of *nature-grace*.[42] To make a long story short, the otherworldliness of Neo-Platonism won out: at best we can talk about a Christianized Neo-Platonism, or a Neo-Platonic Christianity during the Middle Ages.[43]

For Christians, this synthesis represented a continuation of the Greek worship of Reason. The highest calling for the Medieval Christians became withdrawal from the world and the contemplation of God, or even the obsession with the *idea*, the *thought* of God. A

favourite point of debate at that time was whether God can create a stone so big that He himself cannot lift it. In terms of action it also fostered world-avoidance, favoured monastic life, prescribed celibacy and promoted an ascetic life style.[44]

These Neo-Platonic ideas were championed by the Christian church at that time and because the church was the dominant political structure in medieval society, ordinary life also became governed by these ideas. They were publicly promoted by a hierarchy, (literally " the rule of the priests"), or by the officials of the church. As a result, during that time it became impossible not to believe in the existence of God in much the same way it is difficult today to believe that God exists.[45]

But the god people were expected to believe in and to worship was not the God of the Bible. It was at best a mixture of pagan and Christian elements. The medieval take on life meant that the church hierarchy (the clergy, the priests, the monks and the nuns) had authority, not only over the lives of individuals before death, but also over life *after* death. The function of the church in society was to be the mediator between the people and God. The meaning of human life was seen as a preparation for heaven after one died and an avoidance of ending up in hell. Furthermore, one could only hope to enter heaven and to avoid hell if one followed the rules, the rituals and the official doctrines of the church. The authority of the church was absolute. Not to follow those rules and doctrines could result in being accused of heresy, and if convicted, being burned at the stake to suffer a horrible death.[46]

In both its doctrine and practice the church was decidedly otherworldly, and aimed at withdrawal from everyday life. The life lived by the common people, the laity, was considered inferior to the life of the clergy, the priests, monks and nuns living in cloisters in the countryside away from the hustle and bustle of life in the city.[47] The life they lived was considered more holy because it celebrated the practice of abstinence and celibacy. The God the church preached to the laity was one of a Being whose primary action seemed to be to judge people outside the church for their sins. As a result the lives of ordinary people were riddled with guilt and the dominant question that occupied the lives of many people was, "What must I do to be saved?"[48]
Salvation could only be had via membership in the church. In addition, the doctrine of the church was considered more authoritative than its source, the Bible, because it enjoyed the benefit of Aristotelian logic, which at that time was considered the ultimate standard of truth. The method of thought resulting from this approach is known as *scholasticism.*[49]

The use of this logic also involved church theologians in accepting Aristotle's hierarchical view of the world and of society, which, with overtones of Plotinus, saw the created order of the world and society as a series of levels from lower to higher. The common people, the "laity" were said to occupy the lowest level, the clergy the intermediate, and God the highest level.[50] It also implicated them in an abstract concept of God, as "that Being to which no greater being can be thought,"[51] a far cry from the loving God in Christ revealed to us in the scriptures. Finally, this view admonished the common people to remain in their "station in life", or their divinely ordained location in

the hierarchy. This view stifled any kind of upward mobility, societal renewal or scientific innovation and earned the medieval times the label of "the dark ages."[52]

At this point in my narrative I must insert a caveat. It applies not only to the medieval phase of Western history but to all the other phases I attempt to write about as well: of course the actual history of Western civilization, including the medieval times, is far more complicated and colourful than I am describing. F.C. Coplestone, arguably *the* authority on this history, requires more than ten volumes to do the job. I only deal with this history in order to document the demise of God in the Western world and its consequences for us living in the twenty-first century. This development ought to make us realize that when we think about our existence today we stand in this tradition, which co-determines how we, in the current Western thought-and-action world, *frame* our existence.[53]

The Renaissance, the Reformation, and Protestant Scholasticism

This medieval church-sanctioned, sterile view of human life contained many elements of what I have called a pagan view of life, (otherworldliness, rule of the priests, necessity of church rituals to access God, escapism, emphasis on asceticism, etc.). It was not without its detractors. Around 1500 AD there arose two major cultural-religious movements, the Renaissance and the Reformation, which were highly critical of this take on life. Both forms of religious, societal and cultural renewal were grassroots movements. They were borne from the lives of common folk.[54]

For the Renaissance people, this renewal represented a return to the pre-Platonic Ancient Greek classics, specifically to the tradition of the Sophists, which stressed the priority of human individuals in the scheme of things. It mainly came to expression in the visual arts as the reaffirmation of the goodness of the human body. With its emphasis on individual freedom it became the precursor later in history of humanism, individualism, democracy and the promotion of human rights.[55]

For the Reformation renewal meant a re-affirmation of the Bible as the main source of wisdom. This view reacted against the reigning view that church doctrine was the sole source of all wisdom, which was propounded at that time by the church. For both movements this drive for renewal was a reaffirmation of the two spiritual roots of Western thought, Ancient Greek faith in reason and the Hebraic-Christian emphasis on love.

For a while the Renaissance opened up the Western world by changing the medieval focus on (the idea of) God to a preoccupation with human affairs, specifically with the cultural projects and productions of individual human beings. Might we say that the Renaissance people *worshipped* Greek culture? In any case, nothing seemed impossible to achieve to them if only people put their minds to it and put their hearts in it. However, this exclusive focus on the goodness of human cultural achievements inevitably, over time, ran into the *reality* that human beings do not always succeed and are also capable of some of the most horrendous forms of evil, like murder, rape and greed. Consequently,

the Renaissance's focus on the goodness of humanity lost some of its shine, and the cultural focus shifted to a preoccupation with the (physical) world *outside* of humanity, which, in turn, ushered in the domination of the physical sciences over Western culture, and the era of Classical Rationalistic Humanism with its emphasis on reason as *control*.[56]

Similarly, the Reformation had a salient effect on the lives of ordinary people. The medieval view had separated life into a profane and a sacred realm, where the sacred realm, away from ordinary living was considered more holy and closer to God. The view of the Reformation was that all of life is blessed by God, and not just what happens in the church. This view opened up medieval culture to rich *coram deo* living. Family life, commerce, science and the arts blossomed. This gospel-centred view of human life proposed by Calvin, Luther and the other Reformers soon spread like wild fire, all across northern Europe and the Scandinavian countries.[57]

Unfortunately, in an attempt to organize the insights of Calvin and Luther into a full-fledged theology, second generation Reformers once again availed themselves of scholastic/Aristotelian logic, which made the resulting theology rigid and sterile. A prime example of this movement was Melanchton, who came to be known as the "systematizer of Lutheran theology" and "the father of Protestant scholasticism."[58]

This attempt at a new Post-medieval theology was tellingly called "*Protest*-ant" theology. It more than anything else fragmented the Reformed- Christian community after Calvin and Luther into a large number of warring factions. Protestant church communities fought one another about the turn of a theological phrase: election, predestination, supra- and sub-lapsarianism, transubstantiation etc. etc.

The Reformers had intended the Bible to function as a source of inspiration and a unifying source of wisdom in human life. Instead, for many post-Reformation Christians the Bible became a major source of division with each Protestant denomination battling the others about interpretive issues like the factual inerrancy of the bible, about Divine election or the criteria regarding who were worthy to enter heaven after death and who not, and other theological concepts. This battle infamously became known as the "religious wars". They were indeed wars: for more than a century Protestants and Catholics, and later Protestants and Protestants, fought and killed one another, with each side claiming to defend true Christianity.[59]

In my view, Protestant scholasticism represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the vision of the Reformers. The primary aim of the Reformers was not to formulate and to defend yet another doctrine in competition with the existing doctrine of the medieval church. With their emphasis on the authority of the Bible in opposition to that of medieval church doctrine they intended to re-acquaint the common people with the loving God of the Bible. As the familiar slogan of the Reformation, "by grace, through faith alone" accurately summarizes, the unconditional love of God invites and incites human beings to place their unconditional trust and allegiance in Him as He reveals himself in the Christian scriptures. The image that resonates with this gospel is not that of a learned theologian correctly depicting the nature of the Divine, but rather that of a

child who, naively trusting, places his or her hand in the hand of a loving mother or father. The call of the Reformers was a call to *coram deo* living.

What then, was the error of the Protestant scholastics? Essentially, they turned the biblical message of the gospel into a *theory.* In doing this they repeated the error of the medieval theologians who attempted to logically prove the existence of God. They turned the long time Christian experience of the *reality* of God, dating all the way back to the Jewish worship of Jahweh, into a *concept* of God, literally a *theo-logy*. This practice did not result in disunity in the medieval church because the pope dictated adherence to church doctrine by threatening excommunication and death through the inquisition. People were *compelled* to believe what the church taught. As a result of the Reformation, however, the pope lost much of his power and theologians of different stripes were free to combat one another, with a vengeance, as did their followers. To be sure there is nothing wrong with biblical scholars logically isolating aspects of the gospel and debating their ideas with one another. Analysis and debate are in fact the lifeblood of scholarship. Their error lay in substituting these activities and their results for the heartfelt, childlike, trusting response of ordinary believers to the gospel.

These Protestant scholars were educated in a long tradition of Greek philosophy, which worshipped thought and reason over faith and thereby made logical thinking the primary arbiter of truth, including the truth of the revelation of God.[61] I deal with this issue more extensively in the section of the book that describes my Christian view of the world (chapter 6). Briefly, for now, this early Protestant tradition relates to the Stoic doctrine which states that the World Logos, which was said to be the ordering principle of the world, endows every human being at birth with a bit of itself, a *logos spermatikos*, or "seed of reason." This endowment enables every human being to *infallibly* formulate and judge the truth of every statement, including the statements of scripture. As we will see, this doctrine continued its influence unabated under the leadership of Rationalistic Humanism and in one form or another, pervades the history of Western Civilization to this day.[62]

We should not underestimate the disastrous consequences of this historical development for the Christian community in the Western world and indeed for the church across the globe. What motivated the Protestant scholastics to substitute the authority of reason and logic over the authority of scripture as the arbiter of truth? In essence, it was fear. They were afraid that the insights of Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers would be lost if they did not defend them with the help of logic. Whether a person was a true believer came to be determined by whether he or she subscribed to a certain set of creeds, doctrines, or "fundamentals" believed to be distilled from scripture. The problem was that different denominations adhered to different fundamentals. The unfortunate consequence of the actions of the Protestant scholastics over the last several centuries has been that the church became infected with the perversion of the gospel called *fundamentalism*.[60]
As a result, the influence of the insights of the Reformers were relatively short lived. The Christian gospel eventually lost much of its influence in the Western world.

The rise of Humanism and the demise of God

This worship of reason in human life came to expression in a different way in the Western world at that time in the spirit of Rationalistic Humanism, some times also referred to as "Modernism" or "the Enlightenment". After the Reformation lost much of its power to inspire Western culture, Humanism, as a culture-inspiring movement began to assert its influence everywhere. It had many well-known and famous proponents. Chief among them was Rene Descartes (1596-1650). But there were many others: Newton, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Leibniz, and Kant, to mention only a few. As we saw earlier, Humanism was the offspring of the Renaissance in that it celebrated the glory of Ancient Greek thought, one of the two earlier sources of inspiration for the Western world, the other being Hebraic Christianity. Like the Renaissance, Humanism found its particular source of inspiration in the Sophist period of Greek philosophy. This meant that it displayed a profound faith in the ability of individual human beings to map out their own destiny free from guidance or direction by any external entity, including the church, including God.

Given the traditional belief that human beings were able to reason infallibly, they were said by these Humanists to be *autonomous,* i.e. a law unto themselves. What fuelled their optimism about the freedom and capacity of human beings was the birth of the natural sciences. It demonstrated to them that human beings were able to analyze and to reconstruct reality, or the surrounding physical world, as a completely determined and closed chain of cause and effect. By doing this they were able to control many physical phenomena that formerly seemed to be beyond human control. Efforts by these physical scientists produced a great number of tangible positive discoveries into the world we inhabit, discoveries that benefit us to this day.[63]

However, the picture of the external world that these Rationalistic Humanists developed, and which they called "nature" was essentially a *mechanistic* picture in line with the model of the world that governed the physical sciences of that time. Much like the way they thought of themselves, they thought of nature as autonomous, i.e. as "a thing in itself," an "automaton," "a natural law unto itself." So, next to worshipping human individuals, they also worshipped "nature." In their understanding, "nature" was *natural*, the height of perfection. It was impervious to change. It should not, could not be modified. One had to take his cue from it and adapt oneself to it if one wanted to benefit from it.

As the epitome of perfection, Nature was also considered to be the model for human conduct and society, and as such it was capable of threatening the autonomy, the freedom of individual human beings, which was a central article of faith for these Humanists. So, they were faced with this paradox: to live the good life, individuals had to allow themselves to be directed by "nature", which they considered the height of perfection.

But by doing so they violated the central belief of Humanism in the autonomy of human beings, which meant that they were to be free from *any* outside direction. This dilemma was not just a logical paradox for them, but one that affected their entire life as adherents to this source of inspiration in Western Civilization. Rationalistic Humanism was their *religious* alternative to the worship of the Hebraic Christian God. This inherent internal tension in Humanism continued to influence the later history of the Western world, with an emphasis on the perfection of "nature" alternating with an emphasis on the autonomy of individuals from one period of history to the next.[64] [65]

The reign of Rationalistic Humanism had a major impact on the history of Western civilization after the Renaissance and the Reformation. It fostered the development of secularism by progressively denying the relevance of God in human affairs. One way it did this was by substituting the authority of the state for the authority of the church in society, culminating in what Taylor calls "exclusive humanism."[66]

It began by denying that individual human beings congregate in society with one another on the basis of a pre-existing divinely ordained hierarchy, as the medieval theologians had argued.[67] Rather, they believed that society consists of free individuals who are able and willing to harmonize their individual interests with one another, and who are able to decide together on what is right and what is wrong, purely on the basis of the fact that they are rational, reasonable beings, who are of good will and who have each other's best interests in mind.

Society as state was considered to be the sum of all individuals living in that state. It was said to exist for the mutual benefit of individuals and to guarantee individual freedom.[68] The business of the state was to promote a market economy, i.e. the exchange of goods, services and ideas. This activity, these Humanists believed, is based on the natural order of the world where things cohere because they serve one another in their survival when times are tough and in their flourishing when times are prosperous.[69] In essence, this view is based on the belief that self-love equals love for others. In addition to a market economy, Rationalistic Humanism actively promoted the practice of public opinion, based on the belief that, because people are reasonable, they can come to a common mind purely through an exchange of ideas. God and religion had nothing to do with this. The people were sovereign.[70]

All of this flows from the presupposition of Humanism that human beings are naturally motivated to act for the good of others. This natural drive to "beneficence", as it was called, was deemed to be inborn.[71]

With the benefit of hindsight we might consider the Humanist view of human beings naïve. But I have a lot of sympathy for their plight. To my mind these early Humanists were really deeply disappointed Christians. Consider the historical situation they were facing: the "god" they were presented by the clergy was not the God of the scriptures, but the god of the medieval hierarchy, who was at best a mixture of Christianity and Neo-

Platonic paganism, an aloof god, hardly a person at all, more like a concept, who ruled the world like a tyrant, and who had to be appeased. Moreover, the Christian religion of the post-Reformation period was a most divisive force that ushered in the terrible religious wars that lasted for more than a century.

So, in reaction to this caricature of God and for the sake of peace and prosperity these early Humanists devised an alternative way of framing human existence, one without God and without religion. Once Humanism became an exclusive force in Western culture, religion of any kind became publicly identified with superstition, fanaticism and "enthusiasm" or emotionalism. It came to be seen as a source of *dis*unity from which humankind needed to be liberated.[72]

This reversal of the prominence of God and religion in Western culture did not happen overnight. Adherence to the religion of Providential Deism offered an intermediate phase in this process. It was considered a more "natural" religion than orthodox Christianity. According to this belief, God established a plan, a "moral order" or "natural law," at the dawn of creation, known to every human being by virtue of their ability to reason, for them to follow. This plan was aimed at the promotion of "civility" in human society. It was designed by God to motivate us to act for the good of others. It aroused in us our "drive to beneficence," based on our ability to remake ourselves in order to do good. As a result of Deism, religion became reduced to moralism, or the belief in salvation by doing good deeds. To quote Immanuel Kant, all that was necessary was to "do unto others as we would have them do unto us." Worship, grace, scripture and devotion to God in order to inspire in us the desire toward beneficence, or to do good became irrelevant.[73]

From there it was a small step toward "exclusive Humanism" and the belief that human beings "naturally" have within themselves the ability *and* the desire to practice beneficence.[74]

That individual human beings should practice beneficence may have been the fervent wish of these Humanists. But it proved to be questionable whether people also had the ability and the motivation to do so freely, spontaneously, without the benefit of external direction and guidance, if not coercion. What was believed to be a description of human life became a *prescription* for human conduct promoted by the state. This development ushered in what Taylor calls "the disciplinary society."[75] Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), a Christian philosopher and student of this period in history, calls it the rise of "state absolutism" first formulated by Jean Bodin (1530-1596) and later promoted as a theory of "natural law" by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645).[83] In this prescription, human beings were encouraged (and admonished) to practice self-improvement and self-discipline toward the goal of beneficence in order to create an orderly society and to foster individual self-control (or *autarky,* i.e. self-rule). This was presumed to be the natural thing for human beings to do because the law of nature was

believed to be a moral order. This line of reasoning hid a clear intolerance for disorder. The ethic of self-improvement and a distaste for disorderliness manifested itself also in Christian circles, even more so in the Puritan offshoot of Calvinism.[77]

It is not always recognized that this ethos of discipline was dictated by the belief in the primacy of reason in human life. Philosophically the period of Western history now under discussion, the "Modern" period, was dominated by Rationalism, or the worship of reason. Rationalism's faith in reason was modern in the sense that in distinction from earlier conceptions of reason it was all about *order and control*. It aligned itself with the natural scientific method of thinking. To determine whether a statement or an action was reasonable or not was to see whether one was able to reduce a naturally occurring phenomenon to its basic elements and thereby be able to control it.

Paradoxically, given the Humanist's penchant for individual freedom, Rationalism exhibited the Modern period's celebration of the nature pole in Humanism. The Humanistic concept of "nature" was all about order and control. Taylor calls this the "impersonal order."[78] But, applying this notion to the way human beings were to live together came at the expense of individual human freedom. Human beings had to give up (some of) their autonomy in the service of this ("natural") public order.[79]

In addition, the promotion and practice of a disciplinary society involved what Taylor calls a kind of "flattening" of life. The life we ordinarily live is colourful, multi-dimensional, complex and even chaotic at times. But the life dictated by this Rationalistic regime had none of these characteristics and over time came to be endured as a cultural straight jacket.[80]

Irrationalism, Romanticism and the Hermeneutic of Suspicion

This situation gave rise to a critique of Rationalism fittingly called *Ir*rationalism. Understandably it arose from out of the individual freedom pole within Humanism against the nature pole. Much of the history of Western thought from hereon in became dominated by this critique. It was not an outright rejection of the presence of reason in human life but gave it a more limited place: reason was viewed as *embedded* in human life.

It may seem to the reader that I am making too much of Humanism as a spiritual child of the Renaissance in the history of the Western world, as if this worship of human beings is yet another religion in competition with the worship of the God of Hebraic Christianity.

But I ask you, how else do we account for its undeniable pervasive impact in post-Medieval, post-Renaissance and post-Reformation culture? To my mind the rise of Irrationalism was nothing short of a crisis of faith regarding the primacy of reason, so predominant in classical Rationalistic Humanism. Is it too much to call this a religious war *within* Humanism? Irrationalism was nothing short of a revolt against Rationalistic Humanism.

It should also be noted that Irrationalism in no way represented a repudiation of Humanism. It maintained the, in my opinion, mistaken notion of the autonomy of the individual human person. Reason as the principle of order and control may have been replaced by the notion of *human creativity*, but mankind continued to be viewed as being the measure of all things.[81]

The movement of Romanticism provided the first salvo in the battle between nature and freedom. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) passionately attacked both the supremacy of scientific control in life as well as the modern Rationalistic culture as a whole. For him the root of humanity did not lie in its rationality but in a *feeling of freedom*. He was obsessed with guaranteeing the autonomous freedom of individual human beings. Others followed in his footsteps.[82]

Romanticism celebrated the absolute incomparable individual uniqueness of every human being.[83] It also promoted the arts rather than the sciences. True to its Humanistic roots, its art productions were expressions of a kind of hero worship. Classical art was said to imitate the universal "Forms" (the mimesis of Plato's eternal verities) underlying the visible world. By way of contrast Romantic art celebrated the creativity of the individual artists, or the unique inspiration spontaneously arising out of the depth of their souls. In addition, Classical Rationalistic Humanism had fostered a "cookie cutter" mentality, where every human being was the same as every other human being because they all possessed the same ability to reason. Romantic Humanism stressed that every human being is colourfully different from every other human being because they are all endowed with the gift of *creativity*. In that view every person is a hero who creates his or her own unique life world.[84]

Irrationalistic Humanism's influence also extended to the way they viewed society and culture. It came to expression in its notion of "community", which became the origin of what we today know and celebrate as "ethnic diversity." According to them, no nation, culture, society, family, or race is like any other. They all are universally unique. They have their own history and their own story to tell. These ethnic groupings have their own unique rules, laws, and norms, which must be respected as their ethnic human right. In the very least, we must reckon with the fact that there is more than one kind of normal in the world. Given the fact that each of us belongs to some ethnic community or other we must respect and appreciate the otherness of others in our lives.[85]

In addition, Irrationalism extended this idea of diversity to periods of history as well, in a view that came to be known as "Historicism". No time in history was said to be like any other. History was essentially seen as a process of succeeding revolutions, like the

French, the American and the Soviet Revolution. In each age over time there arises something new, some would say "improved". History is not just a process, but a liberating project, an emancipatory progression. Conservatives became the defenders of the past and the status quo. The progressives promoted future change.[86]

Furthermore, in the area of scholarship natural science was demoted from the primary way of doing research. The Romanticist Vico, for example, argued that knowledge of nature is inferior, second-hand compared to knowledge of society and of history. He employed a criterion of knowledge used regularly during the Middle Ages, which stated that one cannot really know something unless one has made it. God made nature, said Vico, so only God knows the natural world. To human beings, nature is given only as "brute fact". We can only observe it "from the outside in". But we see our own lives "from the inside out", and via sympathetic understanding we understand the lives of men and women in other cultures and other historical times as well. History is the greatest science, human beings *make* themselves through history. It is the process of human self-creation. History is a *Geisteswissenschaft*, as Dilthey was to call it later, literally a "science of the human spirit" rather than a "natural" science. The distinction between the "natural" and "social" sciences started with Vico.[87]

So, in the Romantic view of scholarship the focus of research on nature became replaced by a focus on society, culture and history. This change also involved a change in research methodology. In the classical Humanist model the task of research was said to consist of reducing complex phenomena to their elements. Elements were considered the basic stand-alone building blocks of reality. In the Romanticist view of scholarship, particularly as it pertained to the study of human beings, the basic building block was considered to be a *Gestalt*. In perception theory a Gestalt is an element that is embedded in a context. Per definition an element is that part of a Gestalt, which is focused upon, and the context is that which is not focused upon. Both element and context depend on one another. One cannot know an element without its context and vice versa. This empirical datum in perception serves to illustrate the relationship between reason and life in the Romanticist view. "Reason", as a metaphor for human thought, awareness or conscious existence, can only function in this view in relation to that part of our existence of which we are not aware, or the unconscious part. This development made people realize the importance of feeling, emotion, passion and desire next to thought in the internal households of human beings.[88]

Dynamic psychology, or psychoanalysis, championed by Sigmund Freud *et al*, somewhat later in history proposed the possibility that our reason or our conscious functioning is naturally *determined* by that which is not reason, or our dynamic unconscious. As Freud suggested, we are by no means as rational as we think we are. There is in all of us a tension between our Ego and our Id. Normally, or naturally, our thoughts are "towed" by our unconscious feelings or base passions. (Die Gedanken im Schlepptau des Gefuhl, thoughts being towed by feelings). Psychoanalysis then aims at liberating us by making us aware of our unconscious passions, or by making the Id into an Ego. (Freud: Wo Es war, soll Ich werden, what Id is shall become Ego). So, this change in view implied that a) human beings are less in control of themselves than was previously thought, and that

b) they are also less altruistic than they would like to believe. [89]

H.E. Ellenberger, *the* authority on the history of dynamic psychology, calls Romanticism the "cult of the irrational."[90] It celebrated feeling and intuition rather than logical analysis. In a later phase of history, Romanticism evolved into the kind of irrationalism illustrated by the philosophies of Schopenhauer, Bergson, Nietzsche and the Existentialists. This historical development represents a considerable come down from the conviction concerning human beings during the heyday Classical Rationalistic Humanism about the power of reason. It represents a loss of faith in the capacity of reason, or of knowledge in general, to comprehend life.

However much these thinkers may have differed from one another in their definition of life, they were united in the conviction *that life is bigger and much more powerful and mysterious than the knowledge we have of it.*

Schopenhauer's *Transcendental Voluntaristic Idealism*, as Copleston calls it,[91] is a prime example of this Irrationalism. The main idea of his philosophy is that of a *universal will to live*, which is the blind impulse and dynamic force of the world. This force is constantly at work propelling the universe into a process of infinite becoming and permanent change. This universal life impulse, in which human beings participate, is a *noumenal* force, in the sense that it lies *behind* the phenomena of our everyday experience of reality and dominates our conceptual knowledge of it. Thus, there is no such thing as a total grasp of life. At best we have a partial, intuitive knowledge of it.[92] We *are now a far cry away from Classical Rationalistic Humanism's belief that human beings are able to control and order their life space!*

Schopenhauer's pupil, Friedrich Nietzsche, is another example of Irrationalism. He turned Schopenhauer's *will to live* into a *will to power*. Schopenhauer was a pessimistic thinker because for him this blind will to live rules the universe and also mankind like the Greek *Ananke* or fate, so that human beings have very little capacity to influence the situation. Nietzsche with his will to power is more optimistic about the chances of individual human beings to make a living. *He exhorts people to free themselves from conventions, traditions and especially from religion and God, and to affirm life by becoming their own creators of values, in order in this way to exercise their will to power.*

Asserting our will to power by creating our own value systems is the only thing that matters in life for Nietzsche. One of his better-known quotes is, "*This world is the will to power—and nothing else! And you yourselves too are this will to power—and nothing else.*"[93] Even knowledge itself must be the servant of this calling. Truth is only a fiction and theories are only good or bad insofar as they do or do not advance one's will to power, which for individuals culminates in becoming *Ubermensch* (i.e."Superman").
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Perhaps as an appeal to authority, Nietzsche, who loved the culture of Ancient Greece, refers to two streams of thought in that culture: a Dionysian and an Apollonian stream. Throughout history these two streams have been identified with passion and reason. For

Nietzsche, Dionysus is the symbol of the stream of life and the place where boundaries fall away and individuals become united with this stream into a primordial unity. Apollo, on the other hand, is the symbol of light, of measurement and of restraint. He represents the principle of individuation and separation.

The Dionysian stream is full of horror, terror and danger, but it is also the place of vitality, creativity and constant renewal. For this reason Nietzsche wants to get us in touch with this stream by uncovering the many conceptual masks that civilization has placed upon mankind in the past. Thus, we have arrived at a further elaboration of the method of irrational scholarship and research. It has now become an action in which we *unmask* the usual ways in which we frame the world. One gets at this deeper, hidden Dionysian layer of our experience via imagination, intuition, and empathy rather than by logical analysis. But getting at this unconscious layer also requires the acceptance of the fact that none of us are who we think we are. In addition, it also requires adherence to the view that what we hold for truth is really a fiction, which at best serves to contain the Dionysian beast that all of us are, hidden down in the deep unconscious recesses of our mind.[94] Thus, what Nietzsche advocated was in essence a *hermeneutic of suspicion*,[95] which requires a constant questioning of the viewpoints and beliefs that we take for granted and the values that we hold dear.

It is not difficult to discern in Nietzsche's philosophy elements that were later to come to fuller fruition in the Psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, in the Dialectical Materialism of Marx, and in the current philosophical movement of Post-Modernism.[96]

Understanding the essence of human life now involves habitually questioning and unmasking everything we naively and traditionally hold dear and believe in. Anything less than that means that we are living inauthentic lives. Elsewhere I have called this way of existing the integrity of questioning to combat the inauthentic certainty of knowing.[97] Currently this life style is especially *en vogue* among the so-called millennials. This perpetual search for meaning without ever arriving is per definition an individual form of creative self-expression that, according to this view, is to be respected in every one of our fellow human beings. Historically it represents the triumph of the individual freedom pole in Irrationalistic Humanism. But at what price? This kind of living style knows only one law and one authority: the intolerance of intolerance.

Postscript

The rule of Rationalistic Humanism, prefigured by the Renaissance, began with the naive conviction that human beings are supremely able to control the world in which they live. It ended with a profound admission that things are spiraling out of control. The world today is in an uproar. Things are flying apart. The cosmos has become a random universe.[98] There is a global sense of unease about how we frame our existence. The way we live and move and have our being in the Western world today is characterized by

uncertainty and unpredictability. We no longer feel at home on this secular globe we have created during the last five centuries.

As this was happening we more and more banished God from the public sphere *and* from our private lives. This was not some intellectual exercise while we continued to live our lives as before. It is how we religiously frame our existence. We no longer look to Him for help when we are troubled. We have come of age. It is now up to us to know what to do. But we feel we do not have the means to save our lives. Ethics, coupled with a sense of helplessness has replaced our lives of faith. We lack a place to lay ourselves to rest. We know more than ever before about human life, but we no longer seem to know what human life is all about.

Are these two historical developments connected? I believe they are. In chapter one I wrote:

> Something essential was lost when we collectively decided to live life without God. Secularism represents a loss of religious support and direction for human life. Without God, human life easily becomes a perpetual search to serve and to worship something or someone, *anything* other than God, without the chance of ever coming to rest anywhere.

For thousands and thousands of years civilizations were cognizant of the presence of the Divine in human life. It gave significance to the lives of human beings. For paganism this presence was threatening. For the worshippers of Yahweh and for Hebraic Christianity that presence was a protective cover over their lives. In this secular age we have lost that sense of support and we feel supremely vulnerable in an uncaring universe. [99]

Perhaps the time has come to acknowledge that without God we are *not* masters of our own fate, that in living our lives we are addressed by Someone greater than ourselves, a God who challenges us to live life in ways He has revealed, ways informed by *coram deo*. What human life from that perspective looks like is the focus of the next chapter.

Notes

[1]Taylor, Ch. (2007) *A Secular Age*. London: Harvard University Press: 25
[2]Armstrong, K. (1994) *A History of God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 3-6,
Capetz, P. (2003) *God A brief History*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 4-9.
According to Armstrong the paganistic religions, which existed in the
Middle East some 4000-5000 years ago all had a view of the Divine that
included the worship of many gods, whose purpose it was to access a
mysterious Deity, who resided in a far away place, who threatened human
existence, who had to be appeased, who required an ascetic form of living,
who was otherworldly and unreliable, and who could only be known and
approached with difficulty via a complicated series of cultic rituals.
See also Van Belle (2013) *Explorations in the History of Psychology*.
Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press: 32
[3]Armstrong (1994): 3, 7
[4]Ibid:6, 7
[5]Ibid:3, 4, 10, 11
[6]Ibid:4
[7]Ibid:18
[8]Ibid:44, 49
[9]Ibid:11
[10]Malachi: chapt. 4, Matthew 1:17, Luke 3: 23-37, Luke 1: 47-80, 2: 29-32
[11]Genesis: chapt. 35, Exodus: chapt. 3
[12]Genesis: chapt. 15, 17, Exodus: chapt. 19 ff.
[13]Exodus: chapts. 6-14
[14]Genesis:15, 17, Exodus:24
[15]See many of the psalms
[16]Book of Leviticus.

Modern historians of religion like Armstrong paint a picture of the people of Israel that
is decidedly different from, and in many ways at odds with the biblical account.
They by and large do not go beyond what in their view was the
image the Israelites constructed of their God, Yahweh. They fail to record
the *reality* of Yahweh in the life of Israel. This issue is important, because it pervades
much of the historiography of the history of God. In my view such historiography is
not an account of actual events but rather one of how people *perceived and formed
concepts* of God. This kind of historiography betrays a Humanistic bias. It is in
evidence in most modern history writers. In the Introduction of her book, Armstrong
openly admits to having this bias. It colours the conclusions she draws from the facts
she presents.
Furthermore, according to these modern historians the central motive in the
historical development of the nation of Israel was the movement from
polytheism to monotheism. Armstrong (1994): chapt. 2, Capetz (2003):8.
The biblical account knows nothing of that. While monotheism was
certainly an aspect of the history of Israel this was not what motivated the
lives of the Israelites. It is a historical fact that, with the exception of the
nation of Israel, the major religions of the Middle East some 4000 years

ago were all paganistic and mostly polytheistic. It is also true that the
worship of Yahweh by the nation of Israel throughout its history was
monotheistic in the sense that they worshipped only one God. But the
difference and the contrast between the worship of Yahweh and the
worship of the pagan gods were so much more than a conflict between
polytheism and monotheism.

Armstrong in her book, *A History of God*, writes that the Yahweh religion
of Israel was intolerant of other religions in the area because it was
monotheistic and she praises paganism because it was polytheistic and
therefore had room for many gods. She also accuses monotheistic religions
as Judaism, Christianity and Islam of patriarchy because according to her,
all monotheistic religions serve a male God. No doubt the monotheistic
religions of that time including the worship of Yahweh, showed evidence
of patriarchy, but so did the polytheistic religions of, for example, the
Greeks and Romans.

In my view the neglect by modern historians of the actual history of God in
Israel represents an anachronism. It neglects to acknowledge the Israelite
experience of their God *revealing* Himself to them. Such historiography is a revision of
 a historical process that actually occurred. It may be that we
today are no longer able to experience God revealing Himself to us, but
 that experience was real for the Israelites of times past.

[17]Book of Leviticus

[18]Amos: chapt. 5, 8, Armstrong (1994):44

[19]Armstrong (1994):43-50, Amos chapt. 5:21-27

[20]Micah chapt. 6:8

[21]Mark chapt. 12:29-31

[22]Armstrong (1994):44

[23]Van Belle (2013): chapt. 3

[24]Ibid (2013):27, 22, 24, 32, 33, 59 (question 1, 4), 80
  See also Fustel De Coulange (2001) *The Ancient City, a Study of the Religion, Laws
  and Institutions of Greece and Rome*. Kitchener, ON: Batoche Books, about the
  religious nature of the Greek polis. See also Van Belle (2013): 61, Dooyeweerd
  (1979): 22-25

[25]Armstrong, A. H. (1983*) An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*.
  Totawa, New Jersey: Rowan and Allenfield
  Kok, J. H. (1998) *Patterns of the Western Mind, a Reformed Christian perspective.*
  Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press

[26]Van Belle (2013):22, 24. The Achilles heel of Evolutionism (*not* of the theory of
  biological evolution) is that it involves itself in an infinite regression.

[27]Kirk, G.S. & Raven, J. E. (1963) *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. Cambridge:
  Cambridge U. Press

[28]See Hesiod's *Theogony,* Van Belle (2013):24

[29]Van Belle (2013):23-28

[30]Ibid:33-35

[31]Ibid:35-37

[32]Ibid:32, 33 Orphism is clearly a pagan religion

[33]Ibid:43. See also note 2

[34]Ibid:42, 42, 61: question 7, 62: question 8

[35]Ibid:43-49, Armstrong (1983): chapts. 7, 8, 9, 10, Kok (1998):51-59

[36]Ibid:49-54, Armstrong (1983): chapts. 11, 12, Kok (1998):60-69

[37]Ibid:55-57, Armstrong (1983): chapts. 16, 17, Kok (1998):69-73

[38]Ibid:63

[39]Ibid:63-65, Armstrong (1983):166,
    Cahil, T, (1998) *The Gift of the Jews*. New York: Nan A. Talese/ Anchor Books

[40]Van Belle (2013):65, 66, Copplestone F.C. (1972) *A history of Medieval Philosophy*.
    Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press:17- 49

[41]Van Belle (2013):67-69, Augustine (1993*) Confessions*. Transl. By F. J. Sheed,
    Cambridge: Hacket Publishing Co. Later in his life Augustine rooted himself more and
    more in the spirit of Hebraic Christianity and less in the spirit of neo-Platonism. As a
    result, his insights became more profoundly biblical and influential in the history of the
    church. However, as we will see, this Christian revival bypassed the development of
    the medieval church.

[42]Van Belle, 2013:76,77

[43]Van Belle (2013):65

[44]Ibid:66

[45]See note 1, Dooyeweerd, H. (1979) *Roots of Western culture, Pagan,Secular and
    Christian Options*. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation:75, 76

[46]Taylor, Ch. (1989) *Sources of self, the Making of the |Modern Identity*.Cambridge,
    Massachusetts: Harvard University Press:215, 216   Dooyeweerd, H. (1963)
    Vernieuwing en Bezinning op het Reformatorisch Grondmotief. Zutphen, NL: J. B.
    Van Den Brink:113

[47]Taylor: *Sources* (1989):216, 217. Taylor (2007):81, 370 talks about "higher vocations."

[48]Taylor (2007):61

[49]Dooyeweerd (1979):114, 116, Dooyeweerd (1963): Chapt. 2:111- 120, 283

[50]Van Belle (2013):71, Taylor (1989):217

[51]Ibid:71, 72, 76, 77

[52]Ibid:83

[53]For the influence of these two sources of inspiration on the history of Western Culture
    to this day see my "The Life of Soul" (unpublished paper)

[54]Ibid:77

[55]Ibid:83-85

[56]Van Belle (2013):85. Later irrationalism was to own up to, and even celebrate the
    irrational, amoral, and violent traits in human nature: Taylor (2007):369

[57]Ibid:78

[58]Ibid:78-80, Dooyeweerd (1979):114, 116, 141-143, Dooyeweerd (1963): chapt.2:111-
    120, 283. For an insightful description of this historical development, Google
    Protestant Scholasticism

[59]Van Belle (2013):78-80, Dooyeweerd (1979):145, Dillenberger, J. and
    Welch, C. (1954) *Protestant Christianity*. New York: Scribner and Son:
    78-85

[60]Armstrong, K. (2000) *The Battle for God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

[61]Van Belle (2013):79

[62] Ibid:54, 55, Taylor (2007):124, 125

[63] Ibid:86, Dooyeweerd (1979):149-151. These scientific discoveries in physics also lead to negative results like the construction of the atom bomb.

[64] Ibid:86-89, Dooyeweerd (1979):150-153

[65] Yet another way of framing this dilemma is to view it as a mutual contradiction in the relation between subject and object. See chapt. 6.

[66] Taylor (2007):221, 233, 234, 242-269

[67] Ibid:161, 162, 164, 170, 192-194

[68] Ibid:170, 171, 259, 160, 236

[69] Ibid:181

[70] Ibid:185, 192

[71] Ibid:246, 274, 251, 180

[72] Ibid:239

[73] Ibid:221-234, 251

[74] Ibid:259, 227, 246, 247, 251

[75] Ibid:91

[76] Dooyeweerd (1979):156-158

[77] Taylor (2007):108-111, 114, 121, 127 (influence of neo-Stoicism) 134, 136

[78] Ibid:288- 290. Taylor blames Deism for this condition and claims that it remains with us to this day.

[79] Ibid:125, 283, Dooyeweerd (1979):152, 153

[80] Taylor (2007):309, 372

[81] Ibid:370, Vollenhoven, D.H.T. (1956*) Kort Overzicht van de Geschiedenis der Wijsbegeerte. (Brief Overview of the History of Philosophy). Voor de cursus M.O.A.* vol. 1956, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Theja:39, 40. Instead of viewing human creativity as embedded in the surrounding life world it continued to see the world as the product of human creativity.

[82] Van Belle (2013):141, 142, Dooyeweerd (1979):160, 161

[83] Dooyeweerd (1979):175- 178. The late Carl Rogers, a contemporary psychotherapist voiced this sentiment when he stated that "human beings are universally unique." Van Belle, H. A. (1980) *Basic Intent and Therapeutic Approach of Carl R Rogers*. Toronto: Wedge)

[84] Taylor (2007):352, 319, 370, 372

[85] Dooyeweerd (1979):178-182

[86] Ibid:182-185

[87] Van Belle (2013):140, 141, Taylor (2007):182, 183, Berlin, I. (1977) *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas.* New York: Vintage

[88] Ibid:168-171

[89] Van Belle (2013):173-183

[90] Ellenberger, H.E. (1970) *The Discovery of the Unconscious*. New York:

Basic Books:199

[91] Coplestone, F.C. (1965) *A History of Philosophy. Vol. VII*. London: Burns and Oates:286

[92] Van Belle (2013):153, 154

[93] Ibid:154, 155, Copleston (1965):407

[94] Ibid:155, Ellenberger, (1970):529, 542; Copleston (1965):397

[95] Smith, J. K.A. (2006) *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*? Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic:86

[96] Taylor (2007):369, Smith, (2006) passim

[97] Van Belle, H.A. (2012) *Intergeneration Lost and Found, why suits and skirts don't talk with jeans, why they should, and how they can.* Edmonton, AB: Legacy Press:45

[98] Probably the most accurate metaphor for the failure of Humanism in its central aim to control the world is the fact that in our current view of the world we have substituted "the universe" for what we used to call "the cosmos." It is an admission that in the minds of many the world we live in is an uncontrollable wilderness. Taylor (2007): 351, Chapt. 9.

[99] Perversely, Nietsche may be right. When you eliminate God from the scheme of things you are compelled to make up your own values and rules without a blueprint.

II. Perspective

The Bible is a spiritual book about the relationship between God and humankind. It narrates older and newer sightings of the presence of God in human life.

The heart of this relationship is that God and humankind are (meant to be) lovers. This relationship is repeatedly broken by people and repeatedly restored by God
.
The context of this relationship is the joint development of creational possibilities by God and humankind.

The ultimate goal of this relationship is the reparation of a world in trouble, or the coming of the "kingdom of God."

This history of salvation includes the history of all of humankind.

The centerpiece of this history is the incarnation, or the event of God (be)coming down-to-earth to live in our neighbourhood, the fulfillment of coram deo, or the restoration of the broken relationship between God, humankind and the world.

Coram deo makes a spirituality for ordinary, everyday living possible. In opposition to a world avoiding spirituality it offers us a spirituality with which one can get to work.

The essence of biblical spirituality is that the love of God opens our eyes and ears, and hands to an enriched perspective on the world in which we live.

Chapter three

Coram Deo: Living life in the presence of God

This chapter continues the development of the idea that human beings are not a law unto themselves as the Humanists believe, but live to give an account of themselves in answer to Someone or something other than themselves (other people, God, the universe, etc.) A Christian way of expressing that reality is to say that we (are meant to) live our lives *coram deo,* i.e. before the face of, or in the presence of God. Christians share this view of human life with the adherents of Islam and with the adherents of Judaism. That is no accident, since all three are known to be "religions of the Book," i.e. the Old Testament part of the Bible. *Coram deo* is the central teaching of the Christian scriptures. For this reason a detailed view of the Bible related to *coram deo* is in order. My analysis presupposes a certain familiarity with that Book.

The biblical view of human life is *coram deo*. In the following chapters I will attempt to describe in more detail what living in this way is like from the biblical point of view. The centrality of *coram deo* is maintained throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. It is literally the *Spirit* of the Bible. But it is exemplified by the life of Jesus during the 30-plus years He lived and died on earth. A close reading of the gospels is therefore also mandatory.

My description of *coram deo* operates with a more or less hidden distinction between "structure" and "direction". A less than accurate, but more familiar description of what is intended is the distinction between "reality" and "spirituality". In the Bible this distinction is usually referred to as "flesh" and "spirit".[1] Because fundamentalism has made major inroads into Christianity since the time of the Reformation, many of the standard interpretations of the Bible are based on a structural reading, as if the Bible gives us a detailed description of the reality of human life.[2] I will argue that the language of the Bible is directional or spiritual, i.e. it gives a description of human life *from a certain Christian religious point of view*, a view that is governed by the centrality of *coram deo*. Non-Christians may not share this view, since it presupposes trust in the Christian God, but it is central to the Christian scriptures. As will become evident, my description entails a way of reading the Bible that aims to demonstrate a unique view of reality. This Bible-inspired view is radically different from the view with which most of us are familiar and which we consider "normal" in our western world of thought and action.[3]

By way of initial example of this difference in perspective we may compare and contrast our usual understanding of tragedies and miracles in our everyday life with the way the Bible describes them. We tend to define the miracles Jesus did as supernatural, i.e. as

mystical counterfactual actions that transcend the laws of nature. The Bible knows nothing about this characterization of Jesus' miracles. It describes them as acts of grace that bring honour and glory to God. Its descriptions are entirely in line with *coram deo*, i.e. what is unusual and extraordinary about the miracles Jesus did, as chronicled in the gospels, is that they were acts in line with *coram deo*. That is to say, they were evidence of God's grace in the world. They should not occur in a world in which evil appears to dominate, and yet they do.

Similarly, our understanding of tragedies differs from the way the Bible talks about them. Tragedies are always accompanied by suffering. They hurt. A case in point is Jesus' suffering on the cross. Our usual focus is on the physical pain, on the crown of thorns on His head, the beatings He endured, the nails through His hands and feet, the blood pouring out of His body. Gory medieval paintings emphasize this focus. But for Jesus the greatest suffering of the crucifixion was the absence of God. His suffering was most intense when He cried out "My God, my God, why have *You* forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) Again, the context is *coram deo*. The Bible does not ignore human realities like physical pain, disease and death, it does not consider health and prosperity unimportant, but it contextualizes these life realities into a framework of *coram deo*.[4]

So, my first task in this chapter will be to illustrate how the Bible from beginning to end lives and breathes with *coram deo*. I will have to show from a number of different books of the Bible that *coram deo* is a constant central theme. Subsequent to that, my focus will be on a close reading of the gospels, i.e. the chronicles about the life and death of Jesus, since I believe that the life of Jesus represents a prime example of *coram deo* living.

In a subsequent chapter I will also attempt to show that/how an emphasis on *coram deo* living requires a different way of reading the Bible. In addition, one more chapter will deal with my view of how Christians ought to relate to those who are not Christians after the incarnation of Jesus the Christ. In that chapter I will discuss the so called "*antithesis*", or the opposition between good and evil in human life, but do so with a new twist: i.e. as a declaration of solidarity with all members of the human race. This is to say that after the incarnation, as an act of God's grace, Christians and non-Christians alike live paradoxical lives, in which good and evil co-exist and alternate one another. In a next chapter I will attempt to outline my conviction that *coram deo* requires a new vision of created reality, one in which the presence of God plays a central role. Finally, in one more chapter I intend to deal with how Christians in my view (ought to) experience spirituality.

The Bible begins with the creation of the world, in particular with an account of what it was like to live in the Garden of Eden.[5] We tend to picture this way of living as a leisurely vacation in nature: trees, plants and flowers all around, fruit just for the taking, little brooks to drink from and to bathe in, all kinds of animals to name, balmy climate, no need to wear clothes-- in short, a nudist's paradise. What is missing from this description of created reality is its most essential element, which is in fact the focus of the creation narrative: the easy, friendly, intimate way God and human beings interact with each other face to face. The heart of God and the hearts of Adam and Eve are open to

one another. There is nothing to hide. There is no place for shame or guilt. They know one another. God tells them like it is, as to friends, admonishes them: "Eat the fruits from every tree you like. But not from that one." An easy command to follow with an abundance of other fruit bearing trees available.[6]

But these human beings, created and loved by God, so the story goes, are tempted by the devil/snake/deceiver and eat from the forbidden tree anyway.[7] The book *Escape from Freedom* by Erich Fromm, interprets this as mankind's first act of liberation from God, and views it positively as a step on the road to human emancipation from authority.[8] That is not the way the Bible interprets it. According to its narrative, what occurs is a fall, a fall from the grace of an easy, close, intimate love relationship between God and humankind. In consequence of this act Adam and Eve turn their backs to God, fear Him, flee from his presence and hide themselves in shame and guilt.[9]

The results are catastrophic for the whole of creation and for humankind, the "crown" of creation in particular. *Coram deo* is decisively damaged. God defensively closes the garden to avoid access to the tree of life for humankind, which would destroy the possibility of *coram deo* irreparably.[10] The result of this damage to *coram deo* is immediate and worldwide. Creation faces ruin, thorns and thistles grow instead of readily available fruit, cultivating and harvesting take strenuous effort, danger of natural cataclysms and (now wild) animals threaten constantly: the environment has become *hostile.* Men survive by the sweat of their brow, women experience pain in bringing forth continued life and in their desires they become subject to patriarchy.[11] So, when the friendship relationship between God and humankind is damaged, so is the relationship between individual human beings (society) and their relation to the natural world surrounding them (the environment). These disasters do not occur separate or independent from one another. They are of a piece: the fall from grace has spiritual, individual, social, cultural and natural consequences.

After humankinds fall from grace God and people, people and people continue to interact, but there is no longer much love between them. Relationships become adversarial. It begins with envy and anger, then murder (Cain and Abel), and it ends with people doing *only evil all the time.*[12] The whole world is twisted out of shape when *coram deo* is corrupted. What makes living in the presence of God so important that when it is disrupted it has dire consequences for the entire cosmos? For a possible answer we need to consult the description of God's creating acts in Genesis 1 and 2.

What, in essence, does it mean that God created the heavens and the earth, including humankind? In a number of instances God reveals Himself to us as "eternal." We have little understanding of what that means.[13] We could say that it means that He is alone in time, there is nothing before Him and nothing after Him, He is the alpha *and* the omega. He is the origin of space, there is nothing or no one beside Him, no other gods exist next to Him or before his face. He has perfect identity and integrity, in all that He does He is Himself, this is how He reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush.[14] He alone is God, He is the origin of time and space.[15]   Again, by using the male form I do not mean to make a pronouncement about the gender of God. (Recall what I wrote in chapter one).

At some point in time, in the "beginning", God notes, given His penchant for compassion and comfort, that it is not good for Him to be alone and He calls a world into being in space, next to Him, before Him, and over time dependent on Him for its continued existence and ultimate destination. Nothing and no one in the world exists independent from Him. No God means no world. The creatureliness of creatures means: that they are connected to Him, in dependence on Him, supported by Him. They have existence only in His presence, under His protection, before His face, *coram deo* according to the Bible narrative.

An integral part of God's created world-reality is the creation of people. We in the Western world readily think of reality as separate from humankind, "objective", a "thing in itself", against which we test our "subjective" hypotheses. The Bible never does that. There is no creation outside of its relation to humankind.[16]

But the creation of people is different from the rest of created reality. Women and men are said to be "made in the image of God" and are called to "rule" over God's other creatures.[17] What could this mean?

Our usual understanding of ruling is to dominate. The Bible's definition is the exact opposite. For humankind to rule means to serve creation, to protect and to nurture it, to (culturally) bring it to fruition and in this way to image God. For that is how God rules the world. Contrary to deism,[18] the creation of the world was not a onetime event after which God left it to fend for itself. Instead it is an ongoing process of calling-it-into-being-and-nurturing-and-protecting-it-toward-its-fulfillment, from the "garden of Eden" in Genesis 1 to "the city of God " in Revelations 21.[19] According to the Bible, God is the necessary and sufficient *dynamic* condition of the being and becoming of humankind-in-the-world. *Coram deo*! And for a man or a woman to serve God as His image bearer means to acknowledge this reality in who or what he or she is and does.

Again, according to the Bible, as I read it, God enlists the service of people in bringing the creation to fruition.[20] There is a job to be done. When people misdirectedly start using and abusing parts of the world for their own individual or collective convenience, there is hell to pay in the rest of creation. The biblical narrative of the fall, confirms once again the central importance of *coram deo*.

I may now be in a position to assert that the focus of the Bible is exclusively a narrative about humankind's relation to God. It is a Christian spiritual account of human life: how this relation to God was established, how it was broken or damaged, what its consequences were and how it is being restored. Its concern is with the *direction* in which human life can go and ought to go. In my Christian tradition we are fond of saying that the bible offers us the "rule for faith and service."[21] We should not make it say more or less than that. The Bible is a "Christian religious" book. It tells us what or whom to trust and whom or what to serve, given the reality of human life as *coram deo*.

At this point, permit me to relate some instances in the biblical narrative, which, to my understanding, illustrate the fact that the core biblical paradigm for the reality of human existence is face-to-face living with God. It depicts the spiritual space, so to speak, of human life. References to this metaphor are pervasive throughout the Bible. Rather than list every passage that refers to *coram deo*, I will attempt to give a storied paraphrase of it.[22]

The purpose of the creation of humankind, according to the Bible, was to allow God and people to be best friends. The intent was for them to be lovers. The relationship was meant to be personal, with all of the familiar associations of that notion. They were meant to want to spend time with each other, to look each other in the eye, to embrace one another, to be an open book to each other, to tell one another the secrets of their heart, to take walks together, to delight in each other's company, etc.

The imagery and language of the bible is even more robust than that: One day God goes for a walk in the Garden of Eden he has made in the cool of the day. As he meanders and looks around he turns his face to where he sees Adam. His face lights up: "Hi, friend!" he says. "Nice evening, eh?" They sit down together and they talk: God asks, "How was your day?" And Adam tells how he met some animals and how he thought up names for them. Two friends taking a break. They look at each other and smile. All is well between God and humankind.[23]

We will never grasp the catastrophic nature of humankind's fall into sin if we fail to appreciate it as a cosmic breakdown of a love relationship, with feelings of rejection and abandonment on the part of God and feelings of guilt, shame and fear on the part of humankind. As we know from fights between lovers, this does not mean the relationship is broken. But it does mean, when that happens, that they turn their backs to one another. They no longer look each other in the eye and they are not on speaking terms. According to the Christian gospel God makes the first move back when He goes looking for Adam and Eve. And they in turn start looking for ("seeking") his face.[24] With tears in their eyes their relationship is being restored, and broken again, and restored, God always taking the first step and humankind sooner or later seeking God's face. From then on to the present that is what characterizes the relationship. Creation, fall, redemption, restoration, creation, fall etc., the spiralling cycle of living life BC (before the incarnation of the Christ) and AD (Anno Domino, after Christ).[25]

It is a *cosmic* lovers' quarrel. The stakes are high worldwide. When the friendship relationship between God and humankind is damaged, so is the relationship between individual human beings (society) and their relation to the natural world surrounding them. These disasters do not occur separate/independent from one another. They are of a piece: the fall from grace has spiritual, individual, social, cultural and natural dimensions. These are not the *consequences* of us turning our backs to God. They *are* the ways in which we do that. They move the unfolding of creation forward under the support and guidance of God, but in the opposite direction, away from him.

Unfortunate examples of this movement abound in the history of humankind. Take for example the invention and production of tools for farming and manufacturing to enhance human life. Alongside of this positive process occurs the development of ever more sophisticated weapons of war, or the means to destroy human life. With our tongue we learn new ways to praise God in poetry and song, and with the same tongue we become adept at badmouthing our fellow human beings who were made in the image of God: Words can heal and words can kill.[26] Progress in science and the humanities is not an undivided good. Some inventions are better left undone (e.g. the discovery of atomic fusion leading to the development of the atomic bomb) and some advances in the way we communicate are best left unspoken, when they are made in the service of human destruction rather than human enhancement.[27] (I can think here of hate speech, indoctrination, propaganda and spin.)

According to the biblical narrative God initially attempts to stem the tide of humankind's fall from grace by inundating the world with a flood and thereby eradicating humankind's cultural productions to date, both the bad and the good, with the exception of the preservation of one man and his family, deemed to be righteous, together with the flora and the fauna of creation. But these favoured humans too had the tendency to ignore God, or to turn away from his presence in the way they lived. Soon, the habit of cultured creation to turn its back on God repeats itself.[28]

Then, according to the biblical story, God selects an entire nation to live a life *coram deo* by way of example to the rest of humankind. It too did not meet with a great deal of success. God knows from bitter experience that people are the worst material to work with, even when they are meant to be the people of God. However, Gods dealing with the nation of Israel shows that He has a profound respect for human history as part of His plan of salvation to move creation from its beginning toward the fullness of time and from there on toward the end of times. From Abraham on to the birth of Jesus, God works to instil into His people a longing for a Messiah, a Christ figure, whom God anoints to be the Saviour of the world. This process takes millennia. Time and again during this historical period, by means of prophets and angels, God reveals His intentions for His people to live in a face-to-face relationship with him. Time and time again they turn their backs to Him, after which He brings them back to *coram deo* living. This effort falls apart with wearying regularity. On the surface it seems that God is getting nowhere, except for the fact that these attempts at reconciliation are being recorded in what we now know as the Old Testament. By the time of Jesus' life on earth there exists a national longing and an extensive narrative that prefigures His coming.[29]

At long last God concludes that if He wants get something done He will have to do it Himself and He sends his Son Jesus. This momentous creational- redemptive-cultural-historical act on the part of God pivots human life from BC into AD.

This act brings us in our narrative to the life, the death, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus the Christ. We know next to nothing about how Jesus grew up. We know He was a carpenter, that He was obedient to his parents, and that He got lost in the temple at age 12. This last fact is significant because it shows that already early in His life He

knew that God was His father and that He was God's Son. He knew He was not only the eternal, only begotten Son of God, but also historically the Son of God (and significantly also the son of man in the line of David) by birth. His parents informed him of that. But not until he was about thirty and then for only a few years do we know in more detail how he lived his life.[30]

At the start of his ministry He is baptized by the *Holy* Spirit and John calls him "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."[31] Prior to starting His ministry He, unlike Adam and Eve, successfully resists the temptation of the Devil in the desert. During his time on earth He acts with authority, speaks/teaches with authority, tells stories or *parables*, heals sicknesses and forgives sins. He amazes his followers with these "signs" of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. He receives power from His father God to do good, but is apparently unable to heal people who have little or no faith in Him.[32] He gets angry, and is distressed at a lack of faith and at people's hardheartedness, He accuses the teachers of the law and the Pharisees of leading people astray with their fundamentalism and hypocrisy, and when they question his authority, he lets his healing and liberating actions do the talking. He has only one message: "the kingdom (Greek: *Basileia*: the empire, the totalitarian rule, like the Roman empire) of God, (also called the kingdom of heaven) is here!"[33] Half way through his ministry he begins to tell his followers that he "must" die, and in his last days he washes the feet of his disciples as a demonstration that He is a *servant*-king. He is crucified, dies, is resurrected/brought back to life and shortly thereafter returns to His Father in heaven from where He originally came. During his ministry he repeatedly speaks about his relationship with his Father-God in heaven, whose will he obeys in everything He does.[34]

Jesus' life on earth and his ministry did not occur in a vacuum. It took place in a historical context that had prepared the people of Israel for centuries for His coming. They knew about the promise of the coming of the Christ, *aka* the Anointed One, *aka* the Messiah, "in the fullness of time"[35]. His words and deeds appealed to their longing for salvation. Words he used like Holy Spirit, Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven, etc. were familiar to them. He was not obscure. People understood what he was saying because he spoke a familiar Old Testament language. In talking about himself He frequently quoted scripture. His message was as simple as it was earth shaking. "The time for which you have longed for centuries," he said, "is now. The kingship of God is here. I am the Messiah, I was sent by God who is my Father in heaven, I am God's Son. Believe in me. Follow Me."[36] He then proceeded to demonstrate his authority by performing "signs", healing sickness, casting out demons, raising the dead and feeding the hungry. Those were the familiar Old Testament marks of the coming Christ.

Many who heard Him recognized that these were signs that the Messiah *had* come and praised God for them.[37] The incarnation of Jesus the Christ, God's Son was an event of momentous proportions in the history of Israel and indeed of the world. His incarnation was a matter of historical necessity. It *had* to happen. That is the force of frequent reference to the word "must" in the gospels about the events of Jesus' life. His coming to live among us occurred "in the fullness of time" Literally, the time was full for it to happen. Recently the wife of our youngest son gave birth to their second child. This wonderful event gave me a new understanding of the phrase "fullness of time." My wife

had pledged to look after their other child during the birth. My son called in the middle of the night and said: "It is time." After a nine month pregnancy-preparation the child *had* to be born. It was time. Many of the people recognized the importance of what they saw happening with Jesus and responded with joy. They believed their eyes! In the past prophets and kings had longed to see what was happening. But they could not, because it was not yet time. Now that time had come.

At the same time, others, in particular the religious leaders of the people of God, failed to recognize the significance of the incarnation. In fact, they violently opposed what Jesus said as blasphemy and what He did as a serious breach of tradition.[38] If there is one thing that a close reading of the gospels makes clear to me, it is the total miscommunication between Jesus on the one hand, and the Pharisees and the experts of the "Law", i.e. those schooled in the Old Testament, on the other. Of all the people, those leaders should have been intellectually aware that Jesus was the Messiah. But they lacked the historical discernment about the fact that the kingdom of heaven had come, something that the common people, the shepherds, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, readily accepted.

Jesus took their hardheartedness personally. He had nothing but harsh words for them. Their behaviour in the face of so many wonderful signs of the Kingdom of God wounded him to the core of His being, because they insulted His Father in heaven by their obstinate opposition to His mission. That was at the heart of His anguish and anger. His feelings betrayed His mind and heart set and His life style. After Adam and Eve He was the only perfect example of *coram deo* living on earth.

He was deeply in love with God, His Father. They were friends. He spent whole nights talking with Him in prayer. He knew that He was sent by His Father from heaven into the world. He missed being with Him and longed to return to Him. The primary aim of His words and deeds was to bring the people of God in touch with their God again. Once they had faith, i.e. became reacquainted with God again, they could be delivered from demons, be healed and live meaningful lives. He readily acknowledged that He had no power to do good of his own.[39] It had to be given to Him by His Father. He in turn would pass on God's power to heal sickness to those who believed in Him and their mission, in turn, was to pass this power on to yet others.[40] The meaning of human life is that people are meant to be pipelines of God's grace by what they say and do.

In short, the heart of the good news, proclaimed in the four gospels is that because of the incarnation of Jesus the Christ it has become possible for those who believe to live *coram deo* lives again.

Notes:

[1]Matthew 26:41, Mark 14:38, Romans 8:12-17

[2]The reference here is to the infamous inerrancy debate, Sewell, K. C. (2016) *The Crisis of Evangelical Christianity*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock:26-38, 39-43,

Armstrong, K. (2000) *The Battle for God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Part Two, Fundamentalism:135- 317

[3]I am not the first to describe the paradigm of "structure and direction". A. Wolters had already discussed this paradigm at length in his book *Creation Regained* (1985:9, 49-52, 72-73, 96). He, in turn, like myself, learned about structure and direction from the late H. Evan Runner, in his life, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, in Grand Rapids Michigan and the essence of this notion can be found in the *Introduction to Philosophy* .(2005) (Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press) by D.Th. Vollenhoven, who was one of the founding fathers of the Dutch Christian philosophy movement called "The Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea".

The paradigm of "structure and direction" is not new and actually finds its origin in the Bible. A common way of understanding the content of the Bible is to say that it contains the story of the creation of the world, of the fall of mankind into sin, of the redemption by Jesus the Christ and of the ultimate restoration of all things by the Spirit of God. The notion of structure and direction builds on the doctrine of creation found in Scripture. It asserts that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, including humankind, by his creation Word and that this Word not only initiated creation, but has also proceeded to uphold, and to unfold creation since then.

The term "structure" in the notion of structure and direction refers to the structure for creation. It is identical to God's continued faithfulness to his creation, the fall of mankind notwithstanding. It denotes the constancy of Gods grace. In this paradigm "structure" refers to (the actions of) God and "direction" to (the actions of) human beings. The Presence of God denotes in this context that this structure as the actions of God, is *revealed*, is *evident* in our lives, that it *impinges* upon us and *demands/evokes/ facilitates* a response on our part. The "direction" part of the paradigm signifies that people respond to that structure in different ways, and thus in ways that either approximate or deviate from that structure. Furthermore, the term "structure" in the distinction between structure and direction denotes the supporting and norm giving activity of God who calls creation to respond to Him. Thus, it is better to talk about the structure *for* creation than about the structure *of* creation.

See also my *Recounting the presence of God in the therapeutic relation:integration or structure and direction?* below

[4]II Cor. 1: 3, 4
[5]Genesis. 2
[6]Gen. 2: 15
[7]Gen. 3
[8]Fromm, Erich (1941) *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Farrar and Rhinehart
[9]Gen. 3: 7, 8
[10]Gen. 3: 22
[11]Gen. 3: 16
[12]Gen. 6: 5
[13]Ecclesiastes 3: 11
[14]Exodus 3
[15]Revelations 1: 8 As an aside, He is also the origin of compassion and comfort [Greek: *paraklesis*: neighbourliness], see II Cor. 1: 3,4)
[16]Diemer, H. (1943) "The nature of creation needs the culture of creation and vice versa" *Philosophia Reformata*
[17]Gen. 1: 28
[18]Deism, see chapt. 1
[19]Personal communication by Albert Wolters, biblical scholar
[20]Gen. 1: 28
[21]*Belgic Confession* article 4
[22]Some Bible passages related to *coram deo*:

(This list of bible passages is not exhaustive. It is designed to show that references to coram deo are pervasive throughout the Christian scriptures, leading me to believe that it is at least a most important theme in the bible):

Face to face
The basic structure of mankind's relation to God is one of face to face, of being present to one another, of looking at and seeing one another, of looking one another in the eye. This is best expressed in 1 Cor. 13:12: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face".
But there are other references elsewhere in the bible:
Genesis 16:13: Hagar says: "I have seen the One who sees me".
_____ 32:30: Jacob states: "I saw God face to face, yet my life was spared".
Exodus. 33:11: "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend".
Deut. 5:4: "The lord spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain".
Judges 6:22: Gideon: "Ah, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face".
Ezekiel 20:35: "I will bring you into the desert of the nations and there, face to face I will execute Judgment upon you".

Falling on your face
Creationwise, potentially, meeting God face to face is like two friends meeting. But after the fall of mankind it can be a terrifying experience for human beings to look God in the eye, so that the posture is one of prayer, on your knees with your face to the ground.

Many references are about falling on you face in the relationship:
Gen.17:17; Gen. 18:2; Numbers 16:4; Josh. 5:14; 7:6; 1 Sam. 5:34; 1Kings 18:39; Ezekiel 9:8; Matthew. 17:2, 6; Rev.7:11, 15; Acts 6:15.

Within the face to face structure of the relationship between God and humankind, there are many references to God's actions toward human beings, both positive and negative, and the actions of human beings toward God, both good and bad, i.e. actions that break and heal the relationship:

God's face shining, is blessing, turning his face toward humankind
The main reference here is:
Num. 6:25; Ps. 67:1: "The Lord bless you, and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace".
There are many *other references to God's face shining upon humankind:*
Exodus 34:29; 30, 35; Ps. 31:16; 119:135; Isaiah: 60:1; Ezekiel. 1:28; Dan.10:6; Matthew 3:16; 5:16; 13:43; 17:2,6; Mark 9:3; Luke 2:9; John 1 :5; Acts 6:15; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1Titus 5 :4; Rev.1 :16.
Conversely: *When God hides his face:*
numerous references, especially in the psalms, show that this is most disturbing for humankind: Deut.31:17,18; Job 13:24; 34:29; 58:17; 59:9; 64:7; Ps.10:11; 13:1,24; 27:9; 30:7; 31:16; 51:9; 69:17; 88:14; 102:2; 143:7; Mic.3:4,
or, *shows His back and not His face, sets His face against them*
2 Chron.30:9; 35: *when God turns His face away from mankind* 22; Jer.18:17; 33:5; Ezek.7:22; Lev. 17:10; 1 Peter 3:12; 25:2
There are also references to *humankind turning their backs to God, not showing their faces, or making their faces harder*: Jer.1:17, 32, 33.
Conversely, *when people repent, they seek God's face*: 1 Chron.16:11, Ps.24:6; 27:8; 105:4; Hosea 5:15

[23]Gen. 1:26-31, Gen. 2
[24]Gen. 3:9, *Throughout the Psalms there is reference to seeking God's face.*
[25]De Graaf, S.G. (1977) *Promise and Deliverance*. St. Catherines, ON: Paideia Press. This three-volume work recounts this historical drama in detail. It is a translation by H. E. Runner of the Dutch *Verbondsgeschiedenis* (History of the Covenant),(J.H. Kok, Kampen) which stresses the fact that this is a *historical* process. It does not just go in circles but consists of timed events and is going somewhere.
[26]James 3:9
[27]Like any other human activity, science is normed, i.e. there are choices to be made.
[28]In our secular age sins are often pejoratively portrayed as indulgences, frowned upon by ascetic spoilsport Christians, but enjoyed by hedonist atheists. The Bible does not consider sins "naughty but nice" They are described as serious offences like injustice or murder toward neighbours. They can even make God question the wisdom of His actions. (Genesis 8: 21,22
[29]The story of Israel, before the incarnation of Jesus the Christ takes up most of the Old Testament and clearly shows a progression of this longing.
[30]Luke 2:41-50
[31]John 1:29
[32]Mark 6:1-6

[33]Mark 1:14,15

[34]Jesus' life and death is chronicled in the four gospels.

[35]Math. 9:8. See especially Luke 7:16: After Jesus had brought a widow's son back to life [the people] were filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said, "God has come to help His people!"

[36]Luke 9:20,10:21-28

[37]Gal. 4:4, John 7:6, Luke 9:51, Matthew. 26:18

[38]Matt. 12: 24, Mark 11: 27-33, Luke 5: 33, Luke 12: 1-11

[39]Luke 5:17

[40]II Cor. 1:3,4

Chapter four

Reading the Bible with *coram deo* in mind

If the central theme of the Bible is *coram deo*, then how might we read it? The Bible presents itself as a collection of older and newer testimonials about the presence of God in people's lives, inspired by God, written by people living in different times and places. It is a Christian devotional book, on par with the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist and other sacred writings. The intention of the Bible is that by reading and studying this Book Christians strengthen their trust in God.

Reading the Bible for Christians is like Googling the net. The Bible informs how they can have a life that lasts everywhere and forever. For our purposes, it tells us how we can live life *coram deo.* In my Reformed Christian church denomination Christians are fond of saying that the Bible is the "infallible rule for faith and life."[1] What do we mean by that? Well, there are various answers depending on how one reads the Bible. One view popular among Christians in the Western world, and increasingly in Third World countries as well, is that every word in the Bible is the word of God, in the sense that it is divinely inspired and therefore immediately and infallibly applicable to every human situation, regardless by whom these words were spoken or written, or at what time and in which place in history they were written down. The historical and cultural context of biblical texts and the fact that they were written by human beings, all these are irrelevant to the authority such texts are assumed to have over a Christian's life and faith in the twenty-first century.

This approach to the Bible is commonly known as *Biblicism*. It views the Bible as a collection of divinely inspired proof texts, propositions, rules or wise sayings, which a Christian must adopt as true and which she must obediently follow if she believes that the Bible is infallible. A prime example of this view is the dictate of Christian fundamentalism that to be considered a Bible-believing Christian one must subscribe to the ten fundamentals, which were presumably distilled from the Bible as a whole.[2] Biblicism is a pervasive view and practice in many churches that call themselves *evangelical.* Sermonizing from a single Bible text and moralistic preaching tend to promote a biblicistic view of the Bible. It is also evident in many socalled "Christian" books, workshops and lectures geared to foster a "Christian" life style.

I too believe that the Bible is infallible. But the question is what one means by that term. For me biblical infallibility entails that we respect the fact that the Bible a) was written by

people, for people living in b) different historical periods and in c) different cultures. Therefore, to determine its authority over us living in the Western world in the twenty-first century requires a certain amount of trans-personal, trans-historical and trans-cultural translation. This translation is neglected in Biblicism.

For example, the text: "Wives submit yourselves to your husband" (Ephesians 5:22) is seen by some Christians to be directly applicable to wives living in twenty-first century marriages. Such an interpretation ignores the fact that this command was written by Paul, who may not have had much understanding of women. Second, it was issued to people living at a time in human history, and in a Roman culture in which the husband was considered to be the *pater familias* or the head of the household. He literally owned both his wife and his children, and was permitted to dispose of them as he saw fit. This is not our understanding of the place of the husband in the family in the twenty-first century Western world. The same case can be made about how many wives a husband is commanded, allowed or expected to have (Gen. 29:16-30, 1 Samuel 18:30, 2 Samuel 3:2-5).

It is beyond dispute that the Bible was written by people living at different points in human history and in differing cultural contexts. Their narratives also express their individually differing views of the world (witness the different takes on the life and death of Jesus in the four gospels). Their literary productions are stories, and their stories are unique. For some people the assertion that the Bible consists of stories implies that the Bible is not true or infallible. They do not allow for the possibility that the Bible contains *true stories*. To them, the stories we do find in the Bible are mythical reports of actual events: the parting of the Red Sea, Jonah in the belly of the whale, Jesus changing water into wine, etc. To them these stories are improbable in the light of modern science. They are factually incorrect and therefore are not true.

Of course, it is important to know whether events described in the Bible are historically and factually correct. But with one exception that I could find, the Bible itself never wonders whether a description of an event is in fact true. It cannot raise that question because it was written and refers to events that happened well before the rise of Modernity in the Sixteenth Century.[3] To raise the question whether biblical descriptions are factually correct or not is to commit an anachronism. The possible exception to this is found in Luke 24:36-49, where Jesus is said to factually demonstrate to his disciples something, which even for them was an unlikely event, i.e. His bodily resurrection from death. However, even in this passage the aim is not to demonstrate a natural scientific fact but to allow the disciples to accept the joyous reality that their Lord who died was now alive and well. They accepted naively that someone who died could rise from the dead.

The truth of biblical stories does not depend on their factual correctness but on whether they bear true witness to God's presence in our lives. Sometimes God reveals His presence by directly talking to human beings as when a person speaks to another person. By way of example this is recorded in Genesis in which God speaks to Adam, Cain, Noah and Abram. Sometimes God visits people like a man visits his friend, as He does with

Abraham in Genesis 18. At other times His presence is implied, as in the book of Ruth (chapter 4) where Boaz testifies about His presence by what he says and does, or in Esther where the name of God is not even mentioned in the story. God's presence is also witnessed in songs, (think of Psalm 19 and 119) and in prophecies (in the form of a direct: "Thus says the Lord":(Amos chapter 1). Another way in which God shows that He is real in our lives is through events, as when He delivers Israel from their enemies (Exodus 14), or through gifts, like manna in the desert (Exodus 16), healing sick people, casting out evil spirits, forgiving sins, bringing dead people back to life (the Gospels). Finally, God reveals himself to us as God-among-us in the incarnation of Jesus-the-Christ (Luke 2). In short, the different ways in which God reveals Himself in the Bible are too numerous to mention. In all of these, women and men of faith testified about their experience of God's presence in their lives and recorded these events for the edification of people alive in different times in history and in differing cultures.[4]

To sum up, the presence of God in the world is a constant theme throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. God reveals Himself to Bible writers and inspires them with His presence in their lives so that they are able to testify to His reality in personally, historically and culturally appropriate ways. Because of these differences the testimonies of Moses, Abraham, David, Isaiah, Paul, Peter, etc. reveal the different ways of God's presence in the lives of human beings.

The Bible is a Christian devotional book. It has only one function in the lives of human beings: to convince us, by means of these testimonies, of the fact that human life is lived *coram deo*, in the presence of God; it encourages us to live our lives with that reality in mind. In that sense the Bible must be read as a rule for faith and life.

Moreover, biblical infallibility, in my view, does not require that the testimony of every Bible writer records the presence of God in their lives accurately. There are passages in the Bible, in the Psalms for example, where God is portrayed as a warlike, vengeful God, (e.g. Psalm 35), which seems to be at odds with the portrayal of Jesus in the gospels. In other places God is said to command the Israelites to kill off the entire enemy, men, women and children (1 Samuel 15:1-3). A place where God Himself corrects the way people speak about Him is in Job 42:7, where He admonishes the socalled friends of Job. That God is present in the world is crystal clear from every Bible passage. How He is portrayed as present is not always inerrant. But in the main He comes across as a saviour, the defender of the weak and the marginalized, as pre-occupied with the promotion of justice and mercy. Paul calls Him " the father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor.1:3). That comes closer to the God I know, love and worship.

This point underscores yet another way in which God reveals Himself to us in the Bible. Reformed Christian theologians have called Him "the author of the history of salvation."[5] There is a progression in the saving way God deals with the world that at the same time offers us a progressively clearer picture of the ways He is present in our lives. In the Old Testament this progression is evident in the history of the people of Israel and especially in the way the Israelite prophets point forward to the coming Messiah, culminating in a profound longing for the Christ to appear by devout Israelites.[6]

When He does appear, as is recorded in the gospels at the beginning of the New Testament, the cultural-historical context is ripe for his coming. The time is full. From thereon the revelation of *coram deo* is decisively coloured by the historical fact that He *has* come. The history of the story of salvation in the bible from that point forward, moves from the fullness of time to the end of time and of the Christ's bodily return to the world.[7] Thus, to understand the Bible as the rule for our faith and life it is not enough to believe that the Bible speaks throughout of *coram deo*. We must also understand that these sightings of God's presence are taken up in the history of salvation, which begins at creation, moves on toward the fullness of time, and from there on in to the end of time. For us to know what to do in the twenty-first century requires historical-spiritual discernment. We must know what time it is on God's clock (Luke 12:54-59). Spiritually, the history of the world is enclosed in the history of salvation.

Finally, there is another feature about the Bible that transcends a literal reading, which makes it easier to read by today's young people than by older folk. It is that the Bible exudes irony. This is especially evident in the life of Jesus the Christ. In Jesus the sublime and the ridiculous meet. Surely, we must catch the irony of the Boss of the universe, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world beginning His life on earth as a helpless baby, born in a stable to poor parents hailing from Nazareth of all places? His presence among us as the light of the world according to the gospel of John, is, according to Isaiah, "the One from whom men hide their faces" (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus saves our lives by dying (Mark 15). He is the One in whom all fullness dwells and who empties Himself to take on the role of a servant (Philippians 2:6-8). He is the master who washes the feet of His followers like their slave (John 13:4,5). The whole of Christ's life on earth is one gigantic irony. And His message is also full of irony. In the kingdom of heaven a ruler is a servant, the greatest is a kid (Matthew.19:13, 14, Mark 9:35, Luke 9:48, Luke 18:17, Mark 10:13, 14). If you want to get honour in the Kingdom of God you have to be humble (Luke 18:14), the poor enter the kingdom of heaven easily, because they have nothing (Mary's song in Luke 1:46-57), the rich with difficulty because of their possessions (Mark 10:23). When it comes to the Kingdom, the first will be last and the last first (Mark 9:35), outsiders inherit it, the initiated are shut out (Matthew 22:1-14).

I spent a number of months reading and re-reading the gospels in order to get a fresh take on who Jesus was and what He was saying. Even though at some level his message and actions were crystal clear to me, in other ways I at times had no clue what He was getting at with what He did and what He said. At first I thought that this was due to my relative lack of biblical knowledge. But many of those who listened to Him speaking apparently had the same problem. Later I realized that Jesus deliberately made it hard for His audience to understand Him. He mostly spoke in parables and parables are stories that are per definition ironic. They were not meant to be intellectually understood. They were aimed at the heart of the listeners. They were a call to action meant to produce a change. A prime example of this call is the parable of the compassionate Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). This parable is about being a good neighbour (Greek: *plesion* "one living close by") and is full of irony: the priest and the Levite who are meant to be healers, pass by on the other side), The Samaritan who does not live close to the Jews stops and heals a Jew).

The last verse in this story is the call to action: "Go do like wise" (Luke 10:37). Parables, miracles (signs) and Jesus' life as a whole are examples of *coram deo* living. All are aimed at calling us to enter the Kingdom of God.

To read the bible, as intended as the rule for faith and life, one needs to have a nose for irony. Do you think that Jesus was capable of telling jokes? Can you spot one in the Gospels? Do you suppose that at times His tongue was firmly lodged in His cheek? Did He ever poke fun at people? Was He capable of hyperboles, all in the service of getting his listeners to repent? If we were actually there watching Him teach we would probably be more able to tell this from his behaviour. By reading about Him instead we have to infer what He was saying, something that might have been plain to see and hear if we were actually there listening to Him.

Notes

[1]*Belgic Confession* article 4

[2]Sewell, K. C. (2016) *The Crisis of Evangelical Christianity*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock:26-38, 39-43,

Armstrong, K. (2000) *The Battle for God.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Part Two, Fundamentalism:135- 317

[3] See chapt. 1

[4]See especially the Psalms of David.

[5]See *Promise and Deliverance* , which is an English translation of the original Dutch version called, *De Verbonds Geschiedenis*).

[6]Luke 1:46-56, 68-79, 2:28-32

[7]See Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-40 in which he refers to Joel 2:28-32.

Chapter five

The antithesis and the notwithstanding clause of grace[1]

In this chapter I want to consider the relationship of Christians to non-Christians as part of a life lived *coram deo*.

If I read the Bible correctly, then the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ were events of momentous importance for the history of the world. The biblical narrative about the incarnation pivots the Bible from the Old Testament to the New Testament. In the Western world we recognize this historical fact to be the turning point from BC (life before Christ) to AD (Anno Domini, or life after Christ). Both the Old Testament and the New testify to this difference. Before Christ the history of God's salvation focuses on the history of Israel, the "people of God," in whom God instils a longing for the coming of the Christ. The Gentile world is often seen as the enemy of God that attempts to eradicate the people of God, who were, note well, the unique witnesses to God's presence in the world.

After the incarnation of the Christ, based on the fact that he had come, the tone changes dramatically. The followers of Jesus, i.e. members of the church, are called to spread throughout the entire world the gospel of *coram deo*, i.e., the good news that, because of God coming down to earth in the person of the Christ, it is now possible to live a life in which people can love God above all, and one another as themselves. (Mark 12:29-32) The church now becomes an advertising agency for *coram deo*. Members of the church are now front men and women for this message. They are called to promote this universal *coram deo* way of living globally by living a life of love for God and the practice of neighbourliness (Acts 2:28). As a result, in the Western world at least, Christianity becomes one of the two main sources of inspiration for living, the other being Greek philosophy.[2] Later on, this good news message spreads beyond Western culture throughout the entire world.

Why was the coming of the Christ, the Messiah, which, according to the gospels coincided with the arrival of the "Kingdom" of God (Mark 1:15, Luke 4:43), so important for the renewal of life after the incarnation? Historically speaking, for the people of Israel the arrival of the Christ the Messiah was all-important. To get a sense of how important it was you must reread the songs of praise by Mary and Zechariah in Luke 1, and by Simeon and by the angels to the shepherds in Luke 2, and also the speech by Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2. The incarnation was nothing short of God coming down to earth to live among us in our neighbourhood. Talk about *coram deo*!

This incarnation happened in a historical-cultural climate in which the dominant framing of humankinds relation to God was that God normally exists far away, outside the world, and that we can only approach Him through sacrifices to appease Him. For the pagans that included human sacrifice. For Israel it included the bloody sacrifice of animals. In

essence the dominant world religions all had this otherworldly focus. The religion of world avoidance in the known Greco-Roman world, during Jesus' time on earth and for centuries thereafter, was the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Plotinus.[3]

These pre-Christian religions, and to some extent later on also the Christian religion itself, were all obsessed with death and with life after death, with life in heaven in the hereafter, or with reincarnation. Ordinary, everyday life only got its meaning as a *preparation* for this post-death eternal life. By comparison the Divine act of incarnation had a profoundly world-affirming effect on life lived in the Western world, which distinguished it from life on other continents of the globe.

The idea that God was so close that you could hug Him like a friend was revolutionary for its time, and it still is today. It meant that there was no longer a need for sacrifices in order to please God, because by coming down to earth God provided Himself as a sacrifice for all that was wrong in the world, and through this act the incarnation was a Divine affirmation of the importance of the ordinary in everyday living.

To live a spiritual life, no longer meant that you had to escape the world in which you were living. It meant that you could worship God in the everyday ordinary activities of living. The Reformation, which appeared much later in the history of the Western world, was a re-affirmation of the value of ordinary life. It was a *re*-affirmation because this emphasis was already prefigured much earlier in Hebraic-Christian spirituality. The Reformation merely gave a renewed impetus in the Modern era to this Old Testament biblical teaching.[4]

This sanctification of the ordinary made all of life sacred. According to Taylor it held that

> ordinary life is more than profane. It itself is hallowed and in no way second class [to eternal life after death]. The foundation for the re-valuation of ordinary life…was one of the most fundamental insights of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic religious tradition *that God as Creator himself affirms life* (emphasis mine).[5]

Life in the Western world today (in roughly Europe and North America) is said to be predominantly secular, this in contrast to Third Word countries where religion is still a major influence. In a secular way of living the focus is on the here and now, on life before death. This is one meaning of secular. "Secular" can also mean "a life lived in absence of a relationship with God."

Because of this latter characteristic this kind of secularity is the opposite of living *coram deo*. What I have in mind, however, as a result of the incarnation, is a kind of down-to-earth Christianity in which the presence of God is foundational for being in touch with the world in which we live.[6]

Such a life entails openness to and engagement with the world around us and a rejection of world avoidance. It is based on a confession *that this world belongs to God.*[7] The Old Testament notion of religion in particular has a concrete, earthly flavour that seems to get lost somewhat in the New Testament under the influence of Greek thought. By way of example, the Hebraic notion of "soul" as the very breath that we breathe, which ceases to exist and returns to God when our bodies die (Eccl. 12:7), is so much more substantial than Plato's airy-fairy notion of the "soul". In consequence of this latter influence, so much of contemporary Christianity is preoccupied with life after death in heaven. Yet, we know much less about life in heaven after dying than we know about living on earth before death. And with good reason, I believe.

My understanding of the Christian life is that it is a life-long struggle with the forces of good and evil, which mercifully ends when we die, as we enter a time of rest in which we know neither pleasure nor pain until the second of God's incarnations, when we, together with heaven and earth will be restored to our pre-fall glory. Beyond that, I do not profess to know much about life after death, with the exception that I will be with my Lord. *Coram deo* continues *and it transcends death*! This is an amazing comfort for me as I near the end of my earthly life.

Even though the event and the message of the incarnation of the Christ has proved to be the source of much goodness and healing in the world, it did not usher in the full measure of the Kingdom of God. What did happen was that human life became increasingly paradoxical. Forces of evil, which previously had near free reign (Genesis 6:5), were now becoming more and more faced with the pushback of the forces of goodness, inside, between and around human beings. As a result, we now live in a world where good and evil concretely exist alongside one another and combat each other. There exists an antipathy between them (Gen. 3:15). This is the true meaning of what is some times called *the antithesis*.[8]

This opposition between good and evil is not one between groups of people. Prior to the incarnation, the antithesis was indeed lived as between "the people of God," synonymous with "the people of Israel," and the "Gentiles", or "the world." But after the incarnation, and as a result of the spreading of the gospel, this opposition became experienced *worldwide* as one of a battle between culture forming spirits, or between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the Deceiver. This battle is responsible for the paradoxical nature of our lives after the incarnation. This kind of paradoxical living of course already existed prior to the coming of the Christ, but it had an anticipatory (longing) character and was by and large restricted to the ancient nation of Israel.
It was fueled by the hope of salvation expected to be brought about in the future by a Messiah.

In Genesis 3 this antithesis was metaphorically foretold as a battle in which the seed of the woman would crush the serpent/Deceiver's head, in ultimate triumph. But it also meant that the serpent would injure the woman's offspring's heel, incapacitating it for a time.

When we live a life of paradox we often find ourselves confronted with a bewildering, contradictory set of experiences: we come to know ourselves to be accepted by some people warts and all, priced and treasured even for who we are. But there are also times when we are rejected, debased and misunderstood in our deepest intentions. The inevitable hurts of everyday living affect us to the core, but we can also celebrate with intense joy the healings that happen. In a life of paradox both tragedies and miracles are real to us. In this life things happen, good events and bad, which we believe should or could not happen, but they happen anyway.

A life of paradox is a place where we cry tears of sadness and where we can laugh uproariously at the telling of a good joke. In this life we respond to the evil that people devise and commit with attitudes and action of righteous indignation or with callous indifference. It is also the place where honesty forces us to admit that we ourselves have the capacity to murder in our hearts, that in extreme circumstances we might think or act no different.

Living a life of paradox tells us that we need to be loved to be able to love and that we need to love others to be loved by others. We warm ourselves to their company and feel utterly alone when that is lacking. A life of paradox is a place where identity and intimacy clash some times and at other times complement one another. In this life we are thankful and we complain. It is a place where truth counts and where we hide ourselves defensively in a lie. It is a place where integrity and authenticity are at a premium and where we are deathly afraid of both. In this life we risk being vulnerable and insecure with someone and rejoice when they reciprocate being vulnerable with us.

In this place life hardly ever adds up and we don't know why, but it is also a place where we attempt the impossible and pull it off. In a life of paradox brick walls at times surround us on all sides with no way out in sight. But there are also times when one of them turns out to be an open door. At times the future is utterly closed off. At other times it is surprisingly open and friendly. Hope and despair are alternating realities in a life of paradox. These are some of the things we experience when we live our paradoxical lives; there are many more. Especially today, we live in an extremely complex world.

Paradoxes notwithstanding, because of the Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension some 2000 years ago there is today much goodness in the world. Many Christians appear to have the unfortunate belief that whatever goodness happens in the world it only occurs in the church or emanates from the church. The reasoning goes something like this: according to the Bible only actions, which are the result of faith in God, can be called

"good". Since, per definition, non-Christians do not believe in God and therefore do not attend church, they are incapable of producing anything good.

In the mean time non-Christians produce a lot of good things that exist in the world. Since the time of the incarnation there have been many actions of goodness beyond the walls of the church as well. If there is one thing with which I would fault contemporary Christians, it is that they by and large ignore these worldwide signs of renewal and healing. Such Christians seem to forget that salvation is cosmic rather than narrowly ecclesiastical. They seem to lack insight into the tremendous positive impact that the incarnation has had and is having on our Western culture and society as a whole. The world AD is not as good as it should be, but neither is it as bad as it could be. In our Western world there is respect for individual human rights, for freedom of religion, for social justice, and for democracy. There is protection for the disabled, and there are attempts at the liberation of the oppressed and the poor, to mention only a few. All of these Jesus would support, promote and practice if He were living among us today. Non-Christians are not as bad as they could be.

Nor are Christians as good as they should be. Historically the church has at times been a source of evil in the world: Ecclesiastical actions past and present as the inquisition, the crusades, the defence of colonization and of slavery, the suppression of women, the obstruction of renewal, and more recently the scourge of clergy abuse all are perversions of the message and the life of Jesus.

In the (Reformed Christian) religious circles in which I move, the good deeds of non-Christians have been described as the effects of *mere common or restraining* grace, to distinguish them from the effects of *special or saving* grace. Common grace is seen as a temporary measure by God to curb the evil rampant in the world and in people's hearts today. These effects are aimed at preserving the world and human life in it until the time, at the end of history, when the Christ returns and when the things in our present world will be destroyed and radically renewed. Such grace, it is said, does nothing to give people access to eternal life after death. It does not save individuals from this final destruction, nor helps them to enter the kingdom of heaven at that time. For that to happen one needs a special or saving grace, which leads a person to make a "decision for Christ" in one's heart, which causes one to be "born again" and to "give one's life to Jesus."[9]

This formulation of the effects of the incarnation tears apart what in the clear intent of the Christian gospel is meant to be joined together. There is nothing common or insignificant about the healing that the incarnation offers to *all* human endeavours of good will, and it is no different from what it offers to the people of the church (I John 2:2). All human beings are given the opportunity to participate in what the Christian scriptures call "the kingdom of heaven," by doing good with their lives in spite of and in opposition to the evil that is present in the world.

For me, as a Christian, this good news makes it meaningful to show solidarity with the suffering of those whose lives are burdened by the effects of evil, regardless of who they

are, where they live and what they believe. It also allows me to support all actions of social justice aimed at combating the effects of evil wherever they occur in the world. The denial of the worldwide effects of the incarnation and a self-centred focus on church life only, results in a neglect of the coming Kingdom of God and results in a reduction of the full power of the gospel for the world.

To sum up, as a result of the incarnation there is much goodness in the world to combat the forces of evil. Why is this so? I think the answer lies in the notwithstanding clause of Divine grace. We have all probably heard the phrase: "the wages of sin is death" (Genesis 2:17). That is, if we sin, i.e. ignore or oppose the presence of God in our life, bad things will happen to us and eventually we die. This is a realistic assessment of our present condition, but it obviously has exceptions, because most of us are still alive and we prosper. Notwithstanding this rule, our reality includes the fact that we are still here. The rule of the connection between sin and death and the exception of life-saving grace applies equally to Christians and non-Christians alike. It is a universal rule and a universal exception based on the efficacy of God's grace.[10]

The relation between mankind and God was for them to be lovers.[11] In Hosea God is said to plead with His people Israel like a jilted lover. This is exactly the meaning of God's grace toward mankind. Time and again God's people, i.e. Old and New Testament Christians (or the church, so to speak), turn their backs on God, who keeps pleading for them to return to Him. They turn their backs to Him and walk away over and over again. And God takes it again and again, instead of lashing out in anger. It's as if God is a glutton for rejection.

Then, at the eleventh hour, in desperation, (Matthew 21:36-38) He decides to come down to earth to show in the person of Jesus the Christ what a joy it can be to live life before His face, to be in love with God. The Boss of the universe humiliates Himself to be born as a helpless baby, to live a life of self-sacrifice and poverty, to allow Himself to be rejected time and again. And in the end He lets Himself be tortured and killed, as "*the lamb of God,"* long foretold, to "*take away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29), to offer amnesty for all wrongdoing from Adam to the present time.

The essence of Gods grace toward mankind AD is long suffering. He puts up with the evil that we do in order to provide us with maximum room to do the good, of which we are also capable (Matthew 13:24-30). This Divine grace is the basis for the paradox in human existence before and after the incarnation. Human beings continue to do the good deeds, notwithstanding the repeated demonstrations of their lack of love for God, until the full renewal of world at the end of time, when everything will be all right.

Notes

[1] I am deeply indebted in this and the following chapters to the late Dr. J.P.A. Mekkes (1898-1987) for his insights as I learned about them from Sander Grifioen, "Thinking Along with Mekkes", in *Philosophia Reformata*, 82 (2017):26-42, from Johan Mekkes (2010) *Creation Revelation and Philosophy,* and from Johan Mekkes (2012) *Time And Philosophy*. Both translated from Dutch by Chris Van Haeften and published by Dordt College Press in Sioux Center, Iowa, USA.

[2] Chapt. 2

[3] Chapt. 2

[4] Chapt. 3

[5] Taylor, Ch. (1989):213, 218

[6] See my *Listening to Nothing*, chapt. 8

[7]

https://www.crcna.org/welcome/.../contemporary-testimony/our-world-belongs-god

A first edition was adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1986, a second edition in 2008

[8] Grifioen, S. (2017):82:29-31, Mekkes, (2010): Chapter 8, and Mekkes (2012):42.

[9]

https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/common-grace

In 1924 the CRC articulated its position regarding God's general favour to all creatures. This common favour is referred to as "common grace" to distinguish it from Gods "special (saving) grace." The essence of the position is contained in the following points:

In addition to the saving grace of God, shown only to those who are elected to eternal life, there is also a certain favor, or grace, of God shown to his creatures in general. Since the fall, human life in society remains possible because God, through his Spirit, restrains the power of sin. God, without renewing the heart, so influences human beings that, though incapable of doing any saving good, they are able to do civil good.

[10] "The notwithstanding clause of Divine grace" is my translation of *Sub Contrario* by Mekkes: (Grifioen (2017):36-38)

[11] Chapt. 3

Chapter six

A Christian view of reality

> Nearly all the wisdom which we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.
>
> John Calvin,
> The Institutes of the Christian Religion

To my mind, accepting *coram deo* as the central spiritual metaphor of human living also requires a new view of reality. Reality according to *coram deo* looks different from the one we, living in the twenty first century, are used to. If I acknowledge the reality that human life is lived in the presence of God, then my understanding of the world and myself must include the reality of God. So, I believe that there exists an unbroken relationship between God, myself and the world in which I live. That seems self-evident to me, but what does it mean?

The reality of God

At a minimum it means that the existence of God is an important issue in human life. Attempts to prove the existence of God have been a preoccupation of theologians during medieval times and of philosophers ever since the Middle Ages in the Western thought world. Medieval theologians encased God in a logical concept to safeguard His existence. Deism attempted to use the existence of God to bolster its belief in the autonomy of nature. As far as I can determine these Rationalistic efforts and others met with little positive result because none of them take the reality of the presence of God in human life seriously. The reason for the lack of success of these projects may be because, as I say in chapter one

> the question about the existence of God, like the one about the nature and meaning of human life, is not an academic problem to be solved by experts. It is a question which ordinary people in everyday life ask, especially when they face tragedies. It is not a logical question, but an existential question, wrenched from our souls in the messy business of actual living. It is the question of why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. It is the question we ask when life does not add up. That is the place where we must begin our search. We may find the answer in the paradoxical life we live that surrounds the questions we ask.

There were people in our history who struggled with the question about the place of God in our lives more seriously. Ivan, one of the brothers in Dostoyevskys novel *The*

Brothers Karamazov, when he is discussing the existence of God with his brother, states that he has no problem believing in the existence of God. But what he cannot accept is that God made the world he lives in with its suffering, cruelty and injustice.[1] In effect, he says that he has no problem believing that God exists but he has trouble believing that He cares. Given the fact that God exists in our lives, does He care? Is His presence in our lives the presence of a caring deity? Or are the ancient pagans right that God must be feared and appeased because He constantly threatens our existence? That question looms large when we face tragedies in our life.

Is God present in our lives at all? The German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), who was a vocal opponent of Hitler's genocidal persecution of the Jews, was arrested, jailed and hanged weeks before the end of World War II. Faced with the awful reality of the Holocaust he struggled hard with the question how this event of mass genocide could happen in a world where God is present. He concluded that it could not, and that God must have left our world to let us muddle through without Him as best we can. At least, he suggested that people should live *as if* He were absent. Many others in Europe after that world war came to the same conclusion. They gave up their belief in the existence of God and focused on human responsibility instead. Theologically, Bonhoeffer concluded that God gives it to human beings to live without God in the world. The only God we can possibly worship, given that our world is full of evil, is a non-existent God.[2]

In the movie *Shadowlands*, the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis struggles to cope with the death by cancer of his beloved wife Joy, whom he recently married. When he returns to work at the Magdalene College after her death, the principal attempts to comfort him by saying that her death was "God's will." Lewis takes no comfort from that thought and vehemently rejects that statement. Instead he is comforted in his grief later by Joy's young son when they both sit crying in front of the proverbial wardrobe. It is a terrible sin to respond to a heartfelt question about the existence of God by a grieving human being with an intellectual answer. Better to sit beside him or her in silence, with your hand over your mouth, with your arm around the shoulder, and tears in your eyes.

God and the devil are often blamed for the evil deeds we do. It is, therefore, important to know who God is. People call God many things. In II Cor. 1: 3 the apostle Paul lists two of Gods essential attributes: First, He is "the Father of compassion." God, so to speak, invented compassion. I define compassion as doing something for someone for nothing. Whenever we find someone doing that, we can say: "Hey, chip off the old block." Second, Paul calls God "the God of all comfort." So, God is a compassionate God and a comforter. Acts of compassion and comforting are signs of Gods presence in the world.

Paul also defines God by what he does for us: He comforts us "when we are in all kinds of trouble." Apparently, the comfort God gives is essential for human life. We need it to

live. Finally, Paul writes about the purpose of Gods comforting actions toward us. God does this "so that we may comfort those who are in all kinds of trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from Him." (It is also interesting to me that the Greek word here for "to comfort" is *parakalein* (literally, "to call near," or neighbourliness--in the Bible the Holy Spirit is called the *Paraclete*, "the one called near" or our Neighbour).

So, where in the world can we find God, if at all? Isn't that the essence of the question of Gods existence? Is He *there* in our lives?

I remember watching a video some years ago about a young woman who travels all over the world in search of God. She goes to visit the centres of the world's major religions to learn about God from their holy men. She travels to Tibet, Jerusalem, the Vatican and Mecca. But she does not find God in any of those places. When push comes to shove theologians or philosophers don't seem to teach us anything worthwhile about God. Discouraged and dispirited, by accident she happens upon a community where people care for one another. The sick are healed, the hungry are fed, the lonely are loved, the marginalized are respected, the oppressed are liberated and discouraged people are given hope and faith. It is there that she realizes she has found a place where God is.

The reality of being human

For an understanding of the reality of human beings from a *coram deo* perspective we do well to consult what is written in Genesis 1:27, 28. There we read that God created humankind "in His own image" and made them (male and female) "rulers" over the rest of creation. They are told by God to be "fruitful" and "to multiply" (their own potential and the riches of the world around them). This is known in Reformed Christian circles as "the cultural mandate."[3] Admittedly, this mandate was given to only two people at the beginning of world history according to the Bible and thus requires historical contextualization to make this passage paradigmatic for life today. But given that caveat, it can be viewed as relevant for concrete living in the twenty first century.

As such, the passage informs us that people differ from the other of Gods creatures in that they were created *in His likeness*, and that this characteristic has to do with the fact that they, like God, under God, are rulers over the rest of creation. This characteristic comes to expression when they cultivate, or develop what God has created inside and outside themselves. Our usual understanding of ruling is to dominate. The Bible's definition is the exact opposite -- for humankind to rule means to serve creation, to protect and to nurture it, to *facilitate* it, to enable it, to (culturally) bring it to fruition and in this way to image God. For that is how God rules the world.[4]

What now is a more contemporary view of the reality of being human that in some way resonates with this Genesis passage? The central issue of human life, according to many

opinion makers today is one of individual self-realization.[5] According to this view, human life is not just a process, a happening. Human beings are engaged in a historical project. They have their lives at their disposal; their central task is to make something of themselves, and by extension, to develop the world in which they live.

Everything else in their lives receives its meaning from the extent to which they accomplish this task. You either make it in life, or you don't. Young people are told they can become anything they want: scientists, astronauts, prime minister, etc., provided they are willing to dedicate their lives to the pursuit of this lofty goal. Conversely, individual human beings are said to have an inalienable right to pursue this goal. They ought to be given the opportunity and the freedom to be and become who they are, or what they are potentially able to be. This includes shaping the world in any way they envision. To respect individuals means to respect their capacity for this life task.

One can appreciate this view of human life insofar as it honours the human penchant for cultivation. Every person is busy with this task. It forms a basis for the solidarity of humankind. From birth on, all individual human beings, in consort with others, are engaged in developing their own potential and that of the world around them. This fact also gives us a possible criterion for how individuals are to respect one another interpersonally. Cultivating creation inside and outside ourselves is what people do naturally. By way of contrast, according to the view of pagan religions, as we saw, the aim of human life is to avoid doing this task, and to escape the world in which we live. To view individual self-realization as a central issue in human life offers us an important antidote against all forms of escapism.

The fact that all human beings are engaged in cultivating creation is not to say that in an ideal world they cultivate creation in the same way. On the contrary, post-modernism has made us aware that each individual tends to pursue this task differently.[6] It is therefore essential to the common task of cultivating creation that each of us appreciate and respect the way others perform this task, especially when the way they do this differs markedly from the way we do things. For the common task of cultivating creation it is mandatory that we love and respect the otherness of others. This is especially emphasized today in countries and cultures where they celebrate diversity.[7][8]

This important truth is often ignored in the developed countries of the West when the impulse to cultivate creation is reduced to a process of "fabricating and consuming things."[9] This way of living, generally known as capitalism, is becoming a danger to the entire world because, under the influence of globalization, it threatens to invade and to dominate more and more countries and cultures of the globe.

This reductionism in human culture comes to expression, we saw earlier in chapter two, in the Humanistic desire to control "nature", or the givens of creation -- our human nature first of all in the form of self-control over our emotions, but by extension, control over the natural world, and the world of culture surrounding us. In more detail, this impulse to control comes to expression in the invention, fabrication, (mass) production, sale, ownership, use and consumption of "things". It is the practice of extracting "raw

materials" and converting them into "machines", i.e. into things useful for the convenience of living our lives. The ultimate goal is to possess a maximum number of these things: household appliances, furniture, packaged and processed foods, means of transportation, communication devices, places to live, labour saving tools, recreational facilities, products that insulate us from the vagaries of weather, etc., etc. Ownership of these things enhances our sense of well-being and security. When we possess many of them we feel rich, when we own few of these we are considered poor. The *impoverisation* of culture, and indeed of life as a whole, occurs when the aim of culture and living becomes dominated by the most efficient way to produce and to consume these goods (think of fast foods). In such a way of living people are in essence reduced to and treated as entrepreneurs and consumers.[9]

This form of reduced living and possible other forms occur when the way we frame our existence dominates the way we live our lives individually and communally by forcing it into a conceptual straightjacket. From the point of view of *coram deo* this error in judgment has a religious basis. It fails to make a distinction between God and humankind and, therefore, between creation and cultivation. God creates and mankind can only modify, or bring to reality what He creates. God the creator of the world is the necessary and sufficient condition for the cultivating activity of humanity. To use a term from modern music, God alone is the composer of the symphony of creation; humankind is only able to "remix" what He composes.

I will have more to say about this problem in the next section about the reality of the world. For now we need to know that when we fail to distinguish between creation and cultivation we lose our sense of the *givens* of human life. We did not create the natural world in which we live. Moreover, we are born into an already existing society and inherit an already formulated culture, which we must appropriate for our selves to live. The best we can do is to modify or to *reform* what is already there to the best of our insight and ability.

The final reality of human life according to *coram deo* is that people are accountable to God, who challenges them to do the best they can and who holds them accountable for their actions.[10] A popular notion in Western thought is that human beings are responsible to no one but themselves. They are *auto-nomous*, i.e. a law unto themselves. This notion is at variance with the actual behaviour of human beings. People know themselves to be accountable to someone, if not to God then to other people or to public opinion, etc. and they act upon it.

The reality of human beings is that they are never satisfied with just existing. Without exception they all have a strong need to give an account of their existence. Talk to any man, woman or child and they will soon tell you who they are, where they came from, what their world is like, what they are doing and where they are headed. Human beings are storytellers by nature. They have something to say. They have a persistent urge to describe themselves and the world in which they live. This need to know and to name sets them apart from any other creature in this world. It is a uniquely human quality. Our

need to give an account of ourselves is not just our way of describing our behaviour. It is our attempt to justify our actions to someone other than ourselves.

This need to know and to name also points to our social and communal nature. Human beings have a need to be heard as well as to speak. That too goes to the heart of our humanity. All the words we utter are really publications, designed to reveal, to make our insides public. They are meant to address others: "This is what I think," we say. "What do you think?" When we speak, we want to be heard, received, and listened to. It is a terrible thing not to listen to someone tell her life story. It violates her humanity. It negates her deepest need.

This creational need to speak and to be heard forms the basis for the possibility of communication. When we speak and when we listen we affect one another and are mutually affected by one another. Two rocks, even when they are touching never communicate. You can grow two plants, or plant two trees in the same garden. Though they stand next to each other for days or months or even years on end, they have nothing to say to one another. You can put two chairs in a room, the one toppled over, the other upright. You can leave them there till doomsday, but the upright chair will never be able to put the other chair back on its feet. However, put two people in a room and pretty soon they will start to converse and to affect one another. What we say to one another and how we respond matters to us. It can hurt or help us. Word can heal and words can kill. In giving an account of themselves, human beings are of necessity interdependent.

The reality of the world

Does the question whether or not we live life before the face of God or in the presence of God have any relevance for the way we view the world? From a *coram deo* perspective the reality of the world is rooted in the revelation of God. God reveals Himself to human beings through people, things and events. He reveals who He is and what He wants from us through the world He has made. We do not live to serve a hidden, mysterious God, like the God of the pagans. Creation is revelation. Creation is revelatory and revelation is wholly creaturely.[11] The meaning of our lives *coram deo* is empirically knowable from the world we inhabit, provided we are willing to hear and to see it.

This idea flies in the face of everything that the Western world has come to believe since the time when Classical Rationalistic Humanism held sway and perhaps even earlier. This opposition to revelation is certainly much in evidence today. I wrote about the historical development of this opposition to revelation more extensively in chapter two.

Here I want to state as succinctly as possible what, to my mind, is at issue in this regard when describing the reality of the world.

By way of preamble we do well to recount the essence of the method Rene Descartes (1596-1650), arguably the father of Classical Rationalistic Humanism, devised for discovering the truth about the world. He prescribed a kind of thoroughgoing scepticism about everything. One systematically questions the truth of whatever can be believed until one comes to something that is so self-evident that it cannot be doubted. In this way we can arrive at indubitable truth.[12]

By means of this method Descartes arrived at some conclusions about human beings, the world and God. But he cheated. He had to cheat because radical doubt is not possible. In reality, faith always precedes reason. Human beings cannot question anything except in terms of something that they do not question. It is a creational given that only firm believers in something are able to really doubt something else. For Descartes that was his faith in the Divine light of Reason. He accepted without question the Stoic doctrine of *logos spermatikos* (roughly: the "seed of reason"). It states that the Divine World Reason endows every human being at birth with a piece of itself which then enlightens them or reveals (!) to them an infallible way of thinking about the reality of oneself and the world.[13]

That is quite a religious assumption! In short, Descartes and other Rationalists after him were adherents to what came to be called the doctrine of *the apriori*. He came to believe that he lived in a world that he himself had freely constructed by thinking. The world we inhabit, he held, is first and foremost (*apriori)* a thought-up world, a concept. The world Descartes constructed in this manner was a self-governing, independently operating, self-sufficient mechanism like a clock, which was considered to be impervious to all outside influences. It came to be called "nature" excluding both God and humankind. According to the Rationalistic religion of Deism at that time, God the Creator may have started nature in the beginning, but after that He went fishing, so to speak, and left nature to operate as a "thing in itself." This world picture also excluded the influence of human individuals. Knowledge about the world could only be obtained by obeying the laws of nature, which were said to be "objectively" true, (i.e. without the input of human subjects). They exist as things "in themselves". (The philosophical term for this is *ding an sich).*

This formulation was ironic on two counts. First, the laws of this "nature", these natural laws, as we saw in chapter two, came to restrict the freedom of thinking individuals who constructed this world picture in the first place in order to be autonomous, i.e. free from any outside influence whatsoever. Second, these laws were held to be "objectively" true, i.e. without any reference to human subjects. But the notion of objectivity only has meaning as objective for subjects. It belongs to the notion of objects that they only exist as objects for something else. In short, the notion of objectivity implies the existence of subjectivity.

On two counts, therefore, Descartes' method left thinking about the world in Western thought thereafter with an insolvable problem, where at one time the world was said to be the product of human thought and at another human thought was seen as produced by (the natural laws of) the world. From here on in, the history of Western thought was caught in a dialectic between subject and object. At some times and in some places the priority in coming to the truth about the world was given to human beings, at other times it was given to the objective world confronting human beings. Of late our post-modern view of the world has become thoroughly subjectivistic, where it is argued that there are as many realities as there are individual human beings constructing them.[14]

In the meantime it is simply not true that the world around us cannot be modified or cultivated by human beings. Witness the way people have changed our natural life space over the centuries. Nor is it true that people can change the natural landscape any way they wish without impunity. Surely today, with the catastrophic effects of climate change upon us, we are aware of the limits of cultivating the surrounding natural environment.

Why did we come to this impasse? Why have we hung on to it so tenaciously over the last five centuries? You would think that our best minds would have found an alternative to the dialectic between subject and object in framing our collective view of the reality of the world. Is there perhaps a religious reason hiding behind this cultural dilemma? Might there be a connection to the systematic way in which we have come to deny the existence of God in the Western world? (See chapter 2). I think there is.

Recall first off, that from a *coram deo* perspective the reality of the world is rooted in the revelation of God. God reveals Himself to human beings through His creation, i.e. through people, things and events. He reveals who He is and what He wants from us through the world He has made. The world is a gift and a given from God. It is not something we (have to) create. It is "there" for us to enjoy, to cultivate, to change, to develop. It is accessible for the task we were given provided that we hear and see what is there.[15]

One condition to hearing and seeing what is there is that we give up our claim to perfection. No one of us, including Christians, has a corner on the truth. There is an old medieval saying that only the one who has made a thing has perfect knowledge of a thing. On that basis only God knows all about the world and what the world is all about, and we don't. Nor do we have to. In formulating our view of the world we have a tendency to compete with others about the truth of our worldview. This is an unfortunate side effect of the Rationalists' belief that each of us infallibly creates his/her own view of the world. But we don't live long enough, don't have access to all the facts and in general are too bound by our time and place in history to have perfect knowledge of the world. So, there are limits to what we know individually. This awareness should make us more willing to reach out to others to learn from them what we need to know in our

pursuit of everyday living. Knowledge acquisition is a collaborative rather than a competitive affair. Here, as in so many other ways, we need each other to be ourselves.

More to the point, being able to hear and see what is there presupposes that we acknowledge that in and of ourselves we know (next to) nothing. At any time in our lives the world we live in affects us. This pre-existing natural and cultural environment decisively influences how we as children grow up to become adults. Unlike the lives of animal young, human children take several decades to learn to take care of themselves. During that time they are dependent specifically on the care of parents and more generally on the provision of a caring environment -- it takes a village to raise a child. But even after human beings have matured they continue to depend on external conditions beyond their control to be able to live their lives. During a third of our lives, that is 8 of a 24 hour day, we need to be inactive and unconscious to replenish the energy we need for the other two thirds. During that time we are most vulnerable to harm from the outside. It behooves us, therefore, to make an effort to hear and see what is there.

The fact that our knowledge of the world is limited and context-dependent resonates with the *coram deo* view of the world as it relates to the presence of God in human life. The Bible is clear on two points. a) God has perfect knowledge of the world because He has made it and b) for our knowledge we, human beings are dependent on what God chooses to reveal of His knowledge to us. The world we inhabit is a revealed creation.[16] For our knowledge of the world we are completely dependent on the revelation of God. That, according to the *coram deo* perspective, is the *reality* of our existence.

The Bible testifies to the fact that human beings are dependent on God in a myriad of ways. This includes God's revealed will. At times God speaks to His people directly in words, as in the Ten Commandments. At other times he reveals himself in spectacular actions, as in the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, or in the miraculous signs Jesus performs during His time on earth. But he also reveals His will in natural and cultural events as is chronicled in Psalm 19, where the heavens declare the glory of God, or in the voices of the prophets warning about the cultural upheavals in the land of Canaan and the surrounding world. In all these sightings God has only one message: "I am God, your Creator, your Provider, your Shepherd, your Father. You are My sheep, My children. I will take care of you. I want you to trust Me, to put your life into My hands". This is the meaning of Jesus' saying that we can only enter Gods kingdom, Gods domain, as a child. This also holds for our understanding of the world, His creation. We are to listen and to see, as children, as if we know nothing, to hear and see what is there before we speak and act in response to God.

Notes

[1]Dostoyevsky, F. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Book V, chapt.4
[2]Bonhoeffer coined the phrase: *religionless Christianity*. In a letter written
  from a Nazi prison on April 30, 1944, he wrote:

 We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are
 now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly
 describe themselves as "religious" do not in the least act up to it, and so
 they presumably mean something quite different by "religious."

 Yet another quote from Bonhoeffer points to the same formulation:

 The same God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34).
 The same God who makes us live in the world without the working
 hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before
 God and with God we live without God.

<div align="right">

Bonhoeffer, D. (2010) *Letters and papers from prison.*
Minniapolis:Fortress Press

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[3]The cultural mandate or creation mandate is the divine injunction found in
  Genesis 1:28, in which Yahweh, after having created the world and all in
  it, ascribes to humankind the tasks of filling, subduing, and ruling over the
  earth *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_mandate*.
[4]To rule is to serve: John 13:12-17
[5]Self-realization is an expression used in Western psychology, philosophy, and
  spirituality; and in [Far-Eastern] religions. In the Western psychological understanding
  it may be defined as the "fulfillment by oneself of the possibilities of one's character or
  personality."
<div align="center">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-realization</div>
[6]For a good introduction to Postmodernism see: Smith, J. (2006) *Who is Afraid of
  Postmodernism*? Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.
[7]Postmodernism made individual differences absolute and thereby
 fragmented common human experience since "Nothing is true no matter
 what anymore" Van Belle, H. (2012) *Intergeneration Lost and Found*.
 Edmonton AB: Legacy Press:45, 59-77
[8]Currently, under Trudeau, Canada rightly celebrates diversity.
[9]The spirit of production and consumption is alive and well in the mall
 culture of the West. I have written more extensively about this problem in
 my *The Life of Soul.* To access this paper, Google my website at *All of Life
 Redeemed* → *Van Belle*. https://www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk/

[10]God holds us accountable throughout our lives, and not just at the end of days
    (Revelation 20, Mekkes, J. (2010):29, 30, Mekkes, J. (2012):16

[11]Mekkes, J. (2010):chapt. 3

[12]Van Belle, H. (2013):90, 91, 123-124, Descartes, R. (1939)
    Discourse de la Methode. (1637). Text by E. Gilson, Paris:

[13]Ibid:88-90

[14]Van Belle, H.A. (1980) *Basic Intent and therapeutic Approach of Carl R. Rogers.*
    Toronto ON: Wedge Publishing Foundation. Rogers, a self-confessed Humanist has
    stated that there are as many realities as there are persons.

[15]H. Diemer, a Dutch, Reformed Christian biologist and neo-Calvinist philosopher, who
    was killed in World War II, in the spring of 1945 is reported to have said that "the
    nature of creation needs the culture of creation and vice versa." Natuur en Wonder,
    Philosophia Reformata (1943):114

[16]I have dealt more extensively with this point in chapter seven: *Listening to nothing*.

Chapter seven

A Christian view of spirituality

A Christian view of spirituality comes to expression in a receptive attitude toward life. What distinguishes Christian social action from social action by Humanists is that Christian action wants to listen to and be guided by what is given and revealed to them by God. Christian action is pipeline activity: It receives its energy, insight and love from God and passes it on to others. That is a spiritual difference.

Spirituality has once again become a popular topic of discussion in the Western world. What is new is that in addition to traditional Christian or Roman Catholic forms of spirituality, which have always been with us, kinds of spirituality inspired by Far Eastern religions have now also become topics of popular discussion. Such discussions are providing a healthy antidote to the crass secularism, pragmatism and commercialism so familiar to the lives of people living in the Western world. Today, bookstores and websites offer a veritable smorgasbord of diverse ways of practicing spirituality in our lives.

The one thing that all or most of these seem to have in common is that they offer an *escape* from ordinary day-to-day living. The practice of yoga, meditation, channelling or mindfulness, etc. is billed as forms of relaxation and recreation. They are done when ones daily work is finished. These popular notions of spirituality have a kind of otherworldly character. They are reminiscent of an earlier kind of spirituality propagated during the Hellenistic phase of Western thought. During that time, life in the Western world, much like our own today, was in an uproar, with many world-and-life views vying for attention and with none of them gaining the upper hand. In order to deal with this confusion of values the Epicureans proposed a minimalist lifestyle, specifically a search for *ataraxia*, roughly translated as "a search for peace of mind," by opting out of the hustle and bustle of everyday living.

Epicureanism had one major flaw[1]: At best they offered a spirituality *next to* everyday living, but not an ordinary spirituality *within or for* the life that we live every day. These ancient forms of spirituality seem strangely familiar to us today. What seems to have been forgotten is that spirituality is not an add-on, but the most *essential* ingredient of living a full life.

This can be illustrated from the life of young people. In an attempt to form a personal identity they experiment with all sorts of life options. Their choices are for a time all over the map. It is as if they are trying on these life options like a suit to see which

lifestyle fits them. Once they have settled that question, their lives tend to become more stable, with the choices and actions they now make lining up behind that *one* choice of what to live out of, and what to live for. This then, it is said, spells the end of their emerging adulthood and the beginning of young adulthood.

Most theorists view this quest for identity as a psychological matter, and it is that of course. But this process of identity formation by young people is so pervasive and all determining in their lives that characterizing it as a psychological quest does not seem to do justice to it. Speaking generally, it belongs to everyone's life developmentally at some time or other to be spiritually busy, in the sense of deciding what to live out of and what for.[2] In my view, the practice of spirituality I am describing is essential to a well-lived life at any age. None of us can escape engaging in it. The process is ongoing and the goal is a well-lived life characterized by our humanity.

I would argue that the essence of human life is religion and that the essence of religion is spirituality. Let me try to define religion as I see it. To me religion has to be lived to be real. A religion in which one attends a church or mosque, or synagogue once per week and no more is only a hobby. So, I define lived religion as characterized by what or whom we live our entire lives *out of* and by what or whom we live our lives *unto:* i.e. it is what or whom we trust with our lives and what or whom we serve with our lives. Lived religion should provide human beings with a basis and a direction in life. From that vantage point religion is on par with ideology. Viewed from this perspective everyone's life is faith-, or trust-based. The difference between a religion and an ideology is not that religious people's lives are faith based, whereas the lives of those who adhere to an ideology are not. Rather, the distinction is that the former has something to do with God and the latter with something other than God.

The function of spirituality, religious or ideological, is that it gives our lives both faith and purpose. In our complex world it gives our lives a place to feel at home and somewhere to go. Together these two provide us with the courage to live out our humanity in the Western world. They teach us what it means to be human. Many formulations of the meaning and purpose of human life have been given. Each of these spiritual life choices has implications for how we conduct our lives.[3]

For me, as a Christian, the essence of spirituality is *coram deo*. It has to do in this secular age with whether my life acknowledges the presence of God in everything or whether I live my life as if He is irrelevant. In this regard North American Christians can learn much from their fellow aboriginal/ indigenous human beings for whom everything is centrally related to Someone whom they call "Creator-God".

The late Dutch philosopher Johan Mekkes,[4] to whom I am deeply indebted for many insights, has redefined the basic directional question related to God as one of *listening or*

not listening. In his view, all of humankind is faced with this basic choice. The implication of this choice is that it behooves us to listen if we believe that reality is created and sustained by God, because then we live in a world being structured by God. However, if we believe that reality is being constructed by human beings, as is often maintained, then reality consists of indifferent material, which human beings are duty-bound to shape towards human ends.

Bible believers trust and confess that God is the eternal Origin of everything that exists. This confession further entails that God *reveals* the structure and purpose of His creation to humankind. This confession implies that the world we live in and we ourselves also, are immediately knowable to us provided that we trust them to be the products of Gods revelation.

The predominant characteristic of human beings celebrated in the developed Western world is their self-dependence or independence. Human life is not just a process (taking time to live) but a project (in which we *make* a living). By way of contrast, the view of human beings confessed in the Bible is one in which the central characteristic is their utter dependence on the creatures of the world they inhabit. Their dependence on the world demonstrates their dependence on the God who created all that exists. This view implies a non-active, open, receptive stance toward the world, which implies in essence a central and life wide dependence on God.

Trust in God's revelation means that we take a receptive attitude toward the world in which we live. It means that we allow the things of the world to speak to us with authority, including their relationship to their creator, prior to any thought or action on our part concerning their nature. Trusting in Gods revelation means allowing the creatures that surround us to tell us who or what they are in our lives.

When we take this ultra-empirical stance, the created world we inhabit opens up to our reflection, including to our scientific theorizing. A biblical picture of humankind in creation entails a factual immediacy of the world toward human beings. Reality thus conceived is immediately knowable and lends itself to the human actions we are called to perform. What this could experientially feel like is discussed in what follows.

Listening to Nothing

My wife and I are sitting on the deck of our cabin surrounded by evergreen trees at our rainforest hideaway on the west coast of Canada. I say to Jenny: "Do you hear that?" She says: "I don't hear anything." "Exactly," I reply. What we hear is the sound of silence. We are listening to nothing.

The absence of city noise is the most relaxing part of our vacation. It allows us to empty our hearts and minds from anything we have to do. As we sit in silence for a long time some things begin to present themselves to our awareness. Out of nothing things appear: the soft shush-shush of the wind through the trees, the cry of a bird far away, our own breathing, and what feels like a intrusion, the noise of a car down the road. Individual things insist that we pay attention to them when previously we hardly noticed them in passing. They speak to us with authority when we are silent and listen.

Gradually we become aware that we inhabit a world full of things, people, creatures, who demand our attention, who are real, who expect us to respect their existence. Most of them are not things that we have made. They are given to us and motivate us to respond one way or another. That is their authority in our lives.

When things speak to us, when things *reveal themselves to us with author-ity* we quite naturally wonder who their author is. If most of the things of the world we live in are not thought up by us, are not fictions, are not made up by us, are not fabrications, who or what then made these things to be? That is the question of origins, of where things come from. It is a tantalizingly difficult puzzle that has occupied the best minds throughout the ages, difficult because one can imagine another origin behind every origin, another author behind every author of the things of our world.

Many answers to that question have been given. One of them we find in the Christian scriptures. They clearly identify God as the author of all that exists. God qualifies as one of the contenders for the source of all that is, seeing that the Bible identifies Him as an author, as *the* author, who merely by speaking is said to have brought forth the way things are and the way things can change in our world and who, again by speaking, provides for their continued preservation.

Whispers of the heart about God

One biblical poem that connects God to the things of our world is found in Psalm 19:1-6. A shepherd boy, David, wrote this Psalm. He was an Israeli poet who wrote many of the Psalms in the Bible.

Psalm 19 is a poem, a song, a meditation, or, as the Jerusalem Bible has it, a "whispering of the heart" about God. It must be read, recited and sung with reverence and humility rather than theologically dissected and debated with pride. Poetry and song, whispers of the heart, can often reveal things about God where theology can only stutter. That is the case here.

Neither is Ps. 19 a lecture on physics or astronomy. It talks about the heavens and the skies and the sun, yes, but it is not about any of these in the universe. Ps. 19 is about God and the way the heavens and the earth and the planets, and in particular the sun, reveal His glory. It tells us that the universe itself is a poem, a song, a symphony about the greatness and majesty of God. Space whispers to us, with a loud voice so to speak, who God is and what He does, and that He is awesome.

Of course, you can look at the heavens during the day and see nothing but blue or cloudy skies. And you can look at the moon and the stars at night and see nothing but planets whirling in endless space. But that is like watching Niagara Falls and seeing nothing more than a whole lot of water coming down. You miss seeing what the heavens and the planets are clearly showing you, telling you, declaring loudly and unmistakably that the creator of everything is an awesome God. So says Psalm 19.

It is not a debate about whether God is real. It's not about whether or not He is visibly there. It's not about whether He can be seen. It's about whether *we* see him or not. What would it take for us to see what David saw when he wrote this song about God and the universe?

If perception is reality, so that only what can be seen or heard or perceived is real, then what gives birth to perception, to seeing and hearing? What is it that opens our eyes and our ears so that we can see, so that we can hear? I submit to you that the birthmother of seeing and hearing is love. You cannot see, you cannot hear what you do not love. Love opens our eyes and our ears to perceive what is really there.

I will give three examples: Have you ever met a man and you took an instant disliking to him? He is loud and he brags and he complains and he dresses like a slob. Your first impression is that he is not a nice person. Then you meet his girlfriend and you notice how she looks at him. It's look of pure adoration. She is clearly head over heels in love with him. And that makes you wonder whether your first impression was the right one. Maybe he is not such a bad guy after all?

Second example: I could be wrong, but in my experience not all babies are cute. Some babies are butt ugly. Then you see how its mother looks at that baby. She clearly loves that baby to bits and she fusses over it and tells that baby that it is beautiful over and over again. And you wonder, what does she see that I am missing?

The last example is taken from the Bible, how God himself sees His people Israel, a nation whom the Bible describes as a "cantankerous lot". And yet God loves them like no other. He calls Israel "Jeshurun", a term of endearment which means something like "my sweet little baby" (Isaiah. 44:2) and "Hephzibah", which means "my delight is in her" (Isaiah 62:4).

God's love for Israel is the love of a father. In Hosea 11:1-8 God writes:

> When Israel was a child I loved him.
> It was I who taught Ephraim to walk.
> I led him with cords of human kindness and with ties of love.

And as the father of a wayward child God cries out to her in agony: "

> How can I give you up, Ephraim, hand you over, Israel?

My heart is changed within me, all my compassion is aroused

And in Isaiah 66:13 He vows:

As a mother comforts her child so will I comfort you.

This is clearly the language of passionate love by a God who is crazy about human beings. To Him Israel is precious. He sees in Israel something that we cannot see. They say that love is blind, but don't you believe it. Love opens our eyes to see what is really there.

Back to our question: What would it take for us to see what David saw when he wrote this song about God and the universe? The answer is, a passionate love for God. If anything is clear from all that David has written in the Psalms it is that he was totally besotted with God, and that made it possible for him to see God in everything.

But why is love so important for seeing the world aright, including God? Well, when you love someone you want to learn more about him or her. So, you'll spend a lot of time with them, you take the time to get to know them personally, intimately, more fully. In the eyes of the lover, the beloved takes on substance and depth. But only after a long time of being alone together with them.

If there was anything that David the shepherd boy had in abundance, it was time. As the sheep he was watching were grazing around him he would lie on his back for days on end, looking at the skies and marvelling, dreaming, meditating, composing, whispering songs about the greatness of God in creation. If you want to love God in order to see God in the world, then you need to take the time to look at, and listen to nothing.

Implied in Psalm 19 is also the assertion that when we see God in everything the world opens up to us as well. Instead of looking at the universe in black and white, we will be allowed to see it in blazing technicolour.

Look at the marvellous picture of the sun in the skies that David paints for us. He has God stretching out the heavens like a painter stretches canvas over a frame. Then God paints a tent in one corner of the canvas, at the place of the dawn of the day. And he then has the sun coming out of that tent like a bridegroom.

So, picture this: It is the day following the night after the wedding, the day after the honeymoon night, it is the morning after a night of tender and riotous love making with his beloved, a night that no Viagra ad can ever hope to be able to describe.

Early in the morning the bridegroom has come out of his tent. The beloved is still sleeping. And he stands there and he remembers, and he stretches, full of love and energy. Life is so good! And he wants to run for joy, because he is so happy. He wants to run all day, all the way from dawn to the other end of the canvas at the end of the day!

Not a very scientific picture of the sun? Probably not. Breaks all the rules of physics?
Probably. And theologically not very appropriate? Well, maybe not. But then, Psalm 19
is not a physics or a theology lecture. It's a poem, it's a song, a whispering of the heart, a
testimony to the greatness of God in the universe by looking at the skies for a long, long
time.

Notes

[1]In that sense it was a form of paganism (see chapt. 3)
[2]Van Belle, H.A. (2012) *Intergeneration Lost and Found*. Edmonton Alberta: Legacy
  Press deals with emerging adults making a choice
[3]see chapt. 1: Introduction, and chapt. 2: the end, for the meaning question.
[4](2010) *Creation Revelation and Philosophy,* chapt. 3

III. Application

In this section I intend to show that adopting a coram deo perspective opens up a world of experience to human beings. It provides genuine academic insights for scholars, practical directives for professionals, and clear guidelines for everyday living.

It is some times argued that talk about God and religion is fine for funerals, where we deal with heaven and the afterlife to comfort the grieving, but that for life before death it does no earthly good. It is impractical. As one of my learned colleagues used to say about philosophy: " It bakes no bread."

That may be true for other people, but it is not for me. I am a Christian clinical psychologist, and a therapist by profession, with a lifelong academic interest in the relationship between religion and psychology. I have found God and religion intensely relevant for reflecting on the nature of life as a whole and for the nature of my discipline in particular. By way of illustration I have reproduced three of my articles below.

The first article discusses the relevance of two paradigms for mapping out the relationship between the Christian faith and psychology. The first paradigm views the relationship as the integration of psychotherapy and

Christianity. The second, the structure and direction paradigm, attempts to discover what makes an approach to therapy therapeutic, regardless of whether it is done by Christians or non-Christians.

The second article explores the fruitfulness of the notion of "office"(which is a synonym for coram deo) for reflecting on the nature of education, both in life and in school.

The third article deals with the importance of the Christian religion for reflecting on the various seasons of our lives.

Chapter eight

**Recounting the presence of God in the therapeutic relation:
                    integration or structure and direction?**

Our dependence on the presence of God

If anything is clear from the Bible, it is that created existence, including the existence of humankind, is dependent on God. Human beings live, and move, and have their being in God. Dependency on God is of the essence of human life, so says the Bible. Equally evident from the Bible is the fact of God's revelation, i.e. the fact of the *presence* of God in our lives and our dependence on it. All of human life is lived *coram deo,* i.e. it is lived *before the face of God.* For every aspect of our life, we, and every living creature with us, also depend on the *presence* of God. When God turns his face toward us, we live and experience peace. When he turns his face from us, we live in terror and we die. (Ps. 104: 25a, 29a).

As I read the Bible, from the beginning of creation until this day God made his presence empirically observable (Romans 1:19, 20a) and, as if to make his presence unmistakable, He has made himself known to us in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ (Col.1:15a, 16b, 17). Yet, right before the face of this Creator God, under His nose so to speak, people time and again and in many different ways turn away from Him in a futile effort to declare their *in*dependence from Him (Genesis 3). And in doing so, they exchange the very truth of their dependent existence into a lie and end up worshipping and becoming enslaved by Gods creatures instead (Romans 1:21a)

Even so, this is hardly the end of the biblical story. What follows this human debacle is the amazingly good news of Gods restraining, restoring and inspiring grace. Our waywardness notwithstanding, God has *not* turned away from his creatures. Human life continues, and the unfolding of all of creation continues, because of Gods continued presence. The presence of God that called creation into being and guarantees its becoming remains intact. Gods presence in our lives is an *ontological* fact, not just an epistemological fact, to use a philosophical distinction: He is present in our lives whether or not we are aware of Him, or whether or not we acknowledge Him. He is not just present in our minds, he is not the product of our thinking, but His presence is given with the structure of creation (Ps. 139:17, 18). And even after the Fall He daily makes his presence felt as the experience of His grace.

For these reasons it is extremely important that we contemplate the meaning of the presence of God in human relationships in general and in the therapeutic relationship in particular. What place does the Divine presence have in the relationship between a therapist and the person who comes to her or him for help? In my view, the question of the presence of God in therapy translates into the question of *what makes the therapeutic relationship therapeutic.* In this chapter I want to defend the following conviction:

God has a central place in any therapeutic relationship, regardless whether or not the parties in this relationship are aware of, or acknowledge his presence. Whether a relationship between two or more people is therapeutic or not is essentially determined by the manner in which the parties in the relationship respond to God.

So, what do Christian psychotherapists mean when they say that God is present in the therapeutic relationship?   Several answers are espoused by Christians.

The presence of God viewed from the integration paradigm

Most Christian psychotherapists view the problem of the presence of God in psychotherapy as an integration problem, usually as the problem of integrating psychotherapy and Christianity.

In an insightful review of the integration literature, Steve Bouma-Prediger has listed the many ways in which the term "integration" is used. And he asks what exactly is meant by "integration".

> Does one integrate psychology with faith, or the bible, or revelation, or theology, or a Christian worldview, or Christian belief, or Christianity, or religion? Does one integrate theology (or faith, Christianity, etc.) with psychology, or science, or therapy, or counselling? Does one integrate theory with practice, or faith with practice, or faith with learning or faith with vocation, or religious experience with therapy? In other words, what precisely are the *relata* in the integrative relationship? And furthermore, what exactly does the term "integrate" mean? Does it mean merely to relate, or does it mean, more specifically, to combine, to harmonize, to unify, ...what integrates with what and what is the precise character of that integrative relationship?[1]

Clearly, many different meanings are given to the term integration and in a confusing fashion these meanings are used interchangeably. Bouma-Prediger continues:

> [F]or example, the integration of psychology and theology is viewed as the equivalent with the integration of psychology and Christianity, or psychology and religion.[2]

But surely the integration of theology and psychology as two scholarly disciplines must not be identified with the integration of psychology and Christianity, or with the integration between a scholarly discipline and a way of life? And surely religion is ontologically of a different order than the scientific study of psychology? Too often in the literature, integrationists commit a category mistake, i.e. they attempt to *combine, to harmonize, to unify* the equivalent of apples and oranges into one homogeneous category.

The result is that the important discussion about the place of the presence of God in the therapeutic relationship, and by implication, the discussion concerning what makes therapy therapeutic disappears in a conceptual fog.

Describing the presence of God in the therapeutic relationship in terms of integration, is, in my judgment, inherently problematic. For one thing, it assumes that there are two entities, such as faith, Christianity, theology, or spirituality on the one hand, and psychology, psychotherapy, or secular counselling on the other, independent entities that can be related to each other, or combined or harmonized with each other, only with the greatest difficulty. Arnold De Graaf, a well-known Christian psychotherapist, is correct in stating that

> the word *integration* has misleading implications, namely... that there is an inherent duality, opposition, or tension between two dimensions of our experience, between our faith and our feelings, between findings of theology and those of psychology, between our view of the person and that of therapy.[3]

Some psychotherapists view the relation between the "spiritual" and the "psychological", or between "religion" and "psychotherapy", for lack of better terms, as one of opposition. David Benner, another well-known Christian psychotherapist and author, calls these "spiritual reductionists" and "psychological reductionists".[4] That is, they tend to reduce one of the *relata* to the other. Freud, as an example of a well-known psychological reductionist, was clearly down on religion. He called it an illusion and explained a person's longing for God as a lack of psychological maturity.[5] Jung, although he had a more positive attitude toward religion, also reduced it to a matter of psychology.[6][7]

The question we may ask of Freud is, of course, why his view that religion is an illusion is not itself an illusion.[8] For countless millions of human beings the *experience* of God refers to the *reality* of God *outside* human experience. So, psychological reductionists deny a significant portion of human experience.

So-called spiritual reductionists fare no better. People like Adams[9], Bobgan and Bobgan[10], Hunt[11], and other Christian counsellors view psychologically- based psychotherapy as nothing more than bad religion and therefore as inherently un-Christian.[12] They reject the findings of psychology and claim to base themselves exclusively in their counselling on insights obtained from the Bible. They claim superiority for their biblical approach to counselling because, according to them, the Bible is the inerrant and infallible revelation of God. Psychological counselling, in contrast, is viewed as being based on merely human insights, which are prone to error.[13]

The problems I have with this antithetical formulation of the presence of God in therapy are several. First, spiritual reductionists seem to make no distinction between the infallibility of the Bible and their fallible interpretation of the Bible. As a result their views take on an aura of holiness they don't deserve. Second, they seem to restrict the revelation of God to what has been written in the Bible. They seem to ignore God's self-revelation in creation. This view of revelation runs counter to the testimony of the Scriptures themselves (Ps. 19). Third, in my view, their approach represents a misuse of

the Bible. They do not use the Bible to scrutinize the empirical world of psychotherapy for insight (John Calvin suggested many centuries ago, that the Scriptures are "the glasses of God"). Instead they seem to restrict themselves to studying the Bible only and seem to derive from it an exclusive set of rules for doing psychotherapy. Fourth, their approach to counselling, which Jay Adams in 1970 articulated as *Nouthetic Counselling*,[14] tends to use only one technique of counselling, that of confrontation, which may not be appropriate for every psychological problem. This approach ignores other tried and true techniques such as free association, empathy, focusing, listening, concreteness, etc. That this focus on confrontation is central to this approach to counselling even to this day is evident from an article by Welch and Powlison written as late as 1997.[15] Finally, because spiritual reductionists focus exclusively on what they perceive to be the ultimate concerns in counselling, such as sin, repentance and forgiveness, they seem to be unwilling to follow the often tortuous road of the therapeutic process and move much too quickly beyond the ambiguity that characterizes most of therapy toward the resolution stage of therapy. They try to obtain the product of therapy without following the process of therapy.[16] There seems to be no desire in this form of counselling to attempt to understand *why* the person who comes for counselling came to adopt a lifestyle from which he or she presumably needs to repent. For these reasons I consider spiritual reductionism of limited value in discerning the place of the presence of God in the therapeutic relationship. In my view it fails to give an adequate answer to the question what makes therapy therapeutic.

Christian counselling as superior to psychological counselling

A more common way in which psychologically-based secular counselling is related to biblically-based Christian counselling is in terms of inferior versus superior counselling. According to this view psychologically-based counselling is of limited value because it only deals with *psychological* problems, whereas biblically based-counselling deals with *spiritual* problems. Psychological counselling is valid as far as it goes, but biblical counselling digs deeper, reaches higher, focuses on ultimate religious questions. Psychological counselling provides counselees with emotional relief, but biblical counselling applies the unifying power of religion to the life problems with which the counselees struggle so that as a result of counselling their lives become more unified, integrated, and whole. In short, the relation between these two kinds of counselling is one of *levels* of healing.[17]

This view of integration holds that to be really effective what must be added to secular, psychological counselling are some elements of Christian counselling, such as prayer, Bible reading, calls to repentance, etc.[18] The discussion in this paradigm usually centres on the question of when and in which way these Christian elements are to be added to secular counselling. The consensus seems to be that these Christian elements should be slipped in as sensitively as possible, usually during the resolution phase of counselling. In this context Barshinger and La Rowe speak of "pacing" Christian elements into the counselling process.[19]

Furthermore, Christian counsellors who adhere to the inferior-superior paradigm frequently have a tendency to interpret the psychological problems which the counselees bring to therapy as spiritual problems. Thus, at some point in therapy they will suggest to their counselees that their problems are *really* spiritual problems from which they need to repent and for which they need forgiveness from God.

What is overlooked in this form of counselling is, as S Pfeifer (1996) has shown[20] that Christians frequently express their *psychological* problems in *religious or spiritual* terms. One would think that when doing therapy with Christians it would be more conducive to healing to reverse this interpretive tendency. Therapists might better question whether Christian counselees are not using a spiritual formulation of their problems to avoid facing the psychological problems they have. It may very well be true in some cases that a persons psychological problems have a spiritual problem as their root cause. The issue is, however, how one determines that this is the case. Moreover, even if we grant the adherents of the inferior-superior paradigm their assumption that *every* psychological problem has a spiritual cause, we still need to demonstrate how spiritual problems (i.e. problems of one kind) can cause psychological problems (i.e. problems of another kind). Concretely, *how* does the fact that a person does not believe in God make him subject to panic attacks? At a minimum, I would suggest, one would have to translate his spiritual problem into psychological terms before it could function as the cause of his psychological problem.

Furthermore, how do we determine that interpreting psychological problems as spiritual problems and informing a counselee of our interpretation is therapeutic for the counselee? What is the *therapeutic* value of this approach to therapy? An example of how, in my opinion, this approach lead to a misdiagnosis of a psychological problem and a breakdown in therapy is found in Benner (1987).[21] In this passage Berry gives a case analysis of a marital conflict between a wife and her husband, that reads like a theological dissertation and that misses the *psychological* point that the wife in this case felt *emotionally* abandoned by her homosexual husband. In my opinion, Berrys clients were not well served by his description of their marital problems in spiritual terms. Small wonder, therefore, that they terminated therapy prematurely.

In a similar vein we may question the therapeutic value of introducing "Christian" elements, such as Bible reading, prayer, confession and other techniques, into therapy. To say that these elements have intrinsic value for therapy because they are taken directly from the Bible seems somehow less than adequate to me.

Psychological and spiritual counselling are of equal value

There is one more way, which I will mention briefly, in which Christian therapists have attempted to integrate psychologically-based counselling and biblically based-counselling. Some Christian therapists view psychological and Christian counselling as equally valid approaches to counselling. They, therefore, advocate a dialogue between the two. Noteworthy is Ellens[22], who suggests that the helping professions should search

for a method of doing [Christian] theology from a psychological perspective and doing psychology from a [Christian] theological perspective.

Presumably, the exercise is aimed at demonstrating the influence of psychology on Christianity and the influence of Christianity on psychology. This attempt at integration appears to have some value because it has the potential of opening up a dialogue between Christians and non-Christians about the nature of psychotherapy and the nature of religion. However, a close reading of the description of this approach reveals that the dialogue these integrationist advocate proceeds in only one direction, with the authors focusing on how Christianity can and should influence psychology, but not on how psychology can or should influence Christianity. In practice, therefore, this view does not represent a genuine dialogue and differs little from the other attempts at integration.

Summary critique of the integration paradigm

What is most evident in all these attempts at integration is that they make the Bible the ultimate criterion for what should and what should not be included in psychotherapy. It appears that for these integrationists anything is permissible in therapy as long as it is mentioned in the Bible.[23] The problem with placing Christian, biblically-based counselling in opposition to secular, psychologically based counselling, or of placing Christian counselling on a higher plane than psychological counselling is that it puts Christian counselling theories beyond the pale of criticism. It implies that Christian counselling *must* be good (or superior) simply because it is biblically based and that secular counselling *must* be bad (or inferior) because it is psychologically-based. In the mean time, it is a matter of historical record that most of the ingenious insights into counselling and psychotherapy to date have not come from Bible-believing Christians but from secular theorists. Comparatively little has been written by Christian theorists.[24]

Integrationist theory seems to play religious conviction off against professional expertise, with deleterious results. If one were to argue that Christians should get their cars fixed by a Christian mechanic because his work is biblically-based and therefore far superior to that of a secular mechanic who bases his work on the training he has received as a mechanic, he would be laughed out of court. Yet, much of the integration literature uses this, in my opinion, fallacious argument. Thus, it seems to me that for these, and other reasons we need to utilize a different paradigm in recounting the place of the presence of God in the psychotherapeutic relationship, and in our attempts to answer the question what makes therapy therapeutic. In what follows we will view the presence of God in therapy from the paradigm of structure and direction. And we will discuss the relative value of it in comparison with the integration paradigm for the *practice* of therapy.

The presence of God viewed from the paradigm of structure and direction

Central focus: what makes therapy therapeutic?

In recounting the presence of God in the therapeutic relationship I would like to suggest the paradigm of structure and direction as an alternative to the integration paradigm. There is a clear difference between the integration paradigm and the structure and direction paradigm when dealing with the Divine presence in the therapeutic relationship. The integration paradigm defines the presence of God in therapy by distinguishing between the insights of two kinds of human beings, between the insights of Christians and the insights of non-Christians, or by distinguishing between the insights derived from psychotherapy and the insights derived from the Bible. The structure and direction paradigm defines the presence of God in therapy by honouring both kinds of insights, but in addition it wants to distinguish between the truth of God and the fallible insights into that truth by human beings, including the insights of Bible-believing Christians. It wants to have some criterion to determine which of our human insights are in accordance with the truth of God and which are not.

Perhaps the most important thing this paradigm does is focus our attention on the need for a structural, therapeutic criterion for doing therapy. It asks the question: What makes therapy therapeutic regardless by whom it is done, and regardless whether this therapy is biblically based or psychologically based? This is an important question, for only by means of this structural, therapeutic criterion can we determine whether a given theory of, or approach to therapy, or technique in therapy honours the presence of God in the therapeutic relationship. Furthermore, the structure and direction paradigm asserts that the truth of God for therapy can only be discerned by living and practicing it and not just by reading a book, even if that book is the Bible. The truth of God for therapy is discerned by engaging oneself in therapy and not by looking for some rules for therapy in the Bible.

If there is one thing I object to in the integration paradigm it is that it thinks too little of the presence of God in our lives and, by implication, too little of the presence of God in the therapeutic relation. It offers us a reductionistic view of life and of therapy. My main motivation for choosing the paradigm of structure and direction is that, above all, I want to honour the depth and the breadth of the presence of God in human life. For me, the presence of God is not a formula but an everyday existential reality. He is there for me in every aspect of my life and He is intimately related to every detail of my life.

Structure as God's presence

He comes to me in the fullness of my life and tells me what to do, and shows me how to live. He shows me how to raise my children, how to relate to my wife, how to teach my students, how to take care of my health and how to live every other aspect of my life. He speaks directly to my mind, and to my emotions and to my body. He tells me what to think, how to feel, what to do. He speaks to me in the creation that surrounds me, in the tasks I have to complete, in the people I encounter and in the way I relate to myself. Even after the fall He has not left me to my own devices. Even while I sin He does not allow me to flounder in my ignorance. He is always there where and when I need him most. It is this concrete reality of his presence in my life that I wish to designate as His *structure* for my life.

Direction as our response to structure

Unfortunately for me, however, I do not always hear his voice, I am not always willing to listen, I cannot always discern his will. That too is a reality in my life. When he points me in one direction I often go the other way. Time and again I act like a fool in the biblical sense of that word (Psalm 14:1). The fact that I sometimes go His way, and other times not, in response to His presence is the *direction* of my life.

Structure and direction in therapy

God is also present in that part of my life that comprises my profession as a psychotherapist. He tells me how to do therapy. He shows me how to be an effective therapist through the education and training I have received, through the insights into therapy provided by my colleagues, through the struggles and the triumphs of the people I encounter during the therapy hour, and through the experience as a therapist I have gained over the years. Through all these ways and by all these means the presence of God opens up avenues of service for me as a psychotherapist. This is what I mean by the *structure* for psychotherapy.

Yet as a therapist too, I do not always heed his wisdom. I go one way when He wants me to go another and insofar as I wander away from His presence, I flounder as a therapist. That is what I mean by the *direction* of my therapy.

I hope I have made it clear that the paradigm of structure and direction is not just a formula for me, but an existential reality that seeks to concretely honour the presence of God in human life. Insofar as the integrationists also want to honour the presence of God in human life, we share the same goal. But insofar as they reduce the all-encompassing presence of God in human life to some narrow 'spiritual' dimension, as I think they do, they and I part company.

I am not the first to describe the paradigm of structure and direction. Earlier Wolters already discussed this paradigm at length in his book *Creation Regained*.[25] He, in turn, like myself, learned about structure and direction from the late H. Evan Runner, in his later years Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, Grand Rapids in Michigan. The essence of this notion can be found in the *Isagooge Philosophiae*[26] by D.Th. Vollenhoven, who was one of the founding fathers of the Dutch Christian philosophy movement called "The Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea".[27]

So, the paradigm is not new and actually finds its origin in the Bible. A common way of understanding the content of the Bible is to say that it contains the story of the creation of the world, of the fall of humankind into sin, of the redemption by Jesus the Christ and of the ultimate restoration of all things. The notion of structure and direction builds on the

doctrine of creation found in Scripture. It asserts that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, including humankind, by his creation Word and that this Word not only initiated creation, but has also since then proceeded to uphold and to unfold creation.

The term "structure" in the notion of structure and direction refers to the structure for creation. It is identical to Gods continued faithfulness to his creation, the fall of humankind notwithstanding. It denotes the constancy of God's grace. In this paradigm "structure" refers to (the actions of) God and "direction" to (the actions of) human beings. In this context the *presence* of God denotes that this structure as the actions of God, is revealed, is *evident* in our lives. It is meant to motivate us, it is empirically knowable, and it demands a response on our part. The "direction" part of the paradigm signifies that people respond to that structure in different ways, or, in ways that either approximate or deviate from that structure.

Furthermore, the term 'structure' in the distinction between structure and direction denotes the supporting and norm-giving activity of God who calls creation to respond to Him. So, it is better to talk about the structure *for* creation than about the structure *of* creation.

To apply this notion to therapy, the phrase "the structure for therapy" denotes the quality that makes therapy therapeutic. By way of contrast, the "direction" of therapy in a given theory or approach to therapy is that which deviates from or approximates what makes therapy therapeutic. It is in terms of the structure for therapy that theories and approaches to therapy stand judged, regardless of whether they are psychologically based or biblically based. The structure of a therapeutic relationship can best be understood as its structure created by God. The created structure for a therapeutic relationship can be said to define a therapeutic relationship as a *healing (or wholing) and as a liberating (or opening up)* relationship. This means that it both enables healing and liberation and prescribes ways of accomplishing it. More concretely, the created structure of a therapeutic relationship means that God makes it possible for us to be healing and liberating and also points us to the way we should go about doing that.

Evidence of structure in our lives

As no doubt you have already noticed, I have just defined the structure of psychotherapy as a healing and liberating activity. That may sound as if I have an inside track to what that structure is, but I do not. My (rather loose) description is already a response to that structure and not identical to that structure itself. What I am asserting at this point is *that* this structure exists, that it enables us to do therapy, and that it demands a certain therapeutic response from us if we want to be effective therapists. *What* this structure consists of remains for now a wide open question.

However, I would like to argue that this structure for created human life as a whole is a reality in people's lives. Human beings are constantly busy attempting to discern and to describe what it means to have a family, what it means to be married, how one should go about making money, baking bread, planting a garden, doing therapy, etc. The fact that

we make these descriptions and, more importantly, *that we expect these descriptions to have validity,* suggests to me that human beings have some sense of structure and normativity in their lives, and that they appeal to this normative structure in defence of their assertions. In other words, the structure for creation is *evident* in our lives and this fact may point us to the presence of God in our lives.

I guess that in reaction to the thoroughgoing relativism of post modernism, where truth seems to be just another point of view, I want to emphasize that there is *something* to be studied, that there is *something* to be known and that there is *something* we can come to agree on as a result of our ongoing dialogue together. I want to stress that God, and His will, and His faithfulness to creation is present in our lives. So, I am arguing that structure is evident. It, or its operation, is discernible, observable. As the will of God it is not hidden but revealed. However, this is not to say that the creation structure is *easily* discernible. Discerning the structure of created reality often takes painstaking, plodding scholarly research. In the same way, the structure for therapy often only becomes somewhat clearer to one person after extensive dialogue with other knowledgeable people in the field of counselling. Nor do I believe that Christians via their reading of the Bible have an inside track to this structure. At best, when Christians use the Bible correctly in the service of studying creation, they may be kept from stagnating into unfruitful conceptual dead ends. But none of this, from my perspective, represents a shortcut to the hard work of research.

The Bible opens our vision rather than limits our sight

The Bible is a rich book. Its writings are fully in tune with all the nuances of concrete human existence. The Bible is filled with insights into life as a whole, and also with insights that are valuable for our understanding of therapy. But, precisely because the written Word of God is such a rich source of insight it is not intended to restrict our understanding of human life in general and of psychotherapy in particular, but to enrich it. Perhaps the authority of Scripture is not so much legislative as enabling. Perhaps, the Bible does not limit our vision, but opens up our sight. Perhaps it allows us to see more and to see better.

Earlier I have said that my main objection to the integration paradigm is that it thinks too little of the presence of God in our lives and, by implication, too little of the presence of God in the therapeutic relationship. It offers us a reductionistic view of life and therapy. By making the Bible legislative for what is to happen in therapy, or, perhaps I should say, by making a certain reduced *reading* of the Bible legislative for the practice of therapy, it commits itself to a one-sided view of therapy. I would like to explain this in more detail with reference to some common views of therapy found in the clinical literature. In my opinion there is an unfortunate tendency among integration theorists to identify their biblically based Christian therapy *apriori* with the structure for therapy. I think this is a mistake because it leads them to a certain one-sidedness in their conception and practice of psychotherapy and baptizes that view with the authority of Scripture.

The goal of therapy as (inter) personal wholeness

Many of the integrationists tend to view personal and relational integration as the goal of therapy. Psychological problems are described by them in terms of disintegration, fragmentation, brokenness, disharmony, disconnectedness, isolation and separation. Mental health is described by them as personal integration, personal and interpersonal wholeness, inner and outer harmony, connectedness, etc. They view therapy as a healing, i.e. as a "whole-making" process.[28]

There is much to be said for this point of view. Those who view the goal of therapy as (inter)personal wholeness, have a great deal of the clinical literature on their side. In particular, Ego Psychology, Object Relations Theory, Analytical Therapy and some forms of Humanistic and Cognitive Therapy can be said to have personal and interpersonal integration as their aim. For this reason most of the Christian integrationists tend to show a penchant for these approaches to therapy.

Historically it is also understandable that Christian clinicians should choose personal and interpersonal wholeness as the goal of therapy, since this criterion of integration allows them to give religion a place in psychotherapy. Famous psychologists like James, Jung, Erikson, Allport and others all have stressed the personally integrative power of religion.

Finally, the Bible talks a great deal about sin as causing us to live broken lives and salvation as making our lives whole again. It speaks of "uniting our hearts in the fear of the Lord" (Psalm 86:11), it tells us that "in Christ all things hold together" Colossians 1:17), and that "in the Lord" we can be "of one mind "(Romans 12:16; I peter 3:8). Thus, there is no lack of support either in the clinical literature or in the Bible for the integrationists point of view.

The point of view which identifies integration as the goal of therapy stresses the importance of gaining cognitive control in mental health. It tends to define human beings as responsible agents who have their life at their disposal and who can therefore be expected to gather the dimensions of their lives into a unified, wholehearted pursuit of lofty goals. It tends to advocate therapy that enables people to gain an intellectual grip on their emotions in order for them to be able to act in a responsible fashion. It tends to stress the regulative, executive functions of the ego.

The goal of therapy as opening up our emotional life

While there is no question that personal control is an *aspect* of emotional maturity, this point of view is nevertheless one-sided. There is an equally sizable body of clinical literature that views psychotherapy as a process of *liberation*. Classical Psychoanalysis in particular, with its notion of *repression* views psychological disorders as resulting from an *excess* of cognitive control. It focuses on the importance of affect and passion in the economy of human existence. It tends to foster a receptive attitude toward the emotional substratum of our lives so that our lives may be opened up to the rich variety of human experience. It tends to stress the dynamic, energizing function of the id. Similarly, Person-Centered Therapy advocates that we "listen to our experiential

organism" which, it says "is wiser than our self(concept)"[29] and in that way promotes a non-regulative, receptive attitude to our experience.

Christian integrationists tend to ignore schools of therapy that emphasize the liberating function of psychotherapy. Perhaps this is because these schools have traditionally been critical of organized religion. These approaches to therapy claim that religion has been largely restrictive of human emotions, and they can make this claim with some measure of justification. Historically speaking, traditional Christendom in Western Civilization, under the influence of Neo-Platonism and Stoicism, has generally treated human passions as problematic aspects of our existence to be controlled by human beings in the pursuit of Christian virtues.

However, it is doubtful that this traditional bias against passions can be justified on biblical grounds. Thus, there is no biblical reason why Christian therapists should restrict themselves to (inter)personal wholeness as the goal of therapy. The gospel of Jesus the Christ is quite clearly a gospel of liberation. Jesus the Christ is not portrayed in the Bible as the one who shrinks human lives, but rather as one who liberates our existence. *Sin* is identified as shrinking our lives. *It* results in bondage. *It* makes our hearts hard and closes off our experience from the rich and colourful variety of Gods creation and from the needs of our neighbours. But the Bible clearly points to salvation in Jesus the Christ as the way to open up our lives again.

This point is especially emphasized in Philippians 2:1. This passage lists a number of the gifts we receive by being united with Christ. According to this verse these are: encouragement, comfort, fellowship and compassion. In addition it speaks of one more gift. Tucked right in the middle of this list is a gift described by the Greek word, *splagchna*, which literally means 'bowels', but which the English translates as "passion". The word is listed right before the gift of *com*passion, and is meant to contrast with it as its prerequisite. One has to have passion in order to have compassion. Elaborating further, the word means "emotional openness or sensitivity to our experience of the world". The implication is that sin closes our hearts, our bodies, our lives to the pleasures and pain of the world that we inhabit. Sin robs us from being able to experience the wonderful variety of Gods good creation and it also makes our hearts insensitive to the needs and the hurts of others. The result of this process is that we become rigid, hard, legalistic and inflexible. By contrast, the fruits of the Spirit given to us by means of salvation, open us up again and soften our hearts so that we can live fuller lives and become able and willing to show compassion toward our neighbour, (and, by the way, toward ourselves).

What I have so far attempted were two descriptions of the structure for therapy. The one views the therapeutic process as an integrative process. The other sees therapy as a liberating process. Each of these is backed up by legitimate points of view in the clinical literature and each of them has a genuine claim to being biblically-based. But by viewing the Bible as legislative for the practice of therapy integrationists have closed off their vision to only one approach to the therapeutic process. By contrast, the structure and

direction paradigm is able to embrace both approaches and possibly other approaches as well.

The practical value for therapy of the structure and direction paradigm over the integration paradigm

Whoever practices the art of psychotherapy is faced with the undeniable reality that we are dependent on the insights of others if we want to be effective as therapists. Equally undeniable is the reality that some of the most sensitive insights into the structure of psychotherapy have been discovered by non-Christians. Christian integrationists constantly face the question whether it is legitimate to use the insights and expertise of their non-Christian colleagues in their psychotherapeutic practice. By denying the validity of these insights or by considering them inferior to therapeutic insights gleaned from the Bible they may be depriving their clients from the therapeutic services they need to heal. This represents another way in which
the integration paradigm keeps Christian therapists from being as effective as they could be.

That this is not just a theoretical problem becomes clear when we consider a situation in which a Christian therapist is faced with a fellow Christian who has a specific problem, like an eating disorder, and the Christian therapist is not trained in treating eating disorders. Should this therapist attempt to deal with the problem as best she can or should she refer her client to a non-Christian therapist who *is* skilled in dealing with eating disorders? To decide this issue in a responsible manner the Christian therapist must be able to account for the fact that apparently non-Christian therapists are able to respond obediently to the presence of God in therapy. The structure and direction paradigm has a way of doing that.

One way to account for this fact from the side of the structure for creation is to say that Gods faithfulness to creation, which restrains, restores and inspires, impinges indiscriminately on Christians and non-Christians alike, akin to the rain that falls on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). Traditionally this explanation has been referred to as "common grace". However, this explanation still leaves unexplained the fact that apparently Gods grace favours non-Christian therapists more, since the preponderance of insights into the structure for therapy come from non-Christians. So something must, therefore, also be said from the side of the response by humankind to God's grace.

From the side of the response to the structure for therapy, Christians may have to acknowledge the fact that non-Christians may have been willing to open themselves to the presence of God in therapy and may have been more diligent in searching out Gods will for therapy than Christians. It is hard for us to acknowledge this fact if we believe that only Bible-believing Christians can know the will of God. But, perhaps we Christians find it hard to acknowledge the insights of unbelievers because this fact pronounces judgment on our own unwillingness to fully open our hearts to the presence

of God in the therapeutic relationship. Perhaps when we feel this way we should ponder the text from Matthew 7:21 which states: "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven but only those who do the will of my father who is in heaven." Another applicable passage may be Matthew 21:28 about the son who first declined to work in the vineyard when he was told, but changed his mind later, and the son who readily agreed to work in the vineyard, but did not go.

In any case, it is imperative that we do not reject the insights of non- Christians out of hand because it seems to be in the nature of therapy that it represents the application of *collective* insights to the hurts and pains of individual people. Some form of dependence on the insights and expertise of others in therapy, therefore, seems justified. One *ought* to pay attention to the insights of ones colleagues. Spiritual or psychological reductionism is not in accordance with the structure for therapy.

Another problem with which Christian therapists struggle concerns the role that the religion of the therapist and of the person who comes to him or her for help should play in the therapeutic relationship. From the integrationist point of view, religion, specifically the Christian religion, should play a dominant role in psychotherapy. Two quotes from Collins are instructive of what this point of view entails:

> Christian counselling involves more than secular counselling. Christian counselling points people to the teachings of Scripture and encourages counselees to live in accordance with the word of God (p. 71) Good counselling, therefore, could be a form of pre-evangelism (p. 76)[30]

From this perspective, the ultimate goal of Christian counselling is to convert counselees to Christianity. The structure and direction paradigm acknowledges the fact that religion does play a role in psychotherapy, even a central role. But, in addition, it insists that *how* religion plays a role in psychotherapy should be decided on *therapeutic* grounds rather than *religious* grounds. In that connection an experience I have had years ago was instructive for me. A woman came to see me with the following story:

She said she was a Christian suffering from depression, and had seen a secular psychiatrist for some time. He was, she said, a very good therapist who had helped her a great deal. However, recently he had insisted that the reason she was depressed was because she 'had religion' and that if she would get rid of her religion she would be cured. Sadly she felt that she could no longer see this therapist, because, she said, "he does not understand that my faith in God is the only thing I still have to hang on to. And now he is asking me to give that up too!?"

It was clear to me from the emotional turmoil this woman expressed that this therapist not only threatened her faith but also her emotional health. By insisting that this woman give up her faith this therapist violated the first rule for therapists, which is to be sensitive to the subjective experience of the client. He demonstrated a gross lack of clinical sensitivity, at least on this issue. He let his own religious bias get in the way of his therapeutic effectiveness, to the detriment of this woman's emotional well-being.

This story illustrates for me the importance of recognizing that religion structurally has a central place in psychotherapy. For me life is religion. Faith, rather than reason, is of the essence of human life. Religion is constitutive for human life because it deals with ultimate questions of where we are going and where we lay ourselves to rest. Religion represents that *out of* which and *unto* which people live their lives. To withhold respect for the religion of a person is to negate her humanity.

With this sentiment most Christian therapists would readily agree. But would they also agree with me that they would have to show the same respect for that persons adherence to Islam? Or would they somehow feel constrained to convert this person to Christianity? From the perspective of structure and direction this would be a violation of the empathic structure for psychotherapy. It is because religion is of the essence of life that we must fundamentally show respect for the religion of the person who comes to us for help.

However, within this attitude of fundamental respect it may be appropriate at times to raise directional questions. It can be legitimate to ask a client to *consider* whether her religion (or ideology) is helping or hindering her in her attempt to resolve her psychological problems. The child psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner has taught me that this is a legitimate question. His research shows that some commonly held ideologies like individualism or communism put children "at risk."[31] Implied in his research is the suggestion that all religions or ideologies are not equally beneficial. Some may even be life threatening. The relative value of different religions or ideologies for human life is, therefore, open for discussion. But raising this issue in therapy for consideration when the process of therapy calls for it is a far cry from imposing our own religion on the person who comes to us for help.

In any case, the structure and direction paradigm relieves Christian therapists from *having* to convert their clients to their own religion. Psychotherapy is *not* evangelism. At the same time, it acknowledges that religion has a central role to play in therapy because it has a central place in human life as a whole. Finally, it recognizes the fact that not all the religions in the world, as responses to the presence of God in human life, are equally beneficial for human life. Thus it is legitimate in therapy to discuss the relative merits of a client's religion for his life and emotional well-being.

This issue leads us to the next problem of whether it is permissible to use therapeutic techniques that are clearly derived from some kind of religion in the therapeutic relation. A whole raft of techniques, such as yoga exercises, transcendental meditation and channelling, mindfulness, etc. derived from the religions of the Far East have been introduced into therapy during the last several decades. To these we may add the traditionally Christian techniques of prayer, Bible reading, exorcism, healing of the memories, laying on of hands, and the anointing with oil. How do we determine the admissibility of any of these techniques for therapy?

Integrationists would readily allow for the introduction of Christian techniques into psychotherapy, but not for techniques derived from some other religion. It seems to me

that there should be one structural criterion for admissibility of all of these techniques, including the ones found in the Bible. They cannot be judged on the basis of from which religion they derive, but rather on whether these techniques are obedient responses to the structure for psychotherapy. Whether any of these are valid techniques should be decided exclusively by the extent to which they help a person resolve his or her psychological problems.

Psychotherapy is not just the application of proven therapeutic techniques to psychological problems. It is also an experiential process. How does the experience of the presence of God help therapists in doing therapy? When we discuss this question I believe that we have come to the heart of what makes therapy therapeutic. Here I want to speak from personal experience first of all. From my own clinical experience over the last 50 years I have come to appreciate the fact that therapy is an exceedingly complex process. It is full of ambiguities and loaded with surprising twists and turns. There is nothing straightforward about being in a therapeutic relationship. The process of therapy is often unpredictable. One reason why this is so, is that therapy is a relationship between people and "people," as my mentor, Prof. Dr. H.R. Wijngaarden used to say, "are the worst material to work with." It is my long-term clinical experience that I cannot get other people to do anything. I can only get their cooperation. My experience has taught me that therapy is an eminently *cooperative* affair. Perhaps this is the meaning of honouring the presence of God in the therapeutic relationship. In therapy we can only do that *together*. How does the text go: "Where two or three are gathered together in my Name, I will be in their midst" (Matt. 18:20)? Therapy is a cooperative affair, where the therapist is dependent on the client for the success of therapy. That fact makes psychotherapy an exciting, but also often a frustrating occupation, in which it is easy to come to doubt one's competency.

Therapy has its own pace and movement. The most effective ingredient in therapy is not the wealth of advice we are able to pass on to our clients but our ability to be sensitively attentive to the movement of the therapeutic process. For this to happen we have to be quiet inside. We have to be free from anxiety about our own effectiveness as a therapist. I think this is a structural norm for therapy. The first hurdle a student-therapist has to overcome in becoming a therapist is counter-transference. There are moments in therapy when I do not know what to do next. At such moments I become anxious about my ability as a therapist and to combat this anxiety I try to take on a receptive attitude. I open myself to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I do this because I believe that therapeutic insight is not an achievement on my part, but rather a gift from the Spirit of God. By opening myself to the Spirits leading I act on my conviction, and by this very act of surrender I obtain the inner tranquillity I need to refocus my attention to the therapeutic task at hand, and then often, I know what to do again.

This is my personal experience, tied directly to my religious convictions. But I would think that other therapists go through a similar movement in order to achieve the requisite inner peace about their therapeutic effectiveness. Their experience in this regard is tied to their religious/ideological convictions as my experience is tied to my Christian

convictions. For example, I think that this movement to combat anxiety is what the Humanist Carl Rogers refers to when he talks about "listening" to his "organism".[32]

I am arguing that a structural condition for therapeutic effectiveness is empathic attentiveness to the movement of the therapeutic process. Furthermore, I believe that to achieve this empathic ability, every therapist must somehow experience inner tranquility, and finally, that this inner peace is obtained by taking on a receptive attitude toward whatever, or Whomever one believes to be the source of therapeutic insight. In this manner I am attempting to conceptualize what I think is a central moment in the structure for therapy, while at the same time honouring the different directional responses to this norm.

Concluding comments

People are complex creatures and there are probably a wide variety of reasons why they become emotionally disturbed. There are probably also many different ways in which their disturbances can be alleviated. But to learn about this complexity requires the patient scholarly research of many dedicated people. Those who come to therapists for help are illserved when, in the therapeutic relationship, they are subjected to simplistic solutions to their problems, even if these solutions are couched in biblical language and of God in the therapeutic relationship.

Postscript

The bulk of this chapter was written years ago (1998). So, the sources for the discussion on the integration paradigm are in need of updating.

The first major update came from Eric Johnson's 2010 publication, *Christianity and Psychology, five Views*. Johnson shows an expansion of the debate and distinguishes five versions, the "Levels of Explanation" view by Myers, the "Integration" view by Jones, the "Christian Psychology" view, by Roberts and Watson, the "Transformational Psychology" view by Coe and Hall, and the "Biblical Counselling" view by Powlison.

Taking his point of departure from this publication, Loonstra (2016) shows that there has been a development in the integration debate since my analysis of it years ago. Some of the players have changed and the positions have become more nuanced. But, as far as I can tell, the basic paradigm remains the same and the debate rages on with no end in sight.

Loonstra's analysis of the debate is detailed and exhaustive. Each view gets its due. In addition he reduces the differences in views on integration to differences in worldview, specifically to differences in epistemology and anthropology. This is helpful. In addition he offers an external evaluation from a Reformed Christian philosophical perspective and advocates a Normative Practices View on the matter as an alternative. However, whether this extension allows for a resolution of the debate is, in my view, still a matter for

debate. In any case, none of these updated versions of the integration paradigm provides an adequate answer to the question what makes psychotherapy therapeutic.

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Chapter nine

Office, discovery and school education

Introduction

Another, more traditional way of saying that human life is lived *coram deo,* i.e. life in the presence of God, is to say that human beings are always and everywhere "in office" or that they have a "calling". In this chapter I want to explore the theme of "office" as this relates to a Christian view of (school) education.

Office

A discussion about the importance of being in office implies that we stand in a relationship to God who calls us to a task. Our being is that of someone who is addressed and our actions are always responses to this call. Moreover, the God who calls us to the task is also the One who enables us to respond to this call. Our ability is given with our office as a response-ability. Our office or our religious relation to God is constitutive for the *whole* of our existence. Human life is always and everywhere lived in office, *coram deo*, before the face of God.[1]

To quote the late Martin Vrieze, in his time professor of sociology at Trinity Christian College in Chicago, our lives are lived "*coram deo, cum hominibus, in mundo,*" i.e. before Gods face, with others, in the world.[2] Religion is a first person plural and worldly affair. It *directly* deals with how people relate to each other in communities and with how they relate to the world they inhabit. And that reality is embodied in the notion of "office" or "calling".

The point about the communal and worldly character of a person's office is important for our discussion on education because education is an eminently inter-human and worldly affair. How teachers and students communicate together and what they talk about would thus seem to me to be of central importance to a Christian view of instruction. Here, too, it is essential to assert that religion is directly involved not only in the way teachers and students live individually, but also in the way they come to know about the world *together.* It is not possible to relate religiously to God outside of our relations to fellow human beings and our relation to the world. In these two relations we have to do with God. This becomes clearer when we take a closer look at the notion of "office".

Office as authority

Our traditional notion of office is usually associated with such words as dominion, power or authority over something or someone. A person in office is said to have authority. This authority or power is derived, delegated power. It comes from God for the fulfillment of a task, which Reformed Christians usually refer to as the mandate to cultivate the earth. Each person has been given the task of discover and to develop the riches God has laid in

creation in such a way that God as the creator is honoured and praised. And for that task each person has been given some power, some authority, and some ability to respond to this mandate. In that sense *every* person can be said to be "in office."

Office as service

But there is another aspect to the notion of office, which I want to especially highlight in the context of the present discussion on education. This is the aspect of service. A person who is an official is one who serves. Such a person serves God first of all, but as K. Sietsma, a Dutch theologian who wrote a definitive book on office, writes, with a play on the word "service", that when people thus serve God officially, and thus obey the cultural mandate, they "serve up" Gods care and love to His creatures.[3] So, official activity is *pipeline activity*: it is meant to pass on Gods care to his creatures. Gods providence is administered through the office of human beings. The term "office" ties religion directly to inter-human and worldly existence. It holds that life as religion is normed by the central love command (love Me by caring for your neighbour Mark 12:29032) and by the cultural mandate (dress and keep My garden and bring it to fruition Genesis1:28). These two commands come together in our calling or office.

Vicarious functioning and complementariness

Within the relationship of a person with another person people fulfill their office when they function *vicariously* for one another. To be an official means that one acts *on behalf of* someone else. In that sense of the word all of us fulfill an office when we do our daily work. The baker bakes my bread, the mechanic fixes my car, the banker guards my money, and the paperboy delivers the paper *for* me. My MP represents me in parliament, the minister opens Gods Word for me, and Christ intercedes on my behalf with the Father. In all these, others function vicariously for me and in doing so *enable* me to live my life before the face of God. By serving God we live to serve each other.

All this official functioning would be quite impossible if God had created his earthly creatures individually self-sufficient, like the angels.[4] But He didn't. All of Gods earthly creatures were made to stand in a complementary relation to one another. Each creature is called to serve the other and is dependent on the service of the other. The relationships of people with their world and of people with their fellow human beings are inescapably relationships of mutual service, interdependence, and intertwinement. People are meant to serve people. People are normally dependent on people from cradle to grave. And people's lives are normally intertwined. What one human being does, or refrains from doing, reaches right into the intra-personal functioning of the other and affects it for better or worse.[5]

With respect to the communal character of religion, a Christian view of instruction may fruitfully explore the notion of office, since this notion directly relates our relation to God to our relations to fellow human beings. So, the rest of this chapter will explore how the notion of office "norms" inter-human relations in education. In this manner I hope to illustrate the importance of a *coram deo* view of human life for a Christian view of

instruction.

Application of "office" to the educational relation

Learning and knowing

There seem to be two fundamental questions related to education: How can people come to know about their world, inside and outside themselves (i.e., learn) and How can one person help another in this process (i.e., teach)? The answer to these two questions is the answer to what makes education possible. These questions presuppose that the relation between people and their world as well as the relation between one person and another is in some sense problematic. It takes a special effort like learning and instruction to bring about knowledge in people.

At the same time it also implies that this problem is resolvable. The world inside a person and out is knowable and one person can teach another. Learning can be taught. The world complements the learner by yielding its mystery to knowledge, and teachers can help learners learn by imparting their knowledge to them through instruction. Thus the possibility of learning and teaching is ultimately given with the complementary structure of creation.

The need to learn is a creational given

All people are called by God to be servants for their fellow creatures. The fundamental rule of inter-human relations is *neighbourliness*. It is this office that gives a person dignity, responsibility, and freedom. It is in terms of this office that a person has authority and can demand respect. To respect a person is to respect her or his office. But the exercise of one's office requires knowledge of the world. The need to learn is a creational given to which even Adam had to submit. Though he was sinless, Adam still had much to learn. His life was in need of discovery. His learning had a receptive side: as he walked with God, God taught him directly what was so, and what was so was also what was normal. And his learning had a productive side. Adam himself also made distinctions for the purpose of naming the animals, so that the name he gave them became their name.

Through the fall into sin, the identity between the way things are and the way things ought to be, between being and norm, was broken. After the fall, knowledge of the way things are is not necessarily knowledge of the way things ought to be. Through faith in the Christ's redeeming work, knowledge of the norm is once again possible and particularly revealed to fallen human beings in the Bible, but only in principle. Within a fallen and, in principle, redeemed world, it is therefore more realistic to say that the call of our office entails that we constantly learn to bend our lives as we experience it, in the direction of the way it ought to be, or the norm. In our present condition, teachers not only impart knowledge through their instruction to learners, but they can also lead learners astray.

Levels of learning in the educational relationship

When a teacher stands in relation to a learner, that relationship is an educational relationship. Such an educational relationship is one specification of the general complementary way in which we relate to our fellow human beings. An educational relationship exists when at least two people, who necessarily differ from each other in their level of learning, come in contact with each other. Without this difference in knowledge no educational relationship can exist.

People of all ages differ from each other in the knowledge they possess. Thus, in many ways they relate educationally to each other. This difference in learning is most clearly evident in relationships between adults and children. All adult-child relationships are educational in character because they are per definition teacher-learner relationships. Which is not to say that all adult-child relations are exclusively educational. More goes on in them than learning and teaching. In fact, except for adult-child relations that occur in schools, most adult-child relationships are focused on something other than learning and teaching, and the education that occurs in them occurs only *incidentally*. The point is, however, that because of the difference in knowledge that exists between adults and children their relation to one another cannot help but be educational.

No human being is ever born into the world fully developed. For all of us, life is a journey of maturation until we die. What the famous Soren Kierkegaard, an Existentialist philosopher, held to be true for the life of faith, holds true for life in its entirety: Maturity can be learned, but it cannot be given. The wholesale transmission of life knowledge from one generation to the next is not possible. Each generation must learn anew what the previous has just finished learning. We are all born with a developmental lag.

Children are learners

Children know very little and therefore start life in a restricted, closed-off state. This makes them helpless and dependent. Of all Gods creatures, infants are probably the most helpless creatures alive.

The young of animals appear to have no such problem. They mature for the most part inside the biological womb of their mothers. In terms of instinctive response patterns they are born relatively well equipped. It takes them only months, in some cases no more than days, to become self-sufficient. By contrast, it takes children a full two decades to reach adult maturity. They mature for the most part outside the womb. From this vantage point, all children are born premature.[6]

Children depend on social support structures

Children are per definition dependent on the activity of adults, but as Uri Bronfenbrenner, a prominent developmental psychologist has extensively shown in his *Ecology of Human Development,* they do not just depend on the manner in which individual adults relate to them but also, and even more fully, on the societal structures that adults maintain.

Children require cultural response patterns and social support systems to mature physically, emotionally, intellectually, morally, and spiritually. To develop, they need to participate in families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and other kinds of relationships. As Bronfenbrenner has argued convincingly, without this collective socio--cultural substitute womb, children are "at risk." They fail to mature.[7]

Children are learners and the concrete content of their office during childhood is by and large defined by the task of learning to know. For this, children are dependent on the care of adults. With Bronfenbrenner I stress the institutional rather than personal character of this care for two reasons: first, to indicate that it is not so much what adults say to children as what they do that is educative. Children surely learn from what they are told, as occurs in schools. But education is much broader than school education. Life itself is educative. The way adults live together in families, run their business, pay their taxes, and worship God or not enables children to learn. A child learns incidentally, without deliberate instruction, simply by being alive in a given culture and by being a member of a given society. And this kind of learning is prerequisite for the kind of deliberately verbal and reflective instruction and learning that occurs in school education.

My second reason for stressing this point is that, as Bronfenbrenner has shown, children need societal structures to live and to learn. It is not so, as is often claimed, that children need instruction but that this unfortunately means a curtailment of their personal freedom. On the contrary, without such structuration children are in bondage. Life educates and education frees. But it does so only if it provides children with the necessary structures they need to learn.[8]

Education: "freeing" children to learn

Children are learners. They are still in the process of learning to choose and learning to be responsible. During childhood this is their office and this defines their personhood. Adults concretely respect children when they "free" them to learn, and they do so when they function vicariously for them, when they provide children with the services they need to learn. "Freeing children," means more than feeding and clothing and providing them with shelter. In addition it means protecting children, urging them on, encouraging, correcting, instructing, praising, loving and comforting them, and much, much more. Insofar as children cannot do it themselves, adults must feel, think, judge, and decide for them as well as be their identity. Concretely, "freeing children" means being everything for them that they as yet lack in their own being, while learning. Purely by functioning vicariously for children adults enable them to learn. In that sense every adult who cares for a child is a teacher of that child.
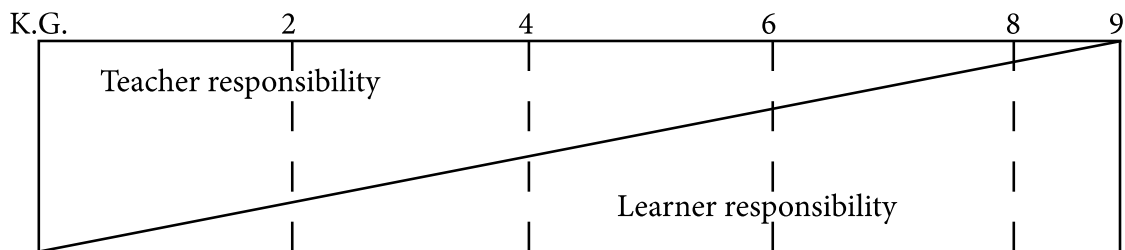
The dynamic character of educational relations

Children are at risk when support fails because learning children are dependent children.[9] But a situation where everything is always done for them is equally detrimental to their

well being, because dependent children are also learning children. As time goes on, they master more and more of the skills they need to live. For adults to maintain their vicarious role in those areas of life where children have eliminated the need for it hampers their learning ability. Once such knowledge has been obtained, it must be exercised if further learning is to take place. For that reason instruction in the teacher--learner relationship is not characterized by imparting knowledge only but also by a transfer of responsibility. Once children have learned to do something, they can be expected to do it themselves. It must no longer be done for them. Competence gained must become competence required.

This makes the teacher-learner relationship a dynamic, ever-changing relationship that involves constantly changing ratios of responsibility for a learners life. It is not only children who change in the teaching-learning process, but the relationship between teacher and learner develops as well.
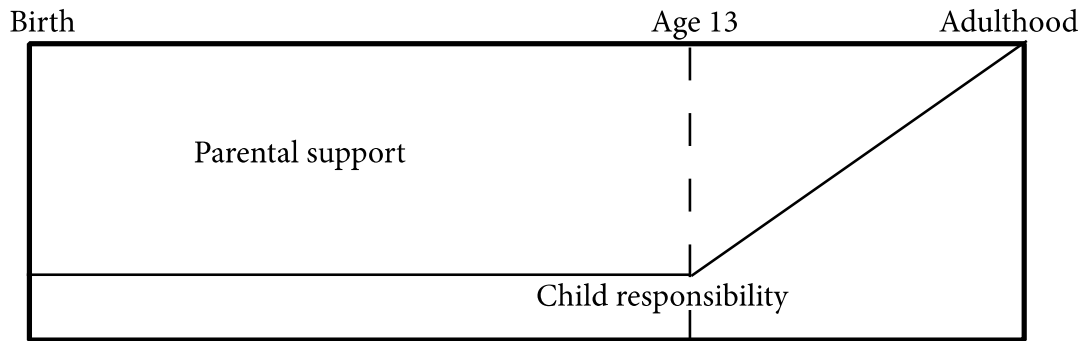Schematically this may be represented as follows:

Changing ratios of responsibility in the elementary school

If, for the sake of clarity, we restrict ourselves to the elementary school experience, the above diagram illustrates that as learners move through the grades and increase in knowledge, they can normally be expected to take on more and more responsibility as well. This taking on of responsibility is as essentially a part of learning as the acquisition of knowledge. Simultaneously, the responsibility of the teacher for the life of the learner is reduced.

In summary, we can say that healthy child development requires a proper mix of support and responsibility. How much support children need and how much responsibility they can be given depends on the level of knowledge they have achieved. It strikes me that parents, because of the nurturing emphasis of the home, have a tendency to over-extend their support to their children, at least up until the time they reach adolescence, as the following diagram illustrates:

Birth		Age 13	Adulthood

Birth   Age 13   Adulthood

Parental support

Child responsibility

Typically, in Western culture today, children are not expected to mature until they reach age 13, at which age parents become impressed by their physical maturity and push them to play operation catch-up. This is not a good practice since it keeps children unnecessarily dependent during childhood and forces them to mature in a hurry during their teenage years. Perhaps if children were given more responsibility earlier in their lives or were allowed to mature more slowly during adolescence, we might eliminate the stress and strain that now characterizes the teenage years.[10]

It also occurs to me that teachers, because of the learning emphasis in the school, are more prone to err in the direction of expecting more from children than their level of knowledge allows. Whether this is so or not, to do so is a mistake in teaching.

Successful teaching involves correctly gauging a childs level of knowledge and governing ones action accordingly. A good teacher is in tune with where their pupils or students are at every step of the educational process. This, more than their accumulated fund of knowledge, qualifies teachers to teach. In essence, teaching is a caring activity, a labour of loving. Teaching enables learners to learn, provided that teachers are in tune with their learners. Teachers often give answers, but they also ask questions. They provide support, but they also demand competence. They do things for learners and require things of learners. They know when to push and when to pull. And this knowledge of giving and taking is the knowledge of love.[11]

Discovery in educational relations

The fact that children are learners makes them utterly vulnerable to the activities of adults as teachers. What adults do or fail to do deeply affects childrens personal development. It affects whether, how, and what they learn. Social Learning theory, which holds that children learn by imitating the modeled behaviour of adults,[12] for all its emphasis on the teaching-learning relation, has misjudged the intimacy of that relationship. Adults do not just model behaviour for the children they teach when they function vicariously for them. Rather, what they do or fail to do on behalf of their children reaches right into the intra-personal functioning of these children. Adults live in their children as their alter -ego with respect to those skills in which their children have as yet no competence. This illustrates how important adult care is for growing children and how devastating defective caring can be, particularly for a childs early development.

There is a prominent problem in psychology and in various forms it has been there for a long time. The problem concerns the relation between what are termed "mind" and "body", "consciousness" and "behaviour", the "mental" and the "physical".[13] In psychotherapy it manifests itself as the question of the relation between "cognition" and "affect".[14] One can also find it in the literature on artificial intelligence as the problem of "top down" versus "bottom up" structuring.[16] In developmental psychology it shows up as the problem of "nature versus nurture," or as "learning versus maturation."[15]

To explain this problem in detail would lead me beyond the scope of this book. But the essence of this problem is which of the two poles has primary existence and which one is a derivative. For example, is the mind a product of the body or the reverse.

The traditional solution to this problem has been to deny that it is a problem, usually by explaining deterministically that the one pole of the problem is "really nothing but" a variation of the other. The behaviorists, for example, held that the "mind" is nothing but an *epiphenomenon* (a side effect) of the "body" or that "thinking" is nothing but "sub-vocal speech."[17 But] this solution to the problem has never been quite successful.

Intra-personal interaction: no solution

Some time later in the history of psychology the problem was reinstated, this time as a virtue. The buzzword was "interaction". Thus, Jean Piaget, a well known cognitive development theorist, asserted that cognition (or knowledge) develops via a process of both *assimilation* and *accommodation*.[18] Anna Anastasi gave the classical answer to this question. She has argued that the problem of development is not nature *versus* nurture, but nature *and* nurture.[19] Both poles must necessarily mutually influence each other in-teractively or else no development can take place.

An interaction solution is only valid as a sequential means-end solution. Thus, one can state that no one can learn anything one is not ready for, and thus argue that one must first mature before one can learn. We can also argue that without learning no one can mature.

But the problem under discussion is that the product must precede the process. We can understand that a person must mature to learn and also must learn to know. What is unintelligible in all this is how one can have to know something before one can learn it. The fact is, of course, that we can't. And yet this problem is at the heart of all the dilemmas in developmental psychology just mentioned.

Interpersonal discovery

To this problem, interactionism gives no satisfactory solution. The reason for this is that it views learning individualistically as occurring *within* the learner. So, learners must simultaneously know, and not know, to learn, which is contradictory. If, however, we view learning as a function of the *relationship between a teacher and a learner*, the

problem dissolves itself. For then it can be understood that one person (the teacher) must know what is to be learned, for another person (the learner) to learn what is to be known. In short, interaction is an *interpersonal* rather than an intra-personal affair. Learning is taught through instruction.[20]

I have argued earlier that when an adult teacher functions vicariously for a learning child that teacher, by this very action, instructs this child. But is this instruction process more explicitly definable? I think it is. A detailed description of a Christian view of instruction is beyond the scope of this chapter. For the moment I can only make a few suggestions of what such an approach might look like. These would have to be worked out in more detail later. In essence the model is that when adult teachers develop their "higher" functions they enable learning children to develop their "lower" functions. This model suggests that there is a typical order to a childs development. Children initially develop what Dooyeweerd calls the "natural aspects" of their lives (i.e., the physical, biological, and the psychological sides of their existence). [21] For the duration of this development a childs life centres on the acquisition of competency in each of these aspects or parts of a childs life. However, as she matures she becomes preoccupied more fully with successively higher modes of living.

There seems to be some validity to this model. Apparently, children initially develop their biological life-sustaining competence for the most part inside their mothers womb. Immediately after birth young children appear to be affectively oriented to the world. They live by what they hear and see, touch and smell rather than by what they think. During this time they seem to develop the capacity for affective experience (i.e., feeling and sensation). Thereafter a child develops the capacity for perception, for symbolizing, for thinking and for abstracting in succession. As they near the time when they are to become adults, children are preoccupied with the development of their overall identity, their personal being.

Throughout this entire period of learning, children are relatively helpless with respect to those higher life functions that are as yet underdeveloped. To compensate for a childs lack of competence, caring adults vicariously perform those life functions, which a child alone is as yet unable to perform.

The important point to notice is that adults perform these services for the child as a way of developing their own "higher" functions. Adults develop what Dooyeweerd has called the "normative modes" of their existence. They focus their lives on believing, caring, playing fair, on harmonizing their lives, on being efficient, socializing, verbalizing, and on forming. Persons whom we recognize as adults have developed these qualities. These are also precisely the qualities that children lack during childhood. And for the duration of childhood they borrow them from significant adults around them as they develop their own being.

The interesting feature of this process is that most of these higher modes which adults develop are directed toward the protection and development of other, more dependent beings, in particular, children. For their own further development, adults need children to

protect and to nurture. Thus we see that, normally speaking, adult development beautifully dovetails with child development.[22]

Education and culture

Up until now we have looked at the educational process as it occurs between persons. We can also look at it as a process that forms, maintains, or transforms cultures, thus as a process of what takes place between generations.

Learning as introduction to a culture

In this broader context, learning and teaching are often viewed as the introduction to and the transmission of a given culture. Within the educational process the learner then represents the upcoming generation and the teacher the established generation. One generation introduces the next to this culture by transmitting its experience, its expertise, its competence, or its insight into this culture. Without such an educational, culture-transmitting process from one generation to another, no culture can exist for long.

In addition to inculcating the next generation into a given culture, the successful transmission of that culture also entails a transfer of responsibility for that culture. Learning involves more than gaining competence in the ways of the old. Insofar as they are able, learners must also take responsibility for the ways of the old. The latter is then seen as just as essential to the educational process as the former.

This view of learning has much to say for itself: It sets clear boundaries to the task of education. One knows what one has to do. It defines the role of the teacher and the learner. It also identifies the end product, i.e., the place at which education must terminate. Finally, it demonstrates how a culture can continue to exist notwithstanding the change of generations.

Learning and change

This view however, has one flaw. The culture to which learners are introduced is presumed to be normative for the educational process. Within such a view of learning, the teacher must be the sole authority on what is to be taught and how it is to be learned. Moreover, the success of the educational process can only be gauged in terms of whether or not the behaviour of the new generation manifests the ways of the old. In this view, learners have rightly learned the right things to the extent that they mimic the behaviour of their teachers.

The fact is, however, that in being educated, every new generation changes the ways of the old more or less drastically. During our period of history, in particular, this process of change appears to have accelerated to such an extent that generational differences are taking on the characteristics of a generation chasm.[23] Why, in learning the ways of the old, do the young *change* the ways of the old? One would think that the young would

have their hands full learning what is already known. Is this cultural change a normal aspect of the educational process?

Developmental and historical change

To answer these questions, it is helpful first to distinguish between age (or developmental) differences and historical (or cohort) differences.

Normally, teachers and learners are of a different age and at a different level of development. Age differences refer to the fact that one cannot expect a ten- or twenty-year-old to act like a forty-five-year-old. Age differences suggest that, factually speaking, one can expect youthful behaviour to differ from established cultural behaviour as exemplified by a fully acculturated forty-five-year-old. Children and young people have a different concept of God, of life, and of the future than adults. They dress and act in accordance with their age and are preoccupied with things that do not necessarily interest middle-aged adults. Moreover, if the latter are seen as the bearers of a given culture, then the behaviour of younger people is seen as not yet fully acculturated behaviour. This view entails that each succeeding generation normally goes through a process of increasing acculturation and that generational differences are wholly attributable to differences in age or development. From this vantage point normative cultural behaviour remains intact notwithstanding the differing approximations of it by different age groups.

Age differences are intensely relevant to the process of education. They alert teachers to the fact that the children they teach are in the process of learning what the teachers themselves already know. This inequality of cultural competence points to the fact that education is essentially the activity of closing the cultural gap. Age (or developmental) differences define the teacher-learner relationship as well as the nature, the problems, and the possibilities of teacher-learner communication.

Age differences also refer to the fact that learning requires a personal change on the part of learners. Mastering material means that the upcoming generation conforms more and more to an already existing culture. For learners this means that they must be willing to suspend judgement on their culture until they have reached full cultural maturity. Thus, they must allow themselves to be taught. For teachers, it means that they must have patience with the ways of the young in the knowledge that in time they too will exhibit normal cultural behaviour.

Historical (or cohort) differences refer to the fact that the behaviour of any age group in one generation or cohort differs from the behaviour of any age group in another generation or cohort. Examples are the counterculture of the late sixties and the punk culture of the late seventies, as well as the behaviour of millennials and even more so of hipsters in our day and age. These differences usually manifest themselves most clearly in the value systems, dress, hairstyles, behaviour codes, and choice of entertainment of the adolescent and the emerging adult segment of a generation. But they have an impact on the generation as a whole. In this case the differences in behaviour from one

generation to the next involve a *cultural* change.

Historical or cohort differences are equally relevant to the process of education as age or developmental differences. Education is more than teaching new dogs old tricks. It not only changes persons but cultures (i.e. commonly accepted ways of doing things) as well. Education offers a culture the opportunity to change itself, to do things in a different way. Next to providing cultural continuity, education is also a process of cultural renewal. In this process it is the learners rather than the teachers who change culture.

Both developmental change and historical change are products of education. As a result of education learners change themselves to suit existing culture or change existing culture to suit themselves. For either change to occur, learners need exposure to models and directives. By the way they try out these models and directives in their lives, learners give their stamp of approval or critique on the culture in which they live.

Historical change is an important result of education

Historical change can be a positive cultural result of education. The older people become, the more they are inclined to mis-identify what needs to be accomplished with what has already been accomplished. After decades of working at creating a life for themselves, people can become so committed to the way things are done that they can hardly distinguish it any longer from the way things ought to be done. Their own way becomes *the* way to be taught and lived.

However, the next generation is not so committed to what is taught. Because the new generation is taught by the old, it stands on the shoulders of the old and can thus be expected to see farther. But also, because it is not committed to the old generation's way, it can stand back from its culture and see more clearly where the way things are done deviates from the way things ought to be done. Thus, a new generation has the opportunity to be properly critical of the cultural products that are taught. It is the responsibility of each new generation to bend the ways of the old into the right direction. The task of reforming culture to make it conform to a better way of living is intrinsic to learning.

This constitutes the historical office of the learner. The faithful exercise of this office can renew a culture. This cultural change can foster cultural renewal (in the sense of the Greek New Testament word *kairos,* which means "fresh, improved." But is can also become merely "different from before" (as the word *neos suggests*). The outcome depends on whether as a result of learning a learners actions increase his or her opportunity to function on behalf of others in a culture. The purpose of education is not just to teach students some knowledge and skills. It must also increase their awareness of their responsibility for serving their fellow human beings.

School education

Education in school and society

Normally speaking, there exists a complementary relation between the school and other inter-human relationships. School and "society" mutually serve each other and are mutually dependent on each other.

Human relationships serve each other when they fulfill their peculiar office. It may seem strange to apply the term "office" to relationships but if life is interpersonal as well as personal, then people can be called to do a task together. This call comes to them jointly insofar as they can only fulfill their office together. Thus, when caring goes on in the family, when intimacy is realized in marriage, when goods are produced in the work place or justice is done by the state, each of the other relationships prospers as well.

Education also occurs in human relationships other than school. But the teaching and learning that occurs in them is incidental to their primary calling. By contrast, the primary calling of the school is to educate.

Thus school education can occur only in the context of life and serve life well if the deliberate focus is on instructing and learning. Education is its primary office.

In our present culture success in school education is a necessary, but not necessarily a sufficient condition for the proper exercise of one's office in life. Thus, school education has only a limited effect and only a limited purpose, which must be maintained if it is to serve life well. Schools should not attempt to teach students those things that can much better be learned incidentally in other human relationships. These are the things common-ly referred to as "experience".

Symbolic reflection in school education

In distinction from the learning and teaching that occurs in most other inter-human relationships, school education has a reflective character. It steps back and contemplates life as it is lived naively, without thinking, in order to disclose some of its possible richness *symbolically*.

If anything characterizes what goes on in schools, it is speaking and listening, reading and writing, viewing and thinking. School life deals with words, sentences, formulas, diagrams, pictures, and songs. The activity of the school and the material it works with are symbolic. They have a typical, once removed, "as if," "what if," character that allows them to refer to real life in a myriad of possible ways. School life contemplates the real world and reflects it as one of many possible worlds. In doing so it symbolically discloses ever-new sides of a created world that is so full of meaning that all the lifetimes from Adam until Christ's return cannot discover it.

School activity is symbolically reflective activity. Even such "how to do" activities as experimentation, rehearsal, role-playing, training, and practical activities do not escape this once-removed, referential character. School life is, in the nature of the case, *about*

real life. In it one imparts and acquires knowledge *about* the world.

There is a second reason to my mind why it is important to maintain the schools distinctively symbolic, referential character. Symbolic entities such as words and sentences are inherently communicative. They have no meaning except in the context of discourse, dialogue, and discussion. They have an inherently shared, common character. They intend to communicate.

School education can only occur in relationships. Schools are not for learning and schools are not for teaching. The purpose of school education is to discover meaning symbolically. It is not correct to say that in school education teachers discover new meaning when they teach and that learners apprehend this new meaning when they learn. Nor is it accurate to say that learners discover new meaning when they learn and that teachers facilitate this process when they teach. It is not even correct to say that both discover meaning when they teach and when they learn. The only accurate way of capturing the communicative character of school education is to say that teachers and learners symbolically discover the meaning of Gods world *together.*

Discovering the meaning of creation in school

This formulation also breaks through the dilemma of child-centred versus subject-centred education.

Teaching and learning are *always* subject-centred in the sense that the important element in education is the discovery of the meaning of the world inside and outside ourselves. The focus of education ought not to be the ability of students to learn or the achievement of high grades that reflect this ability. Neither should the focus be on the ingenious methods which teachers use to facilitate such achievement. The focus should not even be on the capacity of teachers to demonstrate mastery of the material. All these are only means toward the end of education. What makes a teacher a good teacher is her ability to light up part of the world and what determines his ability to do so is insight into the meaning of Gods good creation. When students master some difficult subject matter it is not their success in this task that is cause for rejoicing. Rather what ought to fuel their joy is the material they have mastered.

Let me use an anecdote by a Dutch educator, the late A. Janse, to whom I am indebted for this and other insights. In his book *Met Geheel Uw Verstand,* (p. 222), he relates how a boy comes home bubbling with enthusiasm about what he learned in science that day and excitedly tells his dad all about it. His dad is amazed and says: "Boy of mine, do you ever know a lot! You are pretty smart." But the boy becomes annoyed at his dad's reply and says: "But that is not the point! Don't you see dad? I discovered something new today. Gods creation is so marvellous!"

The calling of school education is a task where learners and teachers jointly reflect on, contemplate, *survey* Gods good creation each day. And if at the end of the day they have discovered some new meaning together, they can be thankful. For then, during that day in that classroom, Gods earth was cultivated just as surely as a farmer cultivates his fields. And it bore good fruit.

What joins teachers and students together in a common task where both have their own unique roles to fulfill is the symbolic discovery of the world.

I believe we do not regard school education highly enough. Through the billions of words that are expended each day in all kinds of classrooms, worlds are being changed, cultures are transformed, history is made, and, if it is done in the right direction, the earth is renewed.

The subject matter, the thing to be discovered, is central to school education. Of course the subject matter changes as one moves from elementary to secondary and post-secondary education. Initially the matter to be discovered may be the symbolic activity of the learner herself. Thus, the initial thing for the teacher to light up and for the student to discover may be that c, a, and t put together result in the spoken and written word "cat" which then refers to a certain furry animal with which one is already acquainted. Some years later one may demonstrate and learn that letters and numbers can be used together to perform algebraic equations. And still later one may come to know that such equations form the backbone of statistics, by means of which one can perform all kinds of experiments, through which one can discover all kinds of interesting things about the psychology, the physics, the chemistry, and the biology of human beings and animals. Finally, one can attempt to apply this knowledge and discover that such symbolic formulations of the way things are have real value in real life.

In other words, some things need to be taught and learned first and some things last. To reverse this order is obviously bad education. It is equally bad education to confront students with a discovery task for which, by virtue of ability, age, learning style, inclination, or whatever, they are not ready. But in all this the central task is the discovery of real meaning inside or outside the learner. And proper instruction, also in the school, is instruction that provides learners with all those services they need to be able to learn.

Notes

[1]Berkhouwer, G.C. (1962) *Man, The Image of God.* Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B.
   Eerdman's.

[2]DeJong, N.(ed). (1984) *Christian Approaches to Learning Theory*. New York:
   University Press:74.

[3]Sietsma, K., *De Ambtsgedachte*. (*The Concept of Office)* S.J.P. Bakker:21.

[4]Mark 12:25

[5]We need each other to be ourselves, Sietsma, K*., De Ambtsgedachte*:21.

[6]Comparative developmental psychobiology investigates the relative
 difference in developmental patterns between animals and human beings.
 T.C. Schneirla, for example, ("The concept of development in comparative
 psychology" in D.B. Harris, ed., *The Concept of Development,*
 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957) has argued for
 phylogenetic developmental discontinuity on the basis of the relative
 difference in stereotypy and plasticity in animal and human behaviour. This, in turn, he
   connects with Hebb's differential A/S ratio.

[7]Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of HumanDevelopment.*
Cambridge Mass: Harvard Press:16-42.

[8]Janse, A., *Opvoeding en Onderwijs*, No publisher:154ff.

[9]Despite a child's dependency on social structures, we are often told to
 respect the child as a person (Rogers, C.R., (1983) *Freedom to Learn For
 The Eighties*. Toronto: Charles E. Merrill Publishing:124). I must confess
 that I never know what this means. It could mean that we should leave the
 child free to choose as she sees fit. To do otherwise would then be a
 violation of her person. Such a view would seem to be central to Christian
 viewpoints where this respect for the person of the child is sometimes
 coupled with his religious calling or office. These viewpoints emphasize
 the responsibility as well as the freedom of the child as a person. Thus, the
 Curiculum Development Company holds that because the child is "Gods
 image bearer...he is able... to exercise responsive choice in learning in a
 way that honours God." And for that reason "...in the final analysis the
 student, not the teacher, is accountable for learning." (Curriculum
 Development Centre (1984) "Reaffirming An Educational Vision," in *Joy
 in Learning:*15, Fall:4). However, If we were to give children complete
 freedom in making their own choices and would hold them fully
 responsible for the choices that they make, we would be treating them as
 adults. In my opinion that would be an act of gross disrespect for children
 and also for their office.

[10]It is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the phenomenon of *emerging   adulthood* in
 our times, suggest that the age at which children become fully
  adult is flexible. (See my, *Intergeneration Lost and Found.* (2012)

[11]Sietse Buning, 1982 *Style and Class.* Orange City, Iowa: Middleburg Press:33, writes
   as follows:

> Love in to hang on
> 	and

> love is to let go.
>   To do the one
> without at the same time
>   doing the other
>   is not love

[12]Bandura, A., *Principles of Behavior Modification,* 1969.
  Van Belle, H.A., *The Differential Effect of Attraction via Trait Structuring on Modeling for Independent Verbal Behavior*, 1971, Free University of Amsterdam document, pp. 66-10

[13]Dooyeweerd, H. (1961) "De Taak Ener Wijsgerige Anthropologie," *Philosophia Reformata*,
  Feigl, H. (1958) *The "Mental" And The "Physical,"* Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press.

[14]Freud, S., "Anxiety and the Instinctual Life," *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis,* 1933.

[15]Lerner, R.M., (1976) *Concepts and Theories of Human Development*.
  Don Mills, ON: Addison Wesley Chap. 3,

[16]Sowa, John, (1983) *Conceptual Structures; Information Processing in Mind and Machine*. Don Mills: Addison Wesley.

[17]Watson, J.B. (1924) *Behaviorism*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press:1-19.

[18]Ginsberg, H. and Opper, S. (1979) *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development*, 2nd ed., N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs.

[19]Anastasi, A., "Heredity, Environment and the Question of "How". *Psychological Review*, 1958.

[20]Kalsbeek, L. (1975) *Contours of a Christial /Philosophy.* Toronto: Wedge: Publishing.

[21] Dooyeweerd, H.(1961)

[22]To the best of my knowledge, K.W. Schaie, (1964) ("A general model for the study of developmental problems," in I:92-10), was the first to distinguish between developmental and historical, or "age", and "cohort" differences.

[23]Van Belle, H.A. (2012) *Intergeneration Lost and Found: why suits and skirts don't talk with jeans, why they should and how they can.* Edmonton, AB: Legacy Press:44-46

Chapter ten

Reflecting on the |seasons of life

The impossibility of stopping the life course

There is an ancient Greek myth about the fountain of youth. In it a young man begs the gods to grant him eternal youth. The gods grant his request. He does not age, he does not develop. He neither grows up nor grows older. Is he happy? No, for as he remains a youth his friends grow older and as his

friends change, he loses contact with them and becomes a very lonely young man.

Today we still pursue this myth of the fountain of youth. Magazines and books are full of it. We see it daily on T.V. But unlike the ancient Greeks, we no longer believe in the reality of eternal youth, only in its *appearance*. We only pursue it as an impossible ideal: there is something desperate about the way people exercise so religiously, dye their hair and submit to cosmetic surgery all in an effort to halt the process of aging. We know from experience that we change from year to year, or even from day to day. We cannot turn the clock back. Time goes on. We cannot stop the course of our life. We cannot wait, not even for a minute.

And yet, this is what I propose to do in this chapter. What I am about to do is very strange indeed and we ought to think about it for a moment. I intend to reflect on the course of our life. When we reflect on something, we take it, we put it over there, we look at it and then we tell what it is. Is it possible to do that with something like the life course, which changes all the time? Some people say we cannot.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus believed it was impossible and he told a story to illustrate his point. Suppose you go swimming in a river, he said. You go in, then you go out, and a little while later you go in again. Now the question: when you take your second swim, are you stepping into the same river? Of course, you say. No, you don't, said Heraclitus, because a river is made up of water and the water of the river flows all the time. The water you step into the second time is not the same water you stepped into the first time. You can never step into the same river twice.[1]

Life is like a river; it flows all the time. We cannot stop the flow of life, we cannot look at it and tell what it is, because while we are reflecting on our life, it changes and we change. We cannot tell what life is. We can only tell what it was at the moment we started our reflection. And yet, billions of people daily reflect on their lives and stacks of books have been written about the life course. They all tell what life is. So, what gives?

Viewpoint: the place of reflection

We know that in order to look at something we have to go and stand somewhere. We have to choose a place from which to look. Similarly, when we want to reflect on the life course and tell what it is, we have to choose a place of reflection, a viewpoint. An interesting feature of viewpoints is that they determine what you can see. Because of my point of view I cannot see what is behind me, but other people facing me can, because their viewpoint is different from mine. In the same way, the place from which we choose to reflect on the life course determines what we can see of it and, therefore, what we can say about it.

The other thing about viewpoints is that they mean to define the essence of the life course. They are not just descriptions of some characteristics of the

life course among others. They are beliefs about what the life course as a whole is all about. They are beliefs about the meaning of the life course. It is clear from what I have written so far that my viewpoint is a Christian one and that I believe we can only see the whole of the life course from a Christian place of reflection. For this reason I call all other viewpoints "isms". What this means is that, in my judgment, they all make too much of a thing that is also true about life, but not its essence. Life has a communal side, but communism makes too much of this fact, as individualism makes too much of the fact that people are also individuals. Neither of these two human characteristics defines what I believe human life is all about. I will return to this point near the end of this chapter.

Two viewpoints about the life course, popular today, are evolutionism and historicism. Both choose their place of reflection about the life course *inside* the life course. Both emphasize the fact that living means changing. With Heraclitus they stress the flow of life.

Evolutionism

Evolutionism (*not* the theory of biological evolution, but the ideology) makes too much of the fact that life evolves. It explains our life and the lives of our forefathers and mothers as a process of evolution. It holds that we can make sense out of life now by looking back and by realizing that we have evolved to become the best we could possibly be at this moment. According to evolutionism this process, which is ongoing today, is rather deterministic, we have nothing to do with it, we have no choice in the matter, we are *in* it, it happens to us.

Evolutionism stresses the fact that living is growing. Think of life as a plant. We do not fabricate plants. They grow themselves. We can only let them grow. According to evolutionism our lives are like plant; the meaning of life is to go with the flow, to accept what we are and to realize, as Erik Erikson, a famous developmental psychologist has said, that... "what is, had to be"[2]. Looking toward the future we must realize that we will probably become even better than we are today. For that is what growing means. It is not just changing, but changing for the better. Evolutionists would urge people to adjust to change, because they believe that change is inevitable and that change is always improvement. Evolutionism is a very optimistic view of life. From its viewpoint life can only get better.

Evolutionists really do not know what to do with the fact that we also *age* during the life course and finally die. They have tried. With Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who has written extensively about death and dying, they have pronounced death to be "the final stage of growth", which we do well to accept as an inevitable product of evolution.[3] But this seems to me rather a contradiction in terms, because "*final* stage" means that growth or

evolution stops. Moreover, the fact of death does not square with the evolutionist's overly optimistic view of life.

Historicism

Historicists make too much of history, where by history they mean the past actions of people. It shares with evolutionism the desire to stress that living is changing, even if it does not share the latters over-optimistic view that living is growing. It also does not share with evolutionism the view that change *happens* to people. On the contrary, historicism argues that people *make* the changes that happen, collectively or individually. With respect to the life course this means that at any moment of their lives people are the product of their own past actions. Human beings are "self-made men and women" and what they will be in the future will depend on what they make of themselves as individuals or as a group right now.

The image that fits historicisms view of the life course is one that is related to technology. Life is a fabrication process, a building and demolition project, a recycling project. We change because we constantly demolish old ways of life and constantly construct new ways of living. The importance of life does not lie in the things we build but rather in that we keep building, keep on thinking up new ideas, keep on making new products, keep on doing old things in new ways. The meaning of life is found in restless activity. For this reason this perspective urges especially older people to remain active during the later years of their lives, their bodily ill health notwithstanding.

Secularism

Evolutionism and historicism are mutually exclusive viewpoints on the life course. The former views life as a process that happens to us. The latter looks at life as a project of our own making. Even though these viewpoints fundamentally contradict one another, they are presented side by side in textbooks on developmental psychology without any attempt to reconcile them to each other.[4] Some developmental facts are described from the point of view of how people adjust to the changes in life, while others are described in terms of how people control the changes of life. It is impossible to reconcile these two descriptions of the life course because they both maintain that we can only reflect on the life course from *inside* the life course itself, i.e. from within the ever-changing current of human history and development. To see that both can be *relatively* true one has to step *outside* the current.

Another way of saying this is that both evolutionism and historicism are secular points of view. Their secularism prevents these perspectives from dealing adequately with the reality of historical and developmental change. Secularism makes too much of the fact that our experience is limited to the here and now. Secularism derives from the Latin word *saeculum,* which means "this age," "this world." It denies the possibility of anyone taking a viewpoint or a place of reflection *outside* the life course from out of which

to survey the flow of life. For example, a secularist would argue that I can only say something about the seasons of our lives from out of the perspective of a person who is just over 80, living in the year 2019. What I say in this chapter may be true enough for this moment, but a year from now it may be obsolete, outdated. Secularism would hold that a point of view that pretends to say something about the life course from beginning to end, something that would be true for all times and all places, is not possible. It is for this reason that such secular points of view as evolutionism and historicism, while they can say something meaningful about the changes we experience during the course of our lives, cannot be the first and the last word on it. We cannot take them as our perspective, as our viewpoint, as our place of reflection.

Because they are secular perspectives neither evolutionism nor historicism can properly capture the *changingness* of life. Let me make this clearer by using the image of the river once again. If we want to see how the current of a river moves, we have to *stand* somewhere, in the river or on the bank of the river. We cannot float along with the flow of the river. We have to be stationary. From this stationary viewpoint we can watch the water of the river flow by. If, however, we are in the river, floating along with its current, then we are more likely to see the banks moving rather than the river. In a similar manner, because these secular perspectives take their place in the flow of life they cannot really capture the changingness of the flow of life. To use the image of the river again, we have to stand in the river or on its banks, we have to take a position, to be able to watch the water come at us or move away from us.

From these two secular perspectives also, all positions, all points of view belong to the flow of life. All of them are merely places in the flow where we happen to be at a given moment. They are products of evolution or of culture, where culture is defined as the process of formgiving, or of making things, and as such they are all destined to change in the future. For example, to believe that a book, which was written in bits and pieces some 2000-4000 years ago can give us a picture of the life course that holds true for all times and places, is ludicrous from the point of view of these perspectives. Because they are secular points of view, evolutionism and historicism scoff at all perspectives which pretend to tell it like it "is", with the exclusion, of course, of their own perspective.

The dangers of secularism

To take such a secular point of view while reflecting on the life course is not without its consequences. For example, from a secular viewpoint it is entirely possible to become disillusioned with evolutionism. This can lead one to describe human development as a process of devolution, i.e. as a process of historical or individual development that happens to us in which things do not get better and better, but worse and worse. Shakespeare, for instance, described history as "... a tale told by an idiot, full of sound

and fury [but] signifying nothing."[5] There is plenty of evil in our human experience to see some validity in this pessimistic description. Similarly, from a secular perspective it is not difficult to become disillusioned with the endless tasks, prescribed by historicism, of continually making more and more new things that we really do not need. Neither is it hard to become disenchanted with the never-ending job of exchanging new ways of living for old ways of living. This loss of meaning could lead one to exclaim in despair, as someone did, that history (and excuse the language)... "is just one damn thing after another" and no more.

Religion, reflection, decision and change

I have gone on at length about secular evolutionism and historicism because many prominent psychologists, who write about the life course, take their place of reflection in these viewpoints.[6] Is there anything positive to learn from evolutionism or historicism? Of course there is. Both have focussed our attention on the fact that living is changing. Evolutionism ties into our awareness that, in some sense, the changes we experience in life happen to us. Historicism has made us more conscious of the fact that we *make* a living, i.e. that to some degree, human beings are responsible for the changes they experience.

Which of the two viewpoints is the better one? If I had to make a choice between these two perspectives I would choose historicism. It, at least, has understood that we do not change, and certainly that we do not grow, without periodic reflection. Unlike animals, people have the ability to reflect on the ongoing stream of their lives, to ask what is going on. Interspersed between the changes of our lives are moments or periods of reflection, in which we stop the flow of life, as it were, to survey what is going on. On the basis of reflection we decide to change our lives. Very few people, other than perhaps little children, move from one season to another without reflection and decision. If they do live their lives without reflection, other people make decisions for them. When that happens people lose their individual freedom.

So, from time to time people have to reflect on, and to decide if they want to make changes in their lives. To do this they first of all have to choose a place of reflection and of decision. In my opinion, this activity is not just an intellectual activity. It is religious or ideological in nature. It has the character of relying on someone or something. Choosing ones place in life has the quality of trusting, of laying oneself to rest.

What I mean in a nutshell is this: People have to believe before they can question. Only those people who firmly believe some things about their lives can question other things about their lives. Typically people question things in terms of what they don't question.[7] Furthermore, they decide what to change about their lives in terms of the questions they raise. Finally, they change their lives one way or another on the basis of what they have decided.

I believe that reflection and decision are essential elements of the human life course. There are moments in our lives when we stop the flow of life in order to think about and

decide on what to do next. After such moments of reflection and decision our life typically takes on a different course. It is therefore not correct to describe human life as an unceasing flow of change. Periodically all people choose a place to stand from out of which to look. Some people may prefer to call this activity ideological instead of religious. In any case, the point I am making is that this activity has the character of *confessing*. (See also Augustine: *Confessions* 1.1)[8]

The Christian place of reflection

Christians choose their place of reflection on the life course in the Word of their God. For them to find their place of reflection and decision, it is imperative that they engage in the study of the Christian Scriptures to discover what it has to say about the seasons of their lives. Christians will want to come to know what the Creator of the life course has to say about the nature of the life course and the place to look for this is in the Bible.

The glasses of God

However, is looking at the Bible to see what it has to say about the seasons of our lives enough? Some Christians think it is. There is no need for us to study the life course itself, they say. All we need to know is how God sees the life course. That is enough. At best such Christians search the Scriptures to know what to do and apply these insights directly to their life without regard for what time it is in their life. At worst they are excessively concerned about the scriptural purity of their doctrine, while in their life they follow other insights. In such instances there seems to be no connection between what they think and what they do.

If all we need is Bible study, writing this chapter would be superfluous, because I am a developmental psychologist and not a Bible scholar. However, Bible study "only" gives us knowledge of our place to stand. It does not absolve us from the task of studying the life course itself. Those who believe that Bible study is enough may stare themselves blind at the scriptures. They never *enter* the river of life. They remain perpetually on shore, at least in their thoughts. However, by virtue of being alive, they are *in* the life course, whether they like it or not, For this reason, they, like every other human being, must also ponder their experience of living and changing and growing and aging *itself*.

What, then, would constitute a Christian approach to the study of the life course? I write from out of the Christian tradition of the Protestant Reformation and this colours what I have to say about this issue. The Reformed Christian position on how to view the life course is that we must look at it *in the light of* the Scriptures. The Bible *lights up*, illumines what there is to see, so that we can see better. John Calvin gave us a beautiful image when he called the Bible " the glasses" of God.[9] We must attempt to put on Gods glasses when we look at the life course. Then we can trust that we will see better, even

though we must also confess that, on this side of Christ's return, even with the glasses on, we still "see but a poor reflection as in a mirror" and "know [only] in part" (I Cor. 13:12).

The wholeness (of the seasons) of Life

So, what can we say about the life course, when we look at it through the glasses of God? Through the glasses of God we discover that created human life was meant to be whole. Something as changing as the life course is not just a chunk of clock time. It has a definite beginning, it lasts for a time, it goes on, things get done and undone, and this entire process moves toward a definite end. Life starts somewhere and it has a destiny. Life as a whole is meant to be whole.

Inside life there are smaller wholes that we call "seasons", each with a beginning, a middle and an end. These seasons are interspersed with periods of transition, with points of change, which are sometimes crisis points that give rise to reflections about life as a whole. Life and its seasons must be completed to be whole, i.e. each of its parts, the beginning, the middle and the end is equally important.[10]

The truth that life is a whole was brought home to me early in life, when my uncle told us a story about a shepherd who was on his way to a meadow with his flock. "To get to the meadow," my uncle said, "the sheep first have to cross a narrow bridge." At this point my uncle stopped talking because, he said, "we have to wait until the sheep are across the bridge." We waited impatiently for him to continue and soon asked him whether the sheep had already crossed the bridge. His answer was, "No, they are still pushing to get across." An hour later they still had not crossed, nor at the end of that day, or week. In fact, as far as my uncle is concerned, the sheep will be pushing to get across the bridge throughout all eternity. He never finished his story. His story was incomplete because it had no ending. This bothered me then, because I knew that a story must be told to the end to be a story.

Life is like a story. It must be lived to the end to be whole. Each of its seasons, childhood, youth, adulthood, middle age and the later years are equally essential. We know this intuitively when we are confronted with the death of a young person. The life of such a person somehow seems incomplete. His death was untimely.

Life, history and eternity

The whole of our life is also embedded in a larger whole. Surrounding our individual life course lies the history of our culture. This larger whole includes the lives of our fore-fathers and mothers as well as the lives of our children. Their lives are included in our present life course as past and future generations.

But beyond this cultural-historical context our lives are, furthermore, embedded in the eternity of God. Before our first forefathers and mothers came into being and after the last of our children has died there is God who had no beginning and will never end. He

was before the first Big Bang occurred and He will be after the sound of the last Big Bang fades away. We know that God dwells in eternity, because God has set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We can, therefore, reflect upon this fact. But what it is to be without beginning or end we will never fathom. The reality of the life course is that it is bounded by eternity, which is shrouded in the mystery of God. All we really know is that we came from God, who dwells in eternity, and that, some day, we will be with Him in eternity.

Secularism has no clue of what this means. It fails miserably when it restricts our view to what we can experience between the beginning and the end of our life course. Why should anyone reflect on the life course, if all we can see is that human beings, like the animals are taken from the dust when they are conceived and return to the dust when they die? (Ecclesiastes 3:18-20)

Viewpoints on Human Development

But people *do* reflect upon the meaning of life when they ask themselves such questions as, "What is the nature of development? What changes when we develop, and why?" They not only describe the change and continuity of our life. They also try to explain the *causes* of human development. What *in essence* is development? Several answers have been given in the area with which I am most familiar, the area of the psychology of development. What is interesting is that all of them define their answers in terms of time on a clock.

Biological time

Development has been defined as biological. This definition views the course of human life essentially as the growing and aging of our biological bodies. This is a natural process of change governed by a biological clock. Our bodies are pre-programmed by our genes to change, to grow and to age and as human beings we change in response to these changes in our body. This model of development is especially popular as an explanation of adolescent development. During adolescence young people experience a sudden growth spurt, the hormones begin to "rage" and this is said to explain why adolescence is such a stressful time of life. The model is also used to explain development during the later years of our life.[11] Here again the process of aging or the deterioration of our biological bodies happens inevitably to all of us and the way we live our lives then is in response to this biological process.

Psychological time

Development is also defined as essentially a process of change in our self-image, or our personality. As we grow up and grow older, so goes the theory, we change in our sense of self, in the way we view ourselves. As a result of our changed self-image our behaviour changes; we act differently. Development essentially consists of a series of changes in the way we think. Development is first and foremost cognitive development. We change in accordance with our cognitive clock.[12]

Social time

In this view, development is essentially a process of learning. It emphasizes that we are shaped or moulded by our social environment over time in accordance with a social clock. At different times in our lives society demands different behaviours from us, demands that we act our age. This process is responsible for the changes in our behaviour from one season of life to another.[13]

Interactive time

In the psychology of development it has become more and more popular to say that development consists essentially of the interaction of biological, psychological and social time.[14] This viewpoint holds that we cannot say which causes which. They mutually influence one another. Development is a product of all of these combined. This trend in psychology is welcome insofar as it tries to avoid reductionism in the explanation of development but it seems to me to be more an admission that the cause of development as a whole is elusive at best. One could ask, for example, Why interaction between these three only? Why not four, five, or more? For example, what is the effect of history on human development?

Historical time

Still other developmental psychologists have stressed the fact that the process of human development occurs within the context of history.[15] As we develop, they say, the demands of society change, and the way society moulds us also changes. These historical changes affect the aging of our body first of all. For example, there is ample evidence of a "secular trend" between successive generations of a given culture. This means that as a result of improved nutrition the children in this culture are healthier, grow taller and live longer than their parents.[16] Clearly here history influences the length of a generation's life span and also its quality of life. An even more telling effect of history on development is the effect it has on the way the members of a given generation view themselves and therefore on the way they experience the stages of life. For example, it will be immediately evident that being a young person in the 1930s was quite a different experience from being a young person in the year 2019. One may wonder whether our parents or grandparents who were young during the Depression years actually had the experience of youth. Life was so serious then that they had to grow up much more quickly than the young people of today do. The point of all of this is that history changes the ways in which society demands we should act at a certain age. A most extreme example of this is the apparent fact of the absence of childhood prior to AD 1600.[17] It appears that during that period of history adults did not view children as children, but more as imperfect, miniature adults. In the same vein, Neil Postman has argued that childhood is again disappearing today.[18] In summary, there is ample evidence that history changes the way successive generations develop.

Reductionism

While each of the explanations described above has something good to say about how we develop during the life course, every one of them is reductionistic, i.e. they all reduce human development to one of its aspects. For this reason I believe that we must discuss one more dimension of development, the spiritual dimension.

Development in the context of Divine history

Christians tend to stress the matter of spiritual time. Spiritual time stresses the fact that the process of development occurs in the context of Divine history. A Christian view of development points to the fact that we develop in accordance with Gods plan. The way we develop is also determined by what time it is on Gods clock. There is a spiritual dimension to our development. Most textbooks on developmental psychology do not mention this dimension of development, yet it is important. According to the Bible, God wants our help in bringing creation to its completion. Christians have long talked about this fact as the "cultural mandate," or the "great commission."[19] According to this understanding of development we can view development as governed by a series of life tasks, which we perform, in the appointed season, at our appointed time in Divine history.

From a Christian perspective on development, the explanation of why we move through the seasons of life is not based on the aging of the body. Nor does it depend on the changes that occur in our self-image or in society's view of the life course. It is not even explicable by a combination of these. These all fail to do justice to the complexity of human life. From a Christian perspective our journey through the seasons of life is determined by the developmental tasks that God gives us to complete during our life.[20] This spiritual explanation of why we develop includes all the other reasons that were given. Ultimately the definitive reason why we grow up and grow older is that, living in the context of Divine history, we are answerable to God's clock for our lives, *coram deo*.

Development is like a theatrical play

What, then, is the most realistic description of our journey through life? Taken as a whole, we can describe human development by means of the metaphor of a theatrical play. A play, like a story has a beginning, a middle and an end (the climax). It consists of a series of acts or seasons of life, and each act must be played in succession. Shakespeare[21] knew this already many years ago. We can further view each dimension of development (biological, psychological, social, historical and spiritual) as a series of concentric circles. Each dimension can be said to occur within the context of a larger, more inclusive dimension. From the point of view of this metaphor, development is a play (biological) within a play (psychological) within a play (social) within a play (historical) within a play (spiritual).

Notes

[1]Kirk, G. S. & Raven, J. E. (1963) *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge U., chapt. 6
Van Belle, H.A. (2013) *Explorations in the History of Psychology*. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press:26, 27
[2]Erikson, E. H. ((1979) *Adulthood*. New York: Norton
_____ (1982) *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review*. New York: Norton
[3]Kubler-Ross, E. (1969) *On Death and Dying*. N.Y: Macmillan
[4]The classic view of interactionism within development is stated in the article of Anne Anestasi, (1958) Heredity, Environment and the Question How, *Psychological Review*.Vol. 65, no. 4. Interactionism as the effect of the environment on us (accommodation) and our effect on the enviroment (assimilation) within cognitive development is found in Piaget, J. (1967) *Six Psychological Studies*. N.Y.: Random House, and in Piaget, J. (1963) *The Psychology of Intelligence*. Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams.
[5]This is popularly called the "riping and rotting" view of development.
[6]Notably Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget and K. W. Schaie.
[7]Even Rene Descartes, who professed to question everything he experienced had to cheat by *not* questioning the existence of *a priori* ideas (the so called *logos spermatikos* of the Stoics) in terms of which he questioned his experience. See:
Descartes, R. (1879-1913) *Oevres de Descartes*. Ed. By C. Adam and P. Tannery, 13 vols. Paris,
Copplestone, S. J. (1965) A History of Philosophy, Vol. V, Westminster: The Newman Press, and
Van Belle, H.A. (2013) *Explorations in the History of Psychology*. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press:88-91.
[8]Religious and ideological reflection are similar in that both concern the basic questions in life of what or whom we live our lives *out of* and what or whom we live *for*. (See also Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1).
[9]Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion.*
[10]Erikson, E. H. ((1979) *Adulthood*. New York: Norton.
[11]Gesell, A. (1945) *The Embryology of Behavior*. New York: Harper and Bros.
Hall, G. S. (1904) *Adolescence: Its Psychology, and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*
_____ (1922) *Senescence, The Last Half of Life.*

[12]Freud, S. (1896) *Collected Papers*. London: The Hogarth Press,
Erikson, E. H. (1979),
Piaget, J. (1967).
[13]Bandura, A. (1977b) *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. Prentice-Hall

[14]Whitbourne, S. K. & Whitbourne, S. B. (2014) *Adult Development and Aging, Biopsychosocial Perspectives*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley

[15]Schaie, K. W. (1965) A general model for the study of developmental change, *Psychological Bulletin*, 64:92- 107.

_____ (1984a) Historical time and cohort effects. In K. A. McCluskey and W. H. Reese (Eds.) Lifespan developmental psychology: Historical and generational effects. New York: Academic Press.

[16]The Secular trend
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1570677X02000333.

[17]Ariès, Ph. (1962) *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life. Tr*ans. Robert Baldick, New York: Vintage, 1962

[18]Van Den Berg, J. H. (1963*) Metabletica, de leer der veranderingen, beginselen van een historiche psychologie*. Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach NV. ,

Postman, N. (1994) *The Disappearance of Childhood.* N.Y.: Vintage Books,

_____(1985, 2005) *Amusing Ourselves to Death.* USA: Penquin

[19]**The Cultural Mandate and The Great Commission**
darrowmillerandfriends.com/2009/.../the-cultural-mandate-and-the-great-commission/

[20]I have borrowed the idea of developmental tasks from Havighurst, R. J. (1972) *Developmental tasks and education*. New York: McKay.

[21]Shakespeare on the stages of life:

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
Then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel*,*
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,

Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

from *As You Like It* (II, vii, 139-166)

Chapter 11: Closing Comments

God is good

All the time!

All the time?

God is good.

African chant

We live in a secular age. The way we live and move and have our being individually and communally in our culture today is without an awareness of the presence of God. God is *publicly and privately* absent from our lives today.

It was not always that way. As far back as time out of mind human life derived its meaning from its relation to a Divine being.[1] This still is the case in much of the (third) world. Only in the West have we deliberately and systematically proceeded to exorcise God from our public and private lives over the past five centuries. Our current secular way of living in the West is unique, even if it also represents a minority position.

The vast majority of religions in ancient times were paganistic. Adherents to these religions believed the Divine to be the source of all the calamities they experienced in their lives. This God needed to be appeased and demanded strict obeisance, extensive sacrifice and an ascetic style of living. In a word, these were functionally religions of sacrifice and servitude born out of fear of the Divine.[2]

The contrast between those religions and the Hebraic-Christian religion is striking. The central message of the Christian gospel is not one of sacrifice and servitude but rather one of deliverance and liberation.[3] Over time, this religion became one of two main sources of inspiration for Western culture, the other being the worship of reason derived from Ancient Greece.[4]

Christianity lost much of its culture-inspiring power in the West when it fell apart in a series of warring fundamentalistic denominations.[5] Its demise represented a cultural crisis for the West; into this vacuum the spirit of *Rationalistic Humanism* took hold, (also called *Modernism* or *the Enlightenment)*. Historically it derived its energy from the culture of Ancient Greece. Humanism's main focus was to free human life from religions of any kind, including Christianity, via a process of *emancipation* or *democratization*.[6]

Initially this process took the form of substituting the state for the church as the dominant public institution of human life. The state was seen as a collection of free individuals

who, without external coercion, chose to congregate together for the purpose of promoting a common good. Human beings were believed to be naturally capable and inclined to live in peace with one another because of their inborn ability to infallibly reason things out together and their natural drive to promote each other's well being or *beneficence*.[7]

But how, concretely, were these newly-minted citizens of the state expected to live out their faith? They were to promote the rights and freedom of their fellow citizens and to abide by the rule of the majority in making public decisions. In this way the Humanistic *description* of human life became a *prescription* for living together. Over time this development was experienced as no less coercive than the earlier demands of church membership during the Middle Ages. It culminated in what was called *state absolutism*[8] or a *disciplinary society*.[9] Having been freed from the dominance of the church and religion, people were still not free from the control of the state.

The reaction was not long in coming in the new cultural movement of *Romanticism*. It championed the absolute rights and freedom of individual human beings, which, it held, *transcended* their responsibility as citizens of a state. Individual human beings were said to have the *inalienable (birth) right and duty* to be unique. Where Rationalistic Humanism promoted sameness among people because of its faith in reason, Romanticism championed the emancipation of the individual, of the unique, because of its conviction that the essence of human life did not lie in its ability to reason but in its *creative ability,* which is located in each individual human being.[10]

It should be noted that this critique of Rationalism by Romanticism represented a crisis *within* Humanism no less severe than the earlier religious wars between Christian fundamentalistic denominations that lead to the cultural ascendance of Humanism in the first place. Romanticism represented a radically new way of doing things from before. It was, in fact, an extreme glorification of the freedom of the creative human individual.

Reason was now considered to be indispensable *only* in (natural) scientific and technological endeavours in which the experimental method reigned supreme. But for the so called *human* or social sciences like psychology, language studies and history, all products of human action, the more appropriate method of investigation was the *hermeneutic* method. It conceived of a human being as a book, the content of which needed *interpretation* to be understood. The *tools* for this interpretive work were feelings, intuition and empathy rather than abstract reasoning.[11]

Guided by an emphasis on human creativity and aided by these tools, in-depth studies of the human spirit became possible. Emotions and passions, which were formerly considered aberrations, were now acknowledged and appreciated as constituent parts of human life. A whole new world of investigation opened up. However, it soon became apparent from these studies that people were far less rational than was previously thought. The way people lived in other cultures and at other times in history was also radically different from the way people lived in the "*enlightened"* Western world. In a word, they discovered that there is more than one kind of normal in the world.

So, the question became critical: If rationality is not what binds people together, what is? Given all these differences, what is the essential characteristic that connects people to one another into one human race? What does it mean to be human? The answer appeared hard to find. Instead scholars contented themselves with merely noting individual human differences. Romanticism had determined that people are universally unique and that was the end of it.

In fact, the question of what binds people together itself became suspect as a throwback to Rationalism. Trust in reason, it was felt, is as dangerous an illusion as trust in God and religion because it implies that there is such a thing as universal truth and morality to which we all have access by means of our reason *and to which we all must pledge allegiance*. A group of leading thinkers, Nietszche, Freud and Marx, (later dubbed by Riciour as *the school of suspicion*) set themselves the task of ridding the Western world of this Rationalistic error.[12]

Friedrich Nietzsche is said to have ushered in the era of *Irrationalism* (later perpetuated by *Existentialism*).[13] Irrationalism was based on the premise that the life we live is bigger, deeper, more complex, and truer than the cognitive boxes we consciously place upon it and on the assumption that we have access to this deeper level of living via our feelings, passions, intuition and our ability to empathize rather than by means of our ability to think.

Accordingly, Nietszche set out to destroy all traditionally existing, well-established, commonly accepted beliefs and ways of doing things, chief among them a trust in a providential deity, and a trust in the infallible guide of reason, as well as in the drive for beneficence of human beings. He saw the need to demystify all existing mysteries, question all answers, to deny all truths, to reject all rules, and to debunk all ideals based on a faith in reason. In short, he set out to devalue all our existing values (*Umwertung aller Werte*).[14]

Nietszche stated that human beings tend to hide their real being and potential from themselves and others by means of the *masking* power of reason out of fear of existing conventions. They could be delivered from this fear by *un*masking their errors in judgement, thereby accessing their hidden basic potential for creativity. He urged individuals to trust in their *will to power* and to exert that will to power by rejecting all external influences, by constructing their own values and by speaking their own truth. *Self-assertion* was the only thing that counted for Nietszche. All other values were illusions.[15]

With the rise of the school of suspicion the attacks on Rationalistic Humanism became increasingly emotional, accusative and personal. Those who clung to existing certainties were not just considered in error. If they were unwilling to question every truth, every belief and every value that they held dear they were said to lack personal *sincerity* and to live *inauthentic* lives because they kept themselves from getting in touch with their real, hidden potential.[16]

That was then. This is now.   The journey from the school of suspicion to our way of framing our existence in the West today is short. The current prevailing mood of Post Modernism adds to the accusation of a lack of sincerity and authenticity the accusation of *guilt*. People ought to feel guilty when they assert their own individual take on life *as the only truth*. What Nietszche had advocated now became suspect. According to Post Modernism, for us to assert our own truth as the only truth was neither permissible nor moral because it made liars out of all those who disagreed with us.[17] The ultimate goal for this Post Modern heart-and-mindset appears to be the intolerance of intolerance.

I have written this book out of a deep concern for the current state of the world in which we live. The Western world is facing a number of major problems: the disastrous effects of climate change, the daily dreadful occurrence of gun violence, the opioid crisis creating an epidemic of overdose deaths, the heart-rending and perilous mass-migration of people from the third world into nations of the developed world, major conflicts between and within nations everywhere, the rise of racism and the hatred of strangers worldwide fuelled by ideologies of populism, nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism, and the disappearance of truth-speaking in our formal and informal communications, resulting in our inability to distinguish right from wrong.

There appears to be no consensus among world leaders on how to deal with any of these, or any other problem for that matter. The result is a paralysis of decision-making. That, to my mind, is the worst problem of all facing the world today. Consequently, there is a global sense of unease, anxiety even, about how to frame our existence. We no longer feel at home on this secular globe we have created. What is lacking is an overarching vision that binds us together. In the words of the Hebrew Scriptures, there is no judge among us and each of us seems doomed to "doing what is good in our own eyes" (Judges 21: 25).

The history of Humanism began with the naive conviction that human beings are supremely able to *control* the world in which they live. It ended with a profound admission that things are spiraling *out of* control. The world today is in an uproar. Things are flying apart. The cosmos has become a universe governed only by chance.[18] The way we live and move and have our being in the Western world today is characterized by *un*certainty and *un*predictability. The spirit of Humanism, which inspired cultural formation in the West for the last five centuries is proving to be bankrupt and for now cultural fragmentation appears to be the only possibility in our secular

world. Humanism has lost its ability to inspire culture formation and there appears to be no other spirit to take its place.

Western culture and perhaps the entire world today is in a crisis. There have been periods of crisis before throughout the history of the West. During the Hellenistic period the world was in an uproar, much like our world today. The culture of Ancient Rome had crumbled and no form of cultural inspiration took its place until the rise of the influence of the Hebraic Christian gospel. Then, in reaction to the cultural darkness of the Middle Ages the Renaissance and the Reformation became forces of cultural renewal. Finally, during the time after the Reformation when the Christian religion lost its culture-inspiring influence the spirit of Humanism arose to move culture formation forward.

One synonym for the word *crisis* is *turning point.* Apparently, periods of crisis are not a complete loss since they appear to give dormant spirits a chance to renew culture.[19] What new spirit is destined to take hold of Western culture is yet to be determined. However, it is becoming more and more evident to me that under the influence of Humanism something essential was lost when we collectively decided to live life without God. Secularism represents a loss of religious support and direction for human life. Based on our history of the last 500 years it appears that without God human life easily becomes a perpetual restless search to serve and to worship something or someone other than God, *without the chance of ever arriving anywhere.*[20] The best we currently can do, it appears, is to define our time in history negatively as Post-Christian and Post-Modern.

So, maybe the culture of tomorrow might be Post-Secular? Perhaps the time has come for us to acknowledge that without God we are *not* masters of our own fate, that in living our lives we are addressed by Someone greater than us, a God who challenges us to live life in His world in ways He has revealed, ways informed by *coram deo*. Hints about what human life from that perspective looks like may be found in a paraphrase of chapters 12 and 13 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Chapter 12 deals with the *reality*, the *structure* of human life. It does not describe the way things *ought to be* but the way things *are*. What strikes me immediately is how totally different this perspective is from the one that we in the Western world are used to under the influence of Humanism. This biblical perspective simply assumes the reality of God in human life and it

identifies God (here named *the Holy Spirit*) as the Giver of gifts.[21] So, if that is how it is, it may not have been the smartest thing we did to get rid of God.

Second, from this perspective the world we live in is not the product of our reason or our creativity. We did not think up the world or create the world in which we live in our own image. Because it is a gift from God the world we live in is a *given.* The world is a reality with which we must reckon. It is what it is. When we are born we enter a world that is already *there,* the product of God's creation and the product of the historical-cultural activities of our forefathers and mothers. That is simply a fact of life. This does not just apply to the natural world, but also to the social world and our historical world.

What also fascinates me about this biblical picture of God is that He is not a hidden God, to be hunted down inside or outside of us. He *reveals himself by the gifts He gives* to human beings. His gift-giving presence is empirically knowable to all who are willing to see or to hear Him. Moreover, according to this perspective, the talents, the unique potentials each of us have, are given to us by God and not the products of human ingenuity. They are to be received with thanksgiving and to be cultivated and made real by us during our lifetime. Furthermore, no gift is the same as any other and every gift is essential for the well being of humankind. Each of our gifts must also serve the needs of others and all of us are without exception in need of the gifts of others. That is just the way things are according to I Cor. 12.

What I find most surprising is the contrast between the Humanistic concept of society and the description of the community of mankind found in this passage of the Bible. Humanists hold that society is populated with free, autonomous self-contained individuals whose primary existence is to assert themselves and only secondarily to establish relationships with other autonomous individuals. Ultimately, in this view, the best anyone of us can do communally is to make space for the individuality of our neighbours.

By way of comparison, Paul in this Bible passage uses the metaphor of the human body for the way human beings were created to live communally. Individual human beings are from birth on and throughout their lives connected and intertwined with other human beings as intimately as the parts, of our bodies are intertwined with one another. We are made to function vicariously for one another, on behalf of one another. We are made to be our neighbour's keeper. When we neglect to do that society falls apart

as I fear is happening today. The consequences of this neglect are painfully evident all around us in the hateful destruction of innocent people, of established cultural habitats and of our natural environment.

Fortunately, in chapter 13 Paul offers us a (Holy Spirited) antidote against all this wanton destruction in the form of love for God and love for one another.

I want to end this chapter and this book with Paul's wonderful rendition of what this love entails:

> Love is patient, love is kind.
> It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking.
> It is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrong.
> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
> It always protects, always trusts,
> always hopes, always perseveres.

ubi charitas et amor, Deus ibi est

Notes

1. Taylor, Ch. (2007) *A Secular Age.* London: Harvard University Press: 25
2. Armstrong, K. (1994) *A History of God.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf
3. Yahweh was a God of deliverance. Exodus, chaps. 6-14
4. Van Belle, H.A. (2013) *Explorations in the History of Psychology Persisting Themata and Changing Paradigms.* Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press, Chapt. 3
5. Van Belle (2013): 78-80, Dillenberger, J. and Welch, C. (1954) *Protestant Christianity.* New York: Scribner and Son: 78-85, Armstrong, K. (2000) *The Battle for God.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 365-371
6. Dooyeweerd, H. (1979) *Roots of Western Culture, Pagan, Secular and Christian Options.* Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation 150-153
7. Taylor, Ch. (2007): 246, 274, 251, 180
8. Dooyeweerd, H. (1979): 175-178. The late Carl Rogers, a contemporary psychotherapist voiced this sentiment when he stated that "human beings are universally unique." Van Belle, H. A. (1980) *Basic Intent and Therapeutic Approach of Carl R Rogers.* Toronto: Wedge)
9. Taylor, Ch. (2007): 91
10. Ibid (2007): 352, 319, 370, 372
11. Ibid:168-171
12. Ricoeur, P. (1970) *Freud and Philosophy, An essay on Interpretation.* London: Yale University Press: 32, Smith, J. K.A. (2006) *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*? Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: 86
13. Vollenhoven, D.H.T. (1956*) Kort Overzicht van de Geschiedenis der Wijsbegeerte.* (*Brief Overview of the History of Philosophy). Voor de cursus M.O.A.* vol. 1956, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Theja:39, 40
14. Nietzsche F. *Werke in drei Bande*: 424
15. Van Belle, (2013): 154, 155, Copleston, F.C. (1965) *A History of Philosophy.* Vol. VII. London: Burns and Oates: 407
16. Van Belle, H.A. (2012) Intergeneration Lost and Found, why suits and *skirts don't talk with jeans, why they should, and how they can.* Edmonton, AB: Legacy Press: 45
17. Ibid: 57
18. Probably the most accurate metaphor for the failure of Humanism in its central aim to control the world is the fact that in our current view of the world we have substituted "the universe" for what we used to call "the cosmos." It is an admission that in the minds of many the world we live in is an uncontrollable wilderness. Taylor (2007): 351, Chapt. 9
19. Erikson, E.H. (1979) *Adulthood.* New York: Norton. Erikson has applied the notion of "crisis" or "turning point" as a time of upheaval necessary for continued growth to the process of human development, and to demonstrate the transition from one stage to the next in the life

     span
20. Perversely, Nietsche may be right. When you eliminate God from the scheme of things you are compelled to make up your own values and rules without a blueprint
21. See II Corinthians 1: 1-3 where God is called the *Father of compassion* and the *God of all comfort*

SHORT BIOGRAPHY of Harry A. Van Belle, PhD

Dr. Harry A. Van Belle received a B.A. degree from Calvin College, MI. USA in 1965, a Drs. degree in 1971 and a PhD. degree in Clinical Psychology in 1980 from The Free University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

From 1971 – 1975 he was the supervisor of the Psychology Department in the Brockville Psychiatric Hospital in Brockville, Ontario, Canada.

From 1975-1977 he wrote his dissertation, *Basic Intent and Therapeutic Approach of Carl R. Rogers,* (1980, Wedge Publishing, Toronto) and worked as a consultant for the Leeds and Grenville Public School Board in Eastern Ontario, Canada.

From 1977 – 1982 he was the first Director-Therapist of the Cascade Christian Counselling Centre in Surrey, BC, Canada, a therapy centre, which he founded.

From 1982 – 1992 he taught psychology at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada.

From 1992 – 2000 he taught psychology at The Kings University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

He has been a practicing therapist, a workshop leader and a popular lecturer for more than 50 years.

In 2000 he took early retirement to spend more time traveling, writing and practicing therapy. As this website (*All of Life redeemed* → *Van Belle,*) shows, to date he has published four books and has written extensively about topics related to psychology, family life, psychological development and psychotherapy as well as on topics dealing with the relation between religion and psychology.

He has been married to Jenny for nearly 55 years, he has three children, five grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

Dr. Van Belle can be reached at harryvanbelle@hotmail.com

He has written four books. The titles of the books, most of which are available from Amazon, are:

Basic Intent and Therapeutic Approach of Carl R. Rogers
Two Shall Be One, reflections on dating, courtship and marriage
Intergeneration Lost and Found, why suits and skirts don't talk with jeans
Explorations in the History of Psychology, persisting themata and changing paradigms

Harry Van Belle I am one of the founding faculty members of Redeemer. I taught psychology from 1982-1992 and I have fond memories of my tenure there. Because of my qualifications as a therapist I became the trusted friend of many students. I deeply treasured the talks I had with them and the fact that I got to know them personally. But it also meant that I became privy to their most intimate secrets, about which I could not talk with anyone because of the confidentiality of the relationship. Among them were stories by students about their experiences of being gay at a Christian university college. Reading the testimonies on Facebook today brought back so many painful memories about what they told me. What impressed me most was the utter lonely agony of that experience. They would tell me about their passionate love for someone, or a desire to have that love, but being unable to express it because, as they put it, of their dual identity. They were Christian, but they were also gay and to their mind, and apparently to the mind of the people around them, the two were incompatible. It was clear to me that these young men who came to me for help had a deep love for God but also that, because of their sexual orientation, they felt that they were not worthy of God's love for them. It puzzled me that these students should feel that way in, of all places, a Christian university. To me they were just different from me, but for that reason no less worthy of God's love. I tried to help them as best I could. But I am as straight as an arrow and could not always live into what it felt like for them to be gay in a situation in which it was not safe to be gay openly. To this day, I do not understand why some Christians object to gays and lesbians. When I think of them, two elderly gay men in our neighbourhood come to mind. They have been living together for decades in a tender, loving, deeply committed relationship that rivals the relationship that Jenny and I now have had for almost 55 years. I mean, they finish each other's sentences, you know? How can those Christians not acknowledge that kind of relationship as a miracle from God in a world full of hatred and selfishness? They must read a different Bible than I do. When it comes to sexual orientation I take my cue from I Corinthians 12. Gays and lesbian Christians are no less members of the body of Christ than I am just because, unlike me, they desire to be intimate with someone who is of the same sex as they are. According to this bible passage, I ought to embrace them as my brothers and sisters. And I do. I celebrate their difference from me. In my opinion Redeemer would do well to celebrate their uniqueness. It would be the Reformed Christian thing to do. With love to y'all at Redeemer

Sex, Intimacy, and the Single Person

Perhaps it's time for the church to take another look

TC Line:

Editor's note: Christians agree that sexuality is a gift from God. But should the church provide guidance on people's sexual behavior? If so, what principles should it use? Until now, the position of churches, has been primarily limited to the prohibition of sex before marriage. But how, then, are single people supposed to live out their sexuality? Here are two perspectives to begin the conversation.

Are We more Hung Up about Sex Than God is?
or: Where do we draw the line
by Harry Van Belle

The record of the church when it comes to sex has not been stellar. It has, in fact, been characterized by the denial of sex. For much of its history, the message of the church to young people has been one of abstinence. If you wanted to become a full-time servant of God, your best bet was to become a nun or an unmarried priest. This prejudice lingers to this day in churches that admonish their young people to abstain, to hold off from sex until marriage.

This admonition about lovemaking is ironic, as anyone who practices sexual intercourse knows. That's because good sex can only happen in a relationship where the partners are able to let go, to passionately surrender to one another. By contrast, the North American obsession with performance, Viagra-induced or not, in sexual relations spells death to a relationship where you need to know yourself received, warts and all, by the other. The real goal of lovemaking is not the pursuit of technical expertise but the enjoyment of romantic intimacy, as the Song of Songs so poetically unfolds.

Nor is this prohibition about sex biblical. If I read Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs correctly, then (a) God wants young people to take pleasure in their youth; and (b) that pleasure most certainly includes lovemaking. Could it

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be that God is less hung up about sex than we are, especially in North America?

Premarital Sex

Whether Christian single people should or should not practice premarital sex is a question that may have been relevant two or three generations ago, but the situation today has changed.

First, whereas in earlier times the practice of sexual intercourse among unmarried youth realistically could—and often did—result in pregnancy, with all of its dire consequences, today's young people have a variety of contraceptives at their disposal. This reduces to a minimum the risk of pregnancy. What's more, most people who have intercourse generally practice "safe sex"—a choice that's supported by the cultural media. So we should recognize that the sexual behavior of many young people today is generally and responsibly geared toward avoiding pregnancy and HIV contamination.

Second, for all kinds of good reasons, people today tend to remain single a decade longer than their parents and grandparents did. During their twenties, many people are in a semi-dependent financial state and perhaps still in school. They generally do not feel ready to marry and start a family before they reach their thirties.

Their situation is comparable to that of their grandparents in Europe several generations ago when, because of a severe housing shortage, young couples were often engaged to be married for longer than a decade. In the meantime they did have unprotected sexual intercourse, resulting in a large number of what used to be called "shotgun marriages." Young couples today often solve this dilemma by deciding to move in together, establishing a cohabitate relationship that includes the practice of sleeping together. Many North American churches frown upon such relationships.

The question is whether they should.

Recreational Sex

An increasingly common form of premarital sex in our culture is recreational sex—sex that's divorced from intimacy and commitment. One form of that is "hooking up," the one-night stand in which two young people meet one another, usually in a bar, strike up a conversation, find they like each other and go home to have sex. Nothing is considered other than the amount of pleasure each gives to the other.

How should we judge these practices of casual and committed sex? What criteria can we use to evaluate these situations?

The prohibition of sex before marriage uses the criterion of behavior. We say single people should not engage in sex—period. But this criterion raises many questions. What exactly do we consider premarital sex? Where do we draw the line? Is it hugging or kissing, with or without the tongues touching? Is it touching each other's genitals or mutual masturbation? Is it oral sex or penetration, with or without ejaculation? How far can people go and still abstain from sex? So how does the church decide and legislate how far young people should go? *Should* the church decide this question? Is the church *competent* to decide? My view is that the church should stay miles away from such unseemly questions.

Maturity and Commitment

Better criteria for evaluating people's sexual behavior, I suggest, are maturity and commitment. Whether or not to engage in premarital sex should depend on the strength of the personal maturity of single people and on their level of commitment toward one another. These criteria, I believe, are much more appropriate ones for the church to consider in providing guidelines for sexual behavior. How mature should young people be, and how intimate and committed should their relationship be before they can *afford* to have sex?

This means that I still need to be persuaded that recreational sex, or hooking up is valid behavior for young people, let alone for Christian young people. To me sex belongs within an intimate, committed relationship between two reasonably mature young people. But I do think, based on these same principles that the church should change its stance on cohabitate relationships, recognizing that such relationships enable young single adults to respond in a responsible way to the culturally and historically changed times they live in.

In the meantime, many young people have long ago ignored the church and have made their own choices for sexual behavior. I believe it's fair to suggest that most young people are responsible enough to distinguish between sex as mere "hooking up" and sex as an expression of committed intimacy.

With respect to guidelines for sexual behavior, as with other contemporary issues, I fear that the church is playing catch-up in defense of a status quo that no longer exists instead of leading the next generation with biblically

grounded insights. You may well differ with me on what those principles should be. This isn't the final word on how the church might provide guidance in the area of sexuality. But it's a beginning.

Harry Van Belle is emeritus professor of psychology at The Kings University College in Edmonton and a member of the Inglewood CRC

NOTE to the Editor:

Thank you very much for your editorial work. It makes the article much more readable. I have made some minor revisions and am comfortable with the revised version. (Word count: 1151)
I understand that a young female was asked to respond to my article. I am glad that someone else who is younger and female is also writing about this topic. But I would be more comfortable if she were to write a stand alone article in response to the given topic like I did . Responses to my article (and hers) in my view should be confined to the letter to the editor pages.