



The return of religion¹

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Abstract

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Religion is back in Philosophy as a respectable subject. Part 1 first charts what MacIntyre, Taylor and Derrida have meant in this regard. Subsequently, it turns to the Enlightenment to determine what constituted the breakthrough. It is found that even where the Enlightenment gave maximum room to religion (i.e. as a civic religion and as “religion of the heart”) it still excluded a constitutive relation to a transcendent revelation.

Part 2 centres on the religion-faith distinction in reformational philosophy. Similar to the Enlightenment, religion is understood as part of human nature. However, human nature itself is conceived as intrinsically religious and depending for its light on revelation. Secondly, “religion” in this context also encompasses idols and religious substitutes. Thus, it directs attention to shopping malls, football stadiums, health policy, et cetera, as possible contexts of a return of religion. Examples show that this has become a popular approach. However, most of the publications surveyed fail to distinguish between an “analogical” and a “pistically qualified” use of religion, and are open to exaggerations (the shopping mall and football stadiums as temples, etc.). At this junction, the relevance is shown of the religion-faith distinction as well as of Elaine Botha’s theory of metaphors. The epilogue offers an integration of parts one and two.

1 I gratefully acknowledge the help of Jonathan Tipping (Groningen) in checking my English.

Opsomming

Die terugkeer van religie

Religie is terug in die Filosofie as 'n waardige onderwerp. In Deel 1 word eerstens uitgestip wat MacIntyre, Taylor en Derrida in hierdie verband bedoel. Daarna word na die Verligting gekyk om te bepaal wat die deurbraak moontlik gemaak het. Die bevinding is dat, selfs waar die Verligting heeltemal plek gemaak het vir religie (as 'n siviele religie en as religie van die hart), dit steeds 'n wesentliche verband met 'n transendentele openbaring uitgesluit het.

Deel 2 sentreer rondom die religie-geloofsonderskeid in reformatoriese filosofie. Ooreenkomstig met die Verligting, word religie as deel van die menslike natuur verstaan. Menslike natuur word egter op sigself verstaan as wesenlik religieus en afhanklik van openbaring vir sy lig. Tweedens omvat "religie" in hierdie konteks ook afgode en religieuse plaasvervangers. Dit vestig dus die aandag op winkelarkades, voetbalstadions, gesondheidsbeleid, ensovoorts as moontlike kontekste van 'n terugkeer van religie. Uit voorbeelde kan gesien word dat hierdie 'n populêre benadering geword het. Die meeste van die publikasies wat ondersoek is, versuim egter om tussen 'n "analogiese" en 'n "pisties-gekwalifiseerde" gebruik van religie te onderskei en is oop vir oordrywing (bv. die winkelarkade en voetbalstadions as tempels). By hierdie kruispunt word op die relevansie van die religie-geloofsonderskeid gewys, sowel as op Elaine Botha se metafoorteorie. Die epiloog bied 'n integrasie van dele een en twee.

Part 1

1. Introduction: return of religion

Peter Berger, the noted sociologist, once said that, with respect to religion, he had made a huge mistake and had had a big insight. The mistake was that he had assumed a negative correlation between modernisation and religion. He had thought that development would cause a steady retreat of religion from the public domain. This assumption which he shared with standard modernisation theories was falsified by what in fact happened. The insight he prided himself on was to have foreseen a pluralisation of cults and religions (Polinder, 2010:6; cf. also Berger, 1979).

In both respects Berger's retraction is on target. Religious issues have not disappeared from the media or from the agenda of the political parties. In fact, the opposite may well be the case: there

seems to be reason to speak of a “return of religion”. Secondly, as Berger foresaw, the established churches have not benefitted from this return. What Europe showed instead was a proliferation of Christian denominations as well as a spreading of numerous heterodox cults.

However, there is more to the return of religion than meets the eye of the sociologist. Berger’s rubrics do not fit all relevant developments. One has to turn to philosophy to get the broader picture.

The first fact to take note of is, until not long ago, many philosophers subscribed to their own variety of the modernisation theories, assuming that, although religious issues still remained after decades of secularisation, it was not worth being taken seriously. Whenever these issues came up in philosophical gatherings, it was rare to find genuine openness. In this respect the philosophical climate did not differ much from the intellectual world at large. As Desmond relates:

I remember a time when to mention God or religion in the company of advanced intellectuals was like mentioning sex in a prudish Victorian drawing room. An icy silence would descend, and the silence communicated more than the argument possibly could: *we do not now talk of these things.* (Desmond, 2005:xi.)

MacIntyre was one of the first to throw a stone into the pond. With respect to our subject, his book, *After virtue* (MacIntyre, 1981) marks a new phase. In this book he strongly takes issue with the prevailing uncritical acceptance of the is-ought divide in moral philosophy and the social sciences (the divide that was thought to keep religious issues at a distance). He warns that by insulating themselves, there would be no escape from “emotivism”, a position representing a total loss of substance. The book ends with a gloomy diagnosis: the “new dark ages (...) are already upon us”; “we are waiting (...) for another (...) St. Benedict” (MacIntyre, 1981:245). The reference to St. Benedict indicates that his only hope for resistance was set on small, monastic-like communities of scholars fostering pre-enlightenment tradition. Later, in *Whose justice, whose rationality?* (MacIntyre, 1988) he is clearer about how to overcome emotivism and regain substance by a rejuvenation of an Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition.

The first reaction of philosophers and social scientists on *After virtue* was one of bewilderment.² But it did not take long for the book to

² I remember sociologist Jan Verhoogt, raising both hands in a seminar on the Future of the Welfare State when the phrase about the new Dark Age was

become one of the classics of the century (Lemmens, 1999).³ Although MacIntyre's attempt to revive a neo-Aristotelian philosophy had little success, he succeeded in discrediting the standard views on religion. This left a fertile soil upon which, for instance, Charles Taylor could sow.

The central message of Taylor's *Sources of the self* (1989) is that the self cannot be understood (also not by itself) apart from historical sources. This book deals extensively with Christian sources, including the Reformation era. Remarkably enough, it was well received by secular philosophers, and has been widely used in philosophical curricula.⁴ A decade later, his book *A secular age* (Taylor, 2007) followed. Now the author not only covered a wider terrain, he also came more clearly to the fore as a committed Catholic, openly declaring that he neither could, nor would, doubt his own faith. Relevant to our subject is his rejection of "human flourishing" as the meaning and end of religion. He insists: "The injunction 'Thy will be done' isn't equivalent to 'Let humans flourish', even though we know that God wills human flourishing." (Taylor, 2007:17.)

A third philosopher to consider is Derrida. In temperament and background he had nothing in common with either MacIntyre or Taylor. No wonder that those who know him only as the master of deconstruction will think that any return of religion would be *malgré lui*. However, *Donner la mort (The gift of death, 1999)* places his philosophy in a different light. Taking on the theme of sacrifice as developed by Patočka (1990), Levinas, and Kierkegaard, it expresses a view of moral codes and ethical commands that break with the conventional insulation of ethics from religion. Ethics, it holds, not only has to concern itself with the universal, but also with absolute singularity (*chaque homme est tout autre*). To take singularity seriously means to enter the border zone with religion, as he puts it in a lengthy commentary on the biblical story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son: "Il ne peut donc plus distinguer si aisément entre l'éthique et le 'religieux.'" (Derrida, 1999:117.) Granted, the religious

quoted. Although sharing MacIntyre's Christian faith, he failed to see how this book could have relevance for his own field: it seemed yet another product of a neo-Romantic sub-current (as exemplified by the then popular works of Christopher Lasch and Ton Lemaire).

3 At a symposium on worldview at Calvin College (1985), Jan Verhoogt read a paper that did show affinity with MacIntyre (cf. Verhoogt, 1989:134).

4 Which does not mean there was no critique (cf. Heyns, 2002).

here remains a border zone. Moreover, there is no evidence that Derrida seriously considers the possibility that Abraham did hear God's voice. But one thing is clear: he no longer sides with those defending an autonomous morality. One wonders whether he would not also have agreed with Taylor that the meaning of "Thy will be done" cannot be explained in terms of some inner-worldly good, such as the enhancement of human life!

More about these three philosophers in the concluding section of Part 1.

2. Dialectics of the Enlightenment

The information gathered so far, suggests that nowadays religion is being taken more seriously by philosophy than it was before. It seems safe then to say that there is indeed a return of religion. However, the next question is whether a real breakthrough has occurred, or not. To answer this question the standard enlightenment view of religion will be taken as point of reference, and more specifically its assumption that all religions are branches of one trunk. We'll turn to this assumption first. Thereafter the ideal of a civil religion as well as the Romantic quest for authenticity, will be explored. To conclude the first part of this study, the positions of Derrida, MacIntyre and Taylor will be reconsidered.

The second half of this study is dedicated to the distinction between religion and faith in reformational philosophy. Only then will it finally be possible for us to determine what does and what does not constitute a genuine return of religion.

2.1 *Truncus communis*

Historically, the decisive step the Enlightenment took was to abandon the traditional bibliocentric view of history (which had already become weakened in the Renaissance era). Sacred history became relegated to one section of the book of history. By the same token, Christianity became demoted to an instantiation of religion-in-general. Religion, it was thought, is the same at the root, but differs in its branches.

A further distinction can be made between negative and (more) positive views of religion. Skeptics and atheists considered an appeal to God or gods as rooted in some human-all-too-human desire for consolation and hence as something mankind will have to forgo in its further development. It was also possible, however, to attribute

an indispensable function to religion in the education of humankind (Lessing, Herder, Kant), or even, as Hegel did, raise it to the level of the “absolute religion” as the pinnacle of religious evolution. However, no matter how negative or positive the view of religion, in all cases Christian religion is interpreted as a special manifestation of the religion of mankind.

Up to the present day, the heirs of the Enlightenment boast of having created a public order in which religions have been cut down to size and consent to being treated on an equal basis. The result is often described as a “privatisation of religion”. But this formulation is not entirely adequate. It is not adequate in Kant’s case, since religion, as he conceives it (i.e. within the bounds of reason), is indispensable for public morality. It is even less fitting in Hegel’s case, given his doctrine that the principles of the modern state (the equality of all citizens before the law, etc.) depend on the Christian religion for their contents. What is rejected, is any claim to exclusivity.

An assessment of the Enlightenment cannot be negative only. Dooyeweerd’s treatment of this subject is exemplary in keeping a balance between critique and appraisal. After a trenchant critique of the ground-motive leading the age of reason, he concludes on a positive tone.

There is indeed another side to our assessment of the Enlightenment faith. We would be entirely amiss if we failed to recognize its great significance for the unfolding of western civilization. The Enlightenment was formative in history and active in opening culture beyond the scope of natural science and technology based on that science. (...) With respect to the legal order it pleaded untiringly not only for the establishment of the individual rights of man, which form the foundation of today’s civil law (...). The Enlightenment also laid many cornerstones for the modern constitutional state (Rechtsstaat). (Dooyeweerd, 1979:107.)

The words *unfolding* and *opening* are significant. It indicates that the criterion for assessment is the contribution to an unfolding of potentials, including the potentials of the Christian religion. Viewed from this angle, we are not dealing with a religion being forced to concessions, but rather with the crucible of the Enlightenment helping to bring out the strength of the former. Similarly, the separation of church and state is no longer associated with suggestions of concessions wrought upon the former, but is understood as an unfolding of a relationship doing justice to the inner nature of both church and

state. Precisely because it is the nature of the church to make itself serviceable to a transcendent truth, its disputes cannot be settled by state officials – their jurisdiction being restricted to matters of public interest.⁵ Unfortunately, it is akin to the Enlightenment to see this separation as something forced upon the church. Starting with the correct premise that the state is no arbiter in religious matters, it concludes that all religions be regarded as equally true, false or useful, and that directional differences between religions are merely “questions about words and names” (Acts 18:15). What it cannot and will not accept, is that equality before the law implies a *restriction* rather than an extension of civil authority.

2.2 Civic religion

Until the eighteenth century it was impossible to conceive of a society without religion. Pierre Bayle was probably the first to defend that a society of atheists was possible in principle. Spinoza tended towards the same conclusion. Together they represent what Israel (2007) has called the radical Enlightenment. However, this is not the end of the story, as the supremacy of reason on which they set their hopes did not remain uncontested either. A century after Spinoza, Rousseau conquered Europe with a plea for the supremacy of sensibility. Thus he opened a back door to a return of religion, for it now became charged with the task of fostering a nationwide sense of solidarity. This idea of a “civil religion” gained widespread currency. The cult of l’Être Suprême during the French Revolution, with Robespierre as its high priest, was inspired by it, but so was the *religion du cœur* idealised by Madame de Staël who was then the most vocal opponent of the radical revolution! (Winock, 2010:201-239). All through the nineteenth century philosophers of religion continued to pay tribute to Rousseau (Hegel, Comte, and Durkheim among others).

Rousseau’s “civil religion”, Robespierre’s cult of *l’Être Suprême* and Mme de Staël’s *religion du cœur* all centered on a form of Deism allegedly free of doctrines and hence without risk of divisiveness. It was in turn further secularised by Comte and Durkheim and transformed into a religion of mankind void of any transcendence.

Why this reaching out for the post-Christian? It was because the architects of civil religion had no use for the antithetical elements of

5 I am alluding here to the norm of “sphere sovereignty” (sovereiniteit in eigen kring).

the Christian faith. What to do with a Savior who announces that He has come “to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Matt. 10:35)?⁶ This shows that all these projects remain caught in the dialectics of the Enlightenment. The only religion condoned in the public realm was to be a generic, unhistorical religion. In fact they all project the idea of a generic religion-of-mankind into a post-Christian future.

In this regard, Hegel is the only exception, because his variety of a civil religion is pegged to an existing religion, namely the Christian religion. He derided Robespierre’s cult of the Supreme Being as a worship of an empty abstraction. He insisted that civil religion has to come to terms with historical Christianity. I must admit, however, that Hegel’s own position is complicated. His *Lectures on the philosophy of religion* ends with declaring that religion has to flee to the realm of philosophy, because only there the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Hegel, 1966:231; 1987:300). On the other hand, he was enough of a realist to admit that philosophy will never capture the hearts and the imagination of the people, and, therefore, in his social and legal philosophy, orthodox (= trinitarian) Christianity holds pride of place.

Does Hegel’s brand of civil religion present the breakthrough we are looking for? No and yes. No, because it was for the want of something better that he turned to historical Christianity. There is ample evidence to suggest that, for the cementing function, he would rather have relied on philosophy but realised it lacked in popular appeal. Yes, because his turn to history broke through the dialectics of the Enlightenment. Thus he reluctantly contributed to the nineteenth-century’s rehabilitation of historical Christianity, of which “our own” Groen van Prinsterer was such an eminent representative, and without which (humanly speaking) the neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper could not have developed.

2.3 The quest for authenticity

The transition from the Enlightenment to the era of Romanticism was marked by a shift in emphasis from reason towards the authenticity of feeling and striving. Rousseau had been a precursor in cultivating sensibility. The ideal was no longer the all-rounded personality and the even-development of all capacities under the gui-

6 Compare the gripping dialogues in Dostoevsky (2002).

dance of reason, but the single-minded pursuit of ideals. What should interest us is an attendant change in the meaning of *religion*, as found in Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne*. In this novel, which caused a sensation when it appeared in 1807, the protagonist explains the meaning of *l'amour fou*:

S'il y a quelque chose de religieux dans ce sentiment, c'est parce qu'il fait disparaître les autres intérêts, et se complaît comme la dévotion dans le sacrifice de soi-même. (Winock, 2010:297.)

Of course, content-wise, little was gained. The content of this passionate "religion" could vary from deism in Herder's and Madame de Staël's case, to the Christian faith among a new generation of apologists such as Lamennais and Chateaubriand. The latter showed indeed that the *amour fou* could also be Christ-directed. As he put it in his review of Madame de Staël's work on literature published in 1800: "Ma folie, à moi, est de voir Jésus-Christ partout, comme Mme de Staël la perfectibilité." (Winock, 2010:184.)

What these different contents have in common, is the anthropological ideal of authenticity, or to put it differently, they share an allegiance to what Taylor has called "expressivism".⁷

Authenticity (or expressivism) is to be credited as a potential breakthrough, for it creates a climate in which central elements of (the Christian) religion may come to fruition – the same elements the Enlightenment tends to suppress, such as loyalty to tradition, single minded dedication, and the subordination of all concerns and personal aims to one dominant end. Even in cases where expressivist doctrines were animated by an irrationalist spirit as it was in the case of Madame de Staël's "foolish love", a revolution was wrought at the anthropological level ending the reign of the typical enlightened ethos that owed much to a neo-Stoic ideal of inner tranquility (Lipsius, Spinoza), and little or nothing to the passionate religion of the Bible ... *for zeal for your house consumes me* (Ps. 69:9).

3. Transition

MacIntyre, Taylor and Derrida, the three philosophers introduced in our earlier survey, have all benefitted from the revolution just mentioned. Their work displays a trend that can no longer be contained

⁷ Taylor (1975:13, footnote 1) credits Isaiah Berlin for having dubbed this term.

within the boundaries of the Enlightenment. And this in turn has made religion once more a subject to be taken seriously.

However, on closer examination we discover spots where it becomes uncertain whether the break-through has materialised fully. This is most obvious in Derrida's *Donner la mort*, as said before, since the author does not seem to be serious in rendering the biblical account of how Abraham was stopped by a voice from heaven when on the verge of sacrificing his son. Reading between the lines one cannot but conclude that for Derrida, Abraham's decision resulted from an *inner* dialogue, and nothing more.

MacIntyre's Achilles' heel is his account of the origins of traditions. He states more than once that all origins are contingent (MacIntyre, 1981:118, 119; 1988:354-355, 360-361), giving no evidence that his own (Aristotelian-Thomistic) tradition would be exempted. What it means is that all traditions initially depend on circumstantial factors that could just as well have been different. By the same token, to insert oneself into an existing tradition, becomes something for which there are never universal valid reasons to quote, and cannot but remain a matter of choosing one out of several options. Simply put, whether a person is religious or secular would initially be contingent. Once a road is chosen, it is only by proceeding along this road that a person could hope to find good reasons for having started where she/he did, and eventually reach a point at which a claim to universality would be warranted. As *After virtue* puts it with respect to moral traditions:

[...] without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists (MacIntyre, 1981:205).

Granted, to some degree MacIntyre's arguments are convincing. At a certain level allegiance to a specific religion is indeed one particular possibility next to others. If most people are more aware of this than their ancestors were, it is because the pluralist predicament Peter Berger spoke of makes itself much more felt today than it did in the past. Here a distinction is in order between religion as a historical phenomenon, that is, as a specific *tradition*, and what comes from the Beyond – its revelatory core.

Taylor's *A secular age* (2007) continues to impress. It is one prolonged effort at rehabilitation of a much despised tradition. However, there is one assumption of modernity he is not ready to give up,

accepting as a *fait accompli* the transition “[...] from a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (Taylor, 2007:3). This transition is believed to be irreversible. In a certain sense, he is right. Undeniably, the pluralist predicament makes itself felt so strongly nowadays that unbelief easily succeeds in giving itself the appearance of normality. But because Taylor fails to account for the revelatory side, the contingency gains more weight than necessary. Although Taylor cannot be expected to be at peace with the Enlightenment assumption that religion is *nothing but* a human possibility, he appears ready to accept a compromise according to which religion (faith) is essential for believers but not quite so for non-believers.

I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. (Taylor, 2007:3.)

Part 2

4. All of life is religion

The final part of this study is dedicated to the relevance of the religion-faith distinction as developed by reformational philosophy.⁸ Important about this conception of religion is, firstly that it breaks with the ingrained anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment. Characteristically, the Enlightenment conceives of religion as a human creation. This does not seem to be far removed from the Reformation, for the latter has always stressed that religion pertains to human nature. The rub is, however, that human nature is assumed to be responsive to God, and that religion is entirely placed in this light. Religion is the response to the gift of life. To have made this abundantly clear is the lasting contribution of Abraham Kuyper’s *Stone lectures*.⁹ Both conceptions relate religion to human nature, but, whereas the one interprets nature as malleable, the other inter-

8 For a complementary view of the same relationship, see Olthuis (1985).

9 On religion as a gift, Kuyper insisted that “the starting-point of every motive in religion is God and not Man” (cf. Kuyper, 2000:46). Compare Dooyeweerd (1953:33): “the modal meaning of faith ... is by its nature related to divine revelation”.

prets this nature primarily as a datum, and (true) religion as an *amen* to this gift.

Apart from a difference in depth, there is also a difference in breadth. As for the Enlightenment, religion is a human possibility that at best has a function in the pursuit of happiness and self-perfection, but is never indispensable. In principle, human self-enhancement could be reached too, if not better, by a philosophical pursuit of truth or through transforming life into a work of art. In contrast, a central tenet of the Reformation is that religion is not optional. It holds that humans are inescapably religious and, put simply, will either serve God or idols. This enabled reformational philosophy to develop a conception of religion that both encompasses positive religion and its substitutes, ranging from overt idol service to the “-isms” of academic and everyday life, such as the many varieties of naturalism as well as idealism and spiritualism, and not to forget secularism.

The strong point of this conception is that it broadens the scope of what phenomena could signal a “return of religion”. This would mean that the developments introduced in the previous sections are not the sole indicators, but that the return may as well take place in the form of a virulent naturalism spreading from the universities to the public square.

5. Faith

Whereas *religion* is used for the basic thrust and overall-direction of the life of a person, or group of persons, *faith* is linked to one specific modality, that is the *pistic* aspect/function. As I see it, the great merit of a functional (or modal) approach is that it forces us to gain clarity as to how a particular phenomenon is qualified. It forces us to always ask: is this or that phenomenon of a faith-type or rather an analogy within another sphere of life? Take for example a transaction concluded in good faith (*bona fide*): obviously, this is not a full-fledged faith, but rather a faith-analogy within the juridical sphere of life. Other examples will follow later. Firstly, what does qualify as properly “pistical”?

Taking our cue from Dooyeweerd’s systematic philosophy, the first thing to note is that *faith* is designated as the “boundary aspect”, in the sense of marking the boundary of time and eternity. One may think of the affirmative moment in a response to the Word, such as Mary’s response to the Annunciation: “May it be to me as you have said.” (Luke 1:38.) Such an affirmation before the face of God

(*coram Deo*) transcends the particularities of a context. It is an *amen* for better or for worse, come what may.

Let it be added immediately, however, that kneeling before an idol may fall into the same category of the pistical. Standing for a function (mode or aspect), *faith* is not narrowly defined. It is not restricted to a specific content. As Vollenhoven's (2005:26) introduction to philosophy puts it: "Belief (faith) is not identical with faith in Christ; all people believe, but not everyone believes in the Christ of God."¹⁰

Secondly, the affirmation should be worldviewish qua breadth – at least, that is what I conclude from Dooyeweerd's illustrations. As we will see, each of those illustrations implies a view of the origin, meaning and destiny of life. The first illustration regards the affirmation of the world as created – but note once more that the antonym of faith finds a place here too.

The majestic words that open the book of Genesis, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,' ought to determine the content of our faith with reference to creation; for heaven and earth, together with all that has unfolded in them, are within time objects of either this faith or an apostate faith that turns away from the revelation of God's Word. (Dooyeweerd, 1979:90; parallel in Dooyeweerd, 1953:33.)

The second illustration shows that also the affirmation of some "-ism" may qualify – but only if an idea of totality is implied.

By relating the origin of all things to an eternal flux of life, the pagan nature religions made all creatures the objects of their primitive faith. The same holds for the modern evolutionist, who believes that whatever lives has come forth from one original source. (Dooyeweerd, 1979:91.)

Having isolated a criterion to decide what properly pertains to the "faith"-aspect and what not, the task at hand is to apply what is gained to our theme of the return of religion. I'll argue that only phenomena that are pistically qualified (i.e. belong to the sphere of faith) contribute to the *return of religion*-theme, in contradistinction to other phenomena that will be classified as analogical and metaphorical.

10 Mark that Vollenhoven (2005:77) relates *religion* to how humans respond to the first commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God." Dooyeweerd's use of *religion* is less focused, but I don't know whether this indicates a substantial difference.

As the matter of metaphors is very much Elaine Botha's perch (cf. Botha, 2007), we better be careful not to speak slightly about "metaphorical", for instance as a mere stepping-stone towards the conceptual! However, our aim is not to disqualify the use of religious metaphors within a philosophical discourse, but simply to promote a better understanding of the religion-faith distinction.

6. Idols of our time

At the time of the recent World Cup in South Africa, it was not uncommon to hear from Dutch pulpits commentaries comparing the football to an idol, stadiums to temples, referees to priests, and the public to a flock of religious enthusiasts. In a certain sense this kind of commentary properly applies the all of life-religion principle. A problem arises, however, when football at World Cup level is assumed to be a surrogate faith at a level with the Baal cult in Old-Testament times.

A similar but more subtle case is the interpretation of consumerism by James Smith, a former student of the Institute for Christian Studies (Toronto), now teaching at Calvin College. I quote from a glowing review of his recent study in theology of culture.

For instance, Smith suggests that the mall is 'actually a religious space suffused with practices that constitute a kind of worship ... rituals of ultimate concern that are formative of our identity' (Smith, 2009:93). The mall's version of the kingdom is 'I'm broken, therefore I shop' (sin and/or need); 'I shop, therefore I am' (identity and salvation). (Sibley, 2010:33; cf. Smith, 2009:93-103.)

It seems fully warranted to state that Smith considers western consumerism to be a full-fledged faith with its own kind of worship, its own rituals, pursuing its own ultimate concern. If he is right, it would be an illusion to think it is possible to use the things of the mall "as if not engrossed in them" (1 Cor. 7:31); the atmosphere being so much charged with religious energies that even to enter it for a Christian would mean to compromise his/her faith.

I think Smith's "theology of culture" does have a function in raising awareness of directional issues in present-day culture. My concern is, however, that it suffers from a systematic misrepresentation of what does and does not constitute idol worship.

Of course, Smith could appeal to precedent cases within the tradition of reformational philosophy, to wit Zuidema's book on the de-

cline of communism wherein he likens the Marxist doctrines to creeds, the party to a church and the leaders to mortal gods (Zuidema, 1957). We may also think of Schuurman's interpretation of modern technological culture as a "Babel culture". A telling example was his valedictory lecture at the University of Delft, the cover of which showed Pieter Bruegel's painting of the Tower of Babel (Schuurman, 2002). Verkerk's inaugural address at the University of Maastricht would be yet another example. His subject was the idolisation of health and security. He described the preventive killing of goats to stop the spreading of the Q-fever as a kind of holocaust on the shrine of health and security (Verkerk, 2010). Do we not have to conclude that the theology of culture is firmly established in this tradition?

A worldviewish breadth seems to be the only criterion to distinguish between proper faith-type phenomena (i.e. pistically qualified) and metaphors having their moorings in faith-analogies within other spheres of life. Zuidema's case is the most clear, since there was a worldview at stake, i.e. Marxism-Leninism. Obviously, we are here at the level of faith and anti-faith, the return of religion here having taken the shape of an anti-faith. By the same token, the decline of communism could not but leave a deep religious void. The present situation in Russia shows how much foresight there was in Zuidema's diagnosis.

The volume *Christian philosophy at the close of the twentieth century* (which counted Elaine Botha among its contributors) contains a lucid defense by Schuurman of his choice of *technicism* as the "best formulation for the secularized motive of creation and redemption ..." (Schuurman, 1995:191). Thus he describes its "(hidden) ideology":

Technicism entails the pretension of autonomous man to control the whole of reality: man as master seeks victory over the future; he is to have everything his way; he is to solve problems old and new – including the problems caused by technicism – and to guarantee – as a possible consequence – material progress. (Schuurman, 1995:191.)

He holds that to speak of a technological worldview is more satisfactory than to speak of a scientific or economical worldview. His point is that technicism has greater depth and breadth than scientism (Dooyeweerd) or economism (Goudzwaard). I do not want to be a judge in this matter, but do want to say that it is very proper for Schuurman to offer such a defense of his position lest his theme of

the Babel culture be taken as an exercise in stretching metaphors belonging to a preconceptual level of philosophising.

Returning to our earlier examples of consumerism and football-as-an-idol: here the worldviewish dimensions seem to lack. Is what the consumer buys in the shopping mall automatically transformed into an article of faith? This seems doubtful. The conclusion must be that consumerism does not qualify as a full-fledged (apostate) faith. If this is true, then describing the shopping mall in religious terms does not get beyond an exercise in metaphors without *a fundamentum in re*. The same would be true of stadiums as temples, or following Wright, of Superman as a (corrupt) imitation of Christ.¹¹

7. Mouths speaking great things

Finally, there is one more possibility to consider: that of something trying to usurp divine power. Simon the magus's attempt to buy the power of God (Acts 8) is a model of this kind of usurpation. It has many parallels in our days, although mostly not as clear-cut as Simon's case.

The obvious illustration is a full-blown ideology. It is not necessary that it clad its intentions in religious terms and metaphors. To return to Marxism-Leninism: although banning all God-talk, it provoked in fact an interpretation such as Zuidema's. The crucial thing to look for is whether an ideology closes the window on eternity by arrogating to itself the right to divine the true interests of man, and mobilising religious energies towards its own immanent goals.

Philosophy by nature seems to be less arrogant than ideology, and much farther removed from Simon the magus' wish to buy the power of God. Yet, everyone who has wrestled with secular philosophies will appreciate what Mekkes used to advise his students, viz. to look closely at who/what gets the first and final word. This question directs the attention towards the way a philosophy positions itself. Does it aspire to place itself between us and the Origin? Does it try to wipe away the horizon?

11 Wright, 2000:3 states:

A defence of a would-be 'supernatural' Jesus can easily degenerate into a portrayal of Jesus as a first century version of Superman – not realizing that the Superman is itself ultimately a dualistic corruption of the Christian story.

To answer these last questions it sometimes helps to watch how a philosophy is being “lived”. For instance, in the case of Hegel, it is highly interesting to consult the testimonies of his students (for instance on the occasion of his death). One then comes to realise that this philosophy did in fact serve as a guide for the religiously perplexed, Hegel’s admonition that philosophy should not try to be “edifying” notwithstanding.¹² In a recent essay I related a similar experience with respect to Neo-Kantianism.

In 1998 at the conference of the *Internationale Hegel-Gesellschaft*, hosted by the University of Utrecht, I read a paper on the Hegel-reception among Neo-Kantians. A passage from Rickert’s commemorative essay on Max Weber instantly awoke the audience. Here was Rickert (not exactly a light-footed philosopher) speaking of a *Logosfreudigkeit* bordering on *mania*, occasioned by the discovery of *theoretical* insights. (Griffioen, 2010:134.)¹³

Even a philosophy wary of speculation and seemingly not given to speak “great things” may still fall under this category, because it threatens to block the way to the Origin and close off the horizon.

From this vantage point it becomes easier to appreciate Smith’s “theology of culture”. Does not much of contemporary advertisement aim at tapping religious energies for commercial purposes? Some years ago a Dutch advertisement appeared around Easter with a text ending with *het is volbracht* (“it is finished”). This phrase was not used accidentally. As was found out later, the text of the advertisement originated with a lapsed preacher who, of course, hoped that these words still reach hidden strata of the secular mind. To visit a North-America plaza in the Christmas or Easter season, is enough to agree that the mall has been turned into a place of quasi-worship.

8. Epilogue

In the first part of this essay we registered some positive developments. MacIntyre’s *After virtue* did not remain without influence. Philosophy now shows more openness towards religion than in the past. On the other hand, the pluralisation Peter Berger brought to

12 See the Preface to *the Phenomenology of Spirit*: “... Die Philosophie aber muß sich hüten, erbaulich sein zu wollen ...” (Hegel, 1980:14).

13 “ (...) die Freude, oder selbst *mania*, des Entdeckens neuer Einsichten” (Rickert, 1926:234).

our attention turned out to be a mixed blessing, as it implies both an unblocking of religious energies and a mounting Babylonian confusion of tongues. However, in this last respect we could derive some consolation from the second part of our journey. The distinction between religion and faith has enabled us to see through muddled waters and distinguish between pistically qualified phenomena on the one hand, and on the other hand, the many attempts to worm a way into the sphere of faith from another sphere. These last attempts lack the wherewithal to satisfy religious needs lastingly. Strange as it may sound, it is some consolation to realise that, although religious needs are manifold, the means to satisfy these needs are restricted to those forms that do open a window on eternity. It means that neither consumerism nor the glamour of sport will be able to forge a return of religion as they please. Come what may, but the North American shopping mall, the Olympic stadiums of Beijing and the football stadiums of South Africa will not develop into holy places of a new paganism.

On the other hand, Vollenhoven reminded us that faith (the *pistical*) only figures here as a function, that is, as denoting a mode of being, rather than a specific content. Therefore, having left behind with a sigh of relief the many pseudo-religions puzzling Berger, we are faced with an even more perplexing problem. The problem is how to distinguish between what is true and what is false in modes of faith that functionally speaking, all have the same qualification.

Elaine Botha's *Metaphor and its moorings* comes to our rescue (Botha, 2007). It does so by helping to assess realistically the limits of conceptual control. More specifically, it helps to avoid the pitfall of what she calls the "double language thesis". According to this thesis a clear-cut distinction distinguishes "between literal and metaphorical language use" (Botha, 2007:114). She shows that Dooyeweerd subscribed to some version of it by suggesting that properly developed concepts and ideas would leave all traces of figurative speech behind (Botha, 2007:113-116). But then she points in Dooyeweerd at what I would call a happy in consequence: "Although he did not refrain from employing metaphorical language in his own systematic philosophical exposition (the image of the prism for the notion of time for example ...)" (Botha, 2007:115). Why "happy"? To explain this point I turn to the by now familiar metaphor of the "window on eternity", an image Dooyeweerd probably borrowed from Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*. When it is said that the shopping mall lacks such a window, we all know what is meant, although the metaphor does not convey any conceptual or ideational knowledge.

How is it nevertheless able to direct our attention? I guess it is because it packs into an image something central to all genuine religions, viz. a basic intuition that human destiny transcends this world. Also when this intuition develops into knowledge, and starts functioning within creeds and theologies, it remains dependent on an external source for its meaning. Metaphors may well be the only way to do justice to this open character.

All avenues lead to one conclusion: ultimately there is no other appeal than to (some) revelation. This especially holds for the pressing question of what are true and what are blind windows. Although for many people such a conclusion presents an insufferable *sacrificium intellectus*, for others, it is a cause for rejoicing. Certainly, also the latter would love to extend their conceptual grasp, if only to be more effective in their dealings with agnostics and religious pluralists, but they can be consoled by realising that the finiteness of human understanding indicates that (true) faith can only be a gift. Indeed: faith is a gift, and it is for keeps.

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Key concepts:

Enlightenment
faith
idol
religion
worldview

Kernbegrippe:

afgod

geloof

religie

Verligting

wêreldbeskouing

