The Essence of Humanity

A Theory on the Origin of Religions and Reading of Sacred Texts

By

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Introduction

The phenomenon of religion is in an interesting phase of its history of development: while most non-Western countries, with the notable exception of China, have often either large populations that identify as religious, are becoming increasingly religious, or both, so-called Western countries seem to be, on the whole, secularising, possibly with the exception of the United States. And even though religion is not necessarily the same as spirituality, it is almost as if, as the anthropologist Anil Ramdas once suggested, in Western societies, rationality has taken the place of spirituality (1993, p. 7). In the past, societies often represented phenomena of nature, on which people's lives depended, as human-like shapes that they turned into deities for them to converse with and obtain favours from (Freud argued that religion is an illusion born from human helplessness against nature, 1927/1961, p. 19). Many ancient Greek, Germanic, Nordic, Japanese Shinto and even Hindu deities reflect aspects of nature, for example Zeus, lightning, Thor, thunder and Fūjin, the wind.

If this interpretation of nature indeed explains the origins of deities, then it may be correct to imagine that, if that nature is subsequently increasingly understood through the (natural) sciences, it is demystified, and deities are no longer needed. Moreover, if the rational Western mind, which has lost the ability to recognise deities in nature and uses its understanding of nature to develop technologies to control it (nature), the relation between human beings and nature transforms to an even greater extent. The availability of technology, allowing for control through the manipulation of nature, tips the scale of the power relation between human beings and nature – at least seemingly and temporarily – in favour of the human being. In summary, the demystification of nature through the sciences, and its subjugation through technology, jointly imply, first, a demystification and, then, a subjugation of the gods.

From this point of view, it seems logical that scientific-technological societies tend to be more secular or, as per Ramdas, more rational and

less spiritual than other societies. This seems indeed to be the case. Not only do statistics indicate a consistent decrease of formal adherence to religion among the majorities in Western countries, but it also seems that an increasing number of people in many Western societies believe that what religions tend to say is simply not true: that there is a Deity, that there is a super-natural reality and an inherent meaning and sense to life. As in the case of Freud, religion is explained as a psychological fiction or something else entirely: Durkheim, for example, argued it is society (1912/2008). In any case, it is a misunderstanding. While there may exist a desire for spirituality, reflected, for example, in the popularity of yoga, meditation and the renaissance of pilgrimage, the metaphysical questions connected with religious beliefs seem largely answered by knowledge from the natural sciences: there is a universe, but without a Deity in it; nature is ultimate reality, mysterious yet knowable; and there is no inherent meaning to life, as existentialist philosopher Sartre (1946/1996, p. 30) had already said around 80 years ago; there is only the meaning that we, human beings, attribute to it.

Yet, I offer this text with the argument that these are incorrect views. I argue that a Deity does exist, that there certainly is a super-natural (or rather, metaphysical) reality and that there also is an inherent, albeit not directly knowable, meaning to life. As I finalised this text, based on close to 20 years of research in the fields of (mainly) philosophy, religion, anthropology and psychology, reflecting and writing (not always in this sequence), I believe I have been able to formulate a philosophical theory positing that our human identity is rooted, in part, in a super-natural reality, where 'natural' is understood as physical or all that can be ascertained empirically. This theory takes human perception and, with greater precision, the mind as the source of perception as a starting point, applying psychoanalytical theory to arrive at the thought that, while the mind has a part that lives 'in time', i.e. consciousness, there is another part that is furthest removed from consciousness and therefore, in routine life, invisible, but eternal.

My idea is, fundamentally, that we, human beings, live in two worlds or 'times': firstly, direct time, of consciousness, which corresponds with

the here and now. This is a world in which scientific laws hold true. But we also exist, through our minds, in another reality, which is mainly unconscious, where time, logic and causality play a much more relative role – that which Australian aboriginals, for example, have called Dreamtime. Our conception of Deity is at the root of Dreamtime, and the co-existence of this with our day-to-day experience of reality creates a specific tension that, if not subdued via stimuli such as those provided by the mass media, social media or other ways, demands a resolution. This tension, this irreconcilable 'error' woven into our beings, is the real root of religion. Religion, and the stories religion tells, is – are - the institutional resolution of the tension created by the co-existence in us of direct time and Dreamtime.

Before embarking further on this voyage, and explaining this theory in greater detail, I should clarify that I am familiar with the requirements for scientific theories and first and foremost Popper's principle of demarcation, based on the falsifiability of such theories. However, and as I will discuss later on, Popper clarified that this is relevant to theories pertaining to the empirically observable. Does this mean that nothing 'scientific' can be said about that which is not empirically observable? Not quite, even according to Popper; but for metaphysics, he defined other criteria, such as problem-solving ability. While I do not consider my theory to be within the realm of the sciences in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word, i.e. the natural or empirical sciences, I will argue that it solves a great number of problems in understanding both what is true about religion as a generic phenomenon and what is true in religion(s), that is to say, specific instances of this phenomenon.

With this, I am looking to address two issues: first, to contribute to an understanding of ourselves, as human beings rooted in a spiritual reality as opposed to having bare existence. In this regard, this is a mission to help individuals understand their place in the world to a greater extent. In relation to Ramdas' idea that rationality replaced spirituality, mainly in the Western world, it seems that the relation between science and religion negatively affected religion as well as spirituality. This originates in an antagonism which existed between these two realms at

least since Galilei's condemnation by the Catholic Church and reached its apotheosis with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution (1859). It destroyed, as many authors argued, the last bastion of the Church's claims to scientific truth. Nietzsche has, subsequently, among others, expressed the void this revealed. I believe this makes human life poorer and, in particular, people less able to face existential questions on life, death and meaning. Nevertheless, since then, some scientists sought to deal religion a final blow, rather than only criticise its scientific claims. In this context, I agree with the Carmelite nun and philosopher Edith Stein, born in Germany in the late 19th century and murdered in 1942:[1] in her view, there are three ways to the transcendent sphere: mystical contemplation, faith and reasoning (2009, p. 22). In this work, I follow the way of reasoning.

But I also have an intention that is more relevant to our collective existence, related to what Huntington (1993) called a clash of civilisations and, in particular, a confrontation between a certain type of political Islam, Judaism and, to an extent, Christianity and the Western World. While Huntington's thesis that the current main source of conflict in the world is the difference between civilisations (rather than, say, social classes), has been contested, it seems quite certain that, for example, the political reality of the existence of the State of Israel is largely based on the acceptance of its religious legitimacy in Judaism. This view is not shared by Islam or (all of) Christianity. The protracted conflicts that this difference in views seems to have given rise to may be compared with the Thirty Years' War: a very violent conflict in the 17th century, rooted in different perceptions of ultimate truth between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. According to Stephen Toulmin (1990), Descartes' principle ('I think therefore I am') was, fundamentally, formulated in reaction to this war. Descartes sought to devise a philosophical system based on purely mathematical truths that could be accessible to people of all denominations. He had argued that, if representatives of different religions could agree on basic truths, they could find a way to communicate and, in this way, similar wars could, in the future, be avoided.

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[1] Stein included a section on 'Time and eternity' (p. 201) in her work 'Potency and act' (2009).

With no pretention to compare myself to one of Europe's most famous philosophers, what I intend to do is similar to this mission. However ambitious, I hope and intend to demonstrate that my theory of existence in two times may help analyse and clarify claims and stories from various religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam. In as far as religion refers to a human encounter with that which is greater than us, it can and must be considered a cultural phenomenon. Saying that one's religion is inferior to another one's is, then, similar to saying that their culture is inferior – something that, from the perspectives of cultural relativism and universalism (with which I mean here the fundamental equivalence of all cultures) is hardly acceptable. This is not to say that every religion is entirely 'true'; it seems fair to say that there are conceptions in religions that seem based on misinterpretations. I intend to make some of these visible. However, in the same time, I intend to demonstrate deeper truths hidden under the symbolic formulations in Sacred Books. These may have some elements in common, i.e. they may be ecumenical. While an all-encompassing comparative study of world religions is beyond the scope of this modest work, in the present, it is my intention to discuss a 'deeper truth', that, I believe, underlies Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and religion in general.

To proceed, firstly, I will in greater detail explain the parameters of my undertaking (Ch. 1); then discuss a number of factors affecting the current status of religion in the Western world (Ch. 2); subsequently, I will introduce my theory (Ch. 3), which I then apply to seven cases (Ch. 4) and, finally, close with three reflections hopefully relevant to the implications of this theory (Ch. 5).

As a technical note, my citations from the Qur'an are based on a translation by the Pakistan-based *Ahmadiyya* movement. In this translation, the opening formula of each Sura (*bism'Allah el rahman el raheem*), except for Sura At Tawbah, is counted as a separate aya or verse. This is not the use in most Arabic versions. Therefore the numbering of ayas can differ by one from other versions of the Qur'an.

Moritz Bilagher

1

Setting the terms

Two worlds

According to Richard Rorty, in 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' (1980, p. 149), it is the tension between universals (or concepts, such as 'humanity') and particulars (specific instances of concepts, for example, a specific human being) that resulted in the 2,500 years of philosophy that we know today. With this, Rorty echoed Horkheimer and Adorno, who had argued in their 'Dialectics of Enlightenment' that philosophy is defined by the attempt to bridge the gap between perception and concept (1944/2007, p. 31) as well as Heidegger who, in 'Being and Time' had, earlier (1927/2006, p. 216), already asked: "is it not allowed to ask for the ontological relation between the material and the non-material? Is it a coincidence that no progress has been made on this question for over 2,000 years?"

This seeming duality between universals and particulars, concept and perception, and the material and non-material, was arguably first identified in Greek philosophy, for example by Plato, who in 'The Republic' identified two essentially different worlds: that of the empirical,[2] i.e. the material world of sensory experience in which we live what we could call our 'everyday lives', or the world of 'particulars', on the one hand; and a different, abstract, non-material or over- or beyond physical (that is to say, a metaphysical) world of concepts and ideas, of which the empirical world is only a reflection (4th century BCE/1995a), on the other hand. The idea of this duality is not only relevant to philosophy, religion or science, but also to everyday life: after all, there seems to be, in most of us, a deep-rooted intuition that this is a way in which

[2] The adjective empirical means related to sensory perception. Empirical reality is usually equated with tangible reality and opposed to abstract or conceptual reality.

we can order the world: in addition to the things that we can see, hear and touch, there are other 'things' that we cannot, at least not directly, perceive. That there are ideas, beliefs, opinions, atmospheres, energies, spirits that are the constituent parts of our realities.

This duality has led to significant tensions. For example, it has led to questions such as: where do these realities – the abstract and the concrete - connect with one another, if at all? How do the material and the immaterial relate? How is the concept or idea of a human being related to a specific instance of one? Without actual human beings, would the concept of human beings still exist? And, conversely, without this concept, would or could actual human beings exist at all? One well-known philosopher who provided an answer to these questions is the French 17th century thinker René Descartes, according to whom the point of connection between the material and the immaterial is found in the human body and, more exactly, in a gland in the brain (1633/1972, p. 86). In his view, the human body is understood as a locus where the physical body and a spirit, soul or mind are united. For Descartes, both thought (*res cogitans*) and matter (*res extensa*) are substances, although he considered them utterly irreconcilable to one another.

Naturally, Descartes' dualism, which follows from the irreconcilability of matter and thought or, alternatively, the empirical and conceptual, resulted in difficult questions in their own right. For example: if these substances are really not reconcilable to one another, then how can something physical (for example, the substance of alcohol in a glass of wine) induce a state of mind? And, conversely, how can a decision that is made in the mind lead to action in the physical world? In an attempt to reconcile the tensions of Descartes' dualism, broadly two groups of answers have been given to Rorty's, Horkheimer and Adorno's and Heidegger's central question: so-called materialist answers, which understand the immaterial world to originate in the material world; and idealist answers, which understand the material world to originate, fundamentally, in the ideal, non-material, world.[3]

[3] According to Edith Stein, matter is that which is passive, while mind – or spirit – is that which is active (2009, p. 102, see also p. 111).

This difference in types of answers and, in essence, in understandings of the roots of reality is connected with a related question: if there really are two worlds (a material and an immaterial one), then which is the original one? The one we would understand to be the real world would probably be the one that we would consider to be the source or origin of the other one. To Plato, the more important of these two worlds was the metaphysical one. For him, the human condition implies an almost automatic misunderstanding of what reality is: surely, the way a human being is designed leads her or him to believe that the world of sensory perception is true reality. The fact that objects in the natural or empirical world can be seen, touched and sometimes heard, is evidence for the human being of its fundamental real-ness. Inversely, the intangible nature of ideas, notions and concepts leads human beings to believe that their existence cannot be proven, at least empirically, and that they are therefore not real. (Schopenhauer even said: "one could have the impression that our intellect is purposefully destined to tempt us into errors", 1818/1996, II, p. 208.)

Plato described the nature of what, according to him, is reality in his allegory of the cave (4th century BCE/1995a, pp. 170-174). According to this allegory, human beings are like creatures in a dark cave, who believe that the occasional shadows they see on the walls of that cave, falling in from the outside world, are reality. If these human beings were shown reality, that is to say if they would be led out of the cave, the light would be so strong that it might severely impair their vision. A diametrically opposed position, in the field of philosophy, was taken by the Austrian-English philosopher Sir Karl Popper, thousands of years later. Popper was, like Plato, a truly remarkable philosopher in that he covered both the fields of the philosophy of ultimate reality and what we can know about it (in present-day language, he was a philosopher of science) and political philosophy. In the philosophy of science, he developed a principle that has come to define an extremely important division: that between scientific knowledge and pseudo-science, namely the principle of demarcation or *falsification principle* (1963/2006).

This principle says that it is straightforward to distinguish scientific

knowledge from pseudo-science: if something is scientific, it can, potentially, be falsified. If it cannot, it may still be true, but is not scientific. And, as Popper indicated, falsification can only be based on empirical observation. For this reason, to him, metaphysics were by definition unscientific (incidentally, as we shall see later, Popper made an allowance for the possibility that a metaphysical theory can be *true*). For Plato, such a clear division between metaphysics and science did probably not exist. To him, the metaphysical world was, above all, a world of unity; empirical reality, a world of multiplicity, or rather one of multiple appearances. For example, in as far as sensory perception goes, most of us would be able to see trees, being several objects in empirical reality. But the mind, which supplements the ability of observation, if it is not its source, can see unity or a common pattern in these objects, by means of which it can relate them, despite their differences in appearance and location, to one category: although one tree has leafs and the other one does not; although one is large and the other small; although one bears fruits while the other one has none – the intellect can identify all trees as belonging to this single grouping that we refer to as trees.

In Plato's view, the world from which the grouping or concept of a tree originates was the real world in that it contains the pure forms of objects that can be encountered in their various forms, but never in perfection, in the physical world. The idea that only in the conceptual world we can find the pure form of a tree implies that instances of trees, in empirical reality, never entirely correspond to the original archetype or *Urform* and are only derivates and therefore but appearances. The allegory of the cave illustrated this. Due to the combination of circumstances that, although the ideal world[4] is the real world, we seem mainly to inhabit the empirical world, for Plato, the main task of the philosopher is to look for unity in the multiple appearances of the empirical world. This meant searching for truth *per se*. For Popper, on the other hand, not philosophy but the empirical sciences represented the search for truth. In general, Popper would disagree with Plato on almost anything. For

[4] I refer to an ideal world in the context of a philosophical vocabulary, that is to say, I refer to an intangible world of ideas – as opposed to the material world - rather than a best possible world.

example, whereas for Plato truth was unchangeable, for Popper, truth was always tentative and subject to falsification. This by itself was not a new idea: the same was, in essence, already said by the 15th century Bishop Nicolas de Cusa who argued (1440/1954, p. 11) that: "our intellect, which is not the truth, never grasps the truth with such precision that it could not be comprehended with infinitely greater precision."

In 'The Open Society and its Enemies', possibly Popper's main work in the field of political philosophy, he called Plato along with Marx an enemy of the open society, because they were utopians (1945/2019) in two instances on this page. Utopia, for Popper, meant dictatorship. In 'Conjectures and Refutations', one of Popper's main works in the philosophy of science, he differentiated negative from positive epistemology. He understood positive epistemology as the optimistic belief that truth can be known and negative epistemology as the belief that it may exist but can, normally, not be known (1963/2006, p. 7). Popper, therefore, posited the falsification principle opposite the tyranny of the utopians: while the utopians, such as Marx, believed that they understood human nature, and consequently the ideal social order and therefore – borrowing from Hegel – the future of human organisation, that is to say socialism, and intended to efface all that stood between the now and the ultimate ideal, which would ultimately arrive in any case, through a revolution, Popper maintained that, ultimately, truth cannot be known and all we can say is that a theory to explain reality may, thus far, not have been falsified.[5]

One thing we can see clearly from both of these positions is that, while Plato is possibly the archetypical idealist, Popper is the archetypical materialist. It is not a coincidence that, while one took the existence of Deity for granted (4th century BCE/1995a), the other considered it unscientific, because unprovable and so, by extension, probably not true (1945/2019). In line with this, we see that the work of Plato was an almost direct influence on early Christianity (one only needs to compare 'Symposion' with the Letters to the Corinthians), while Popper

[5] Popper attributed the idea that choice of epistemology may have practical consequences to Bertrand Russell (1963/2006, p. 5).

was an important companion of scientific atheism in the Western world. Without taking any definition of Deity for granted *a priori*, if ultimate truth is not possible, then Deity may exist, but can probably not be known. If we ask which of these two positions - Popper's or Plato's – has the upper hand in most of the Western world today, it would probably be the former: the material world seems to be widely seen as the main source of acceptable knowledge (see, for example, Lewis, 1961, p. 135). It seems fair to say that (a) the increasingly broad acceptance of the empirical sciences as a source of truth and (b) a Popperian understanding of these sciences have had a hand in this. From this thought framework, the realm of the metaphysical is regarded with suspicion and, as Italian author Claudio Magris once wrote, the tangible world of phenomena, not that of introspection, reflection and the internal is seen as solid and, therefore, real (1998, p. 79; 2001b, p. 27).

This worldview, underpinning theories of what is true or even whether truth can be known at all, has important implications for our perceptions of reality. For one, it suggests that, in answer to an old ontological[6] question, essentially, mind is a product of matter. Therefore, the secret of what creates our perceptions, our values and self-awareness, must somehow be inherent in matter. But, in addition, it implies that Deity does not and even cannot exist, or at least not rest on scientific authority. In what follows, I will argue against this worldview; I will, consequently, argue that several of its tenets are probably not true and that Deity likely does exist before, one by one, discussing the main implications of this in our understandings of some main religious ideas.

The mystery of phenomenology

To start to illuminate the main questions raised in relation to the initial tension identified by Rorty, and consequently illuminate the nature and essence of this tension itself, I have placed it in the context of a wider dichotomy. The division in universals and particulars seems to run par-

[6] Ontology is the philosophical discipline dealing with the nature of reality, and in particular, the nature of the existence of things.

allel to other sets of tensions, such as that between abstract and concrete. The concrete is the world of sensory perception, in which the entities – or of which the component parts - are objects. The abstract is the world of ideas, of which the constitutive elements are concepts. To illustrate the distinction in and interaction between objects and concepts and by extension the abstract world and the concrete one, we could use the well-known example of a university.[7] If someone asked anyone else to show her or him a university, this other person could point to a building. However, even if this building were a university building, it is not itself the university. A university is not its lecture halls, laboratories, professors or documents constituting it – it is 'only' a concept, an idea people have, and mainly abstract.

The fact that a university is only a concept, and therefore immaterial, however, does of course not mean that it is meaningless or does not exist – on the contrary. An idea such as that of a university is one that can lead to an agreement to establish a range of physical realities, such as the construction of buildings, the recruitment of staff and the establishment of programmes of activities, including research. A university may, in this way, acquire a history and a reputation and begin to be seen as an actor as if it had its own will. I agree with the Turkish philosopher Ioanna Kuçuradi (2007) that "we need clear concepts", given that "[o]ne of the issues that philosophers are expected to deal with is the conceptual confusion prevailing in all areas of human endeavor [sic], but above all in political and semi-political discourse." In this vein, the division between the abstract and concrete seems at least to an extent related to the distinction in what in research methodology is called qualitative and quantitative research or what is in some environments called an interpretive paradigm respectively referred to as a positivist viewpoint.

I will not use these denotations any further, because I do not think they are very helpful. The oft-used differentiation, which roughly suggests that the first is related to words and the second to numbers, seems untenable. After all, words can be quantified and numbers related to a

[7] While I have searched for the source of this, I have not been able to locate it.

verbal reality. More plausibly, rather than two ways of telling a similar story, qualitative and quantitative research may represent two fundamentally different outlooks on reality: one that is subjective and one that is objective. The qualitative paradigm,[8] firstly, originated in the human or social sciences, where the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud developed interviewing techniques and where researchers such as Cushing and Malinowski developed protocols for observation in cultural anthropology (ethnography). Both these practices – psychoanalysis and ethnography – were developed in the late 19th and the early 20th century, as described by Michel Foucault in his *magnum opus* 'The order of things' (1966/2005).

The objectives of psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology seem to have been similar from the outset: to understand the way people make sense of the world rather than to understand how the world works objectively or independently of human perception. To illustrate this distinction, one could look at an object – say, a pen, book or bottle - and make a judgement on whether it is beautiful. When one examines whether this judgement is true, it will appear that this cannot be established, in as far as there is no universal standard for beauty. As Eco said in 'On beauty' (2010, p. 164), in the case of a judgement on beauty:

> … both the intellect and reason give up the supremacy they respectively exercise in the cognitive and moral fields, and come into free play with the imaginative faculty, in accordance with the rules laid down by this last.

Whether an object is beautiful or not depends on the person or subject[9] – i.e. the proverbial 'eye of the beholder' – and is therefore subjective. As a consequence, asking someone whether an object is beautiful or not

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[8] I am using the notion of paradigm here as defined by Thomas Kuhn ('The structure of scientific revolutions', 1970, p. 10), i.e. the whole of questions that defines the state of progress of any scientific discipline.

[9] In the philosophical vocabulary, a subject is someone who perceives something; an object that what is perceived. This should not be confused with the vocabulary of research methodology, where a subject is understood to be a subject of study, i.e. a participant in a research study who is in one way or another being studied (rather than studying).

will produce an answer that says more about the person than about the object.[10] It will help us understand the person rather than the pen, the book or the bottle (Bilagher, 2005), which in any event seems to be the main objective of the humanities *per se*. The fact that subjective reality refers, in the first place, to the subject (person) rather than the object (or thing) does however not mean that it is not real. The extent to which things are beautiful or not may be a very real component of one's being in the world and experience of things. Subjective perceptions are likely to influence people's actions, which can lead to effects in objective reality and the subjective experience of other persons than the immediate subject. It thus seems natural for the humanities, but also for the social sciences, to rely on methods, instruments and techniques of data collection that examine subjective perceptions rather than objective reality. To give one example, when I know the height, weight and colour of hair of a person, I cannot say that I know this person even though these data provide objective information about her or him. To get to know the person in question, that is to say, to get to know them as an individual and a human being would inevitably mean: getting to know her or him subjectively – to develop an understanding of what their opinions, thoughts, convictions and certainties are.

The roots of quantitative research, on the other hand, are firmly located in the natural sciences. They refer to the objective, empirical and tangible world (see Footnote 2); objective, in the sense that the characteristics of phenomena in this world are supposedly equal to everyone. If the person I mentioned above would weigh 80 kg, this should be so for everyone. It is not thinkable that according to one's correct measurement this person would weigh 80, and to someone else's 85 kg. Their weight is not subject to opinion but considered a matter of fact. The fact that the origins of the quantitative perspective are in the natural sciences does evidently not mean that it is not also applied in the social or human sciences. Given the association of the social and human sciences with the realm of subjectivity, this is usually done by

[10] Of course, when one examines perceptions of beauty on a larger scale, the results can tell us something about a culture or even humanity within a given timeframe.

operationalising concepts. This means developing indicators, or proxy measures for concepts that can themselves not be directly perceived and therefore measured. As such, indicators are objectively perceptible events or instances in empirical reality that indicate the presence or absence of a concept. For example, if a smile is taken to be an indication of the presence of happiness (itself a concept), and quantity – rather than duration or intensity – a yardstick of measure, then the number of times someone smiles in a given period can be seen as indicating one's happiness.

The above does not mean that the objective can simply be equated with the concrete, and the subjective with the abstract. The subjective dimension, as it appears in qualitative studies, is that of personal experience. Concepts, although, from a materialistic[11] perspective existing in the human mind alone, are not by definition or at all subjective. For example, although the university mentioned above is not a concrete or tangible entity (that is to say, it is not an object), its existence is an objective or at least inter-subjective[12] fact. Similarly, the existence (rather than the presence) of happiness according to given indicators is not a matter of view, perception or opinion, but established reality, albeit not material; although, again, as mentioned above, it is recognised that substances can change one's state of mind. There is, however, one sense in which it is true to think of subjective reality in alignment with conceptual reality: concepts do not exist out of the human mind. They cannot be observed directly in the natural world. Universities only manifest themselves materially because subjects (persons) are the carriers of that idea. As such, the abstract world may not be local, but its existence is still limited to where there are subjects or, in Kant's vocabulary, where there is *Vernunft* (reason).

This points to something important: the central role that the mind, the carrier of Vernunft or reason, plays in the worldviews I mentioned pre-

[11] In philosophy, and in the way I use the word in this work, materialism stands for the belief that matter is the source of reality, rather than mind; it is normally opposed to idealism, which holds the opposite.

[12] This denotes something that is real for more than one person.

viously. For example, in 'Philosophy and the mirror of nature', Rorty said that Kant had revealed that many of the questions that philosophy had faced in its 2,500 years of history are related to how the mind is set up and, therefore, the 'problems' it had created for itself, rather than to an intrinsic characteristic of nature or reality, independent of the human mind (1980, pp. 160-161). It seems that these questions are invoked by the virtually automatic misunderstanding of reality that is due to our human condition, as suggested by Plato and Schopenhauer.[13] In contemporary questions on how the mind can exist at all, we find new formulations of the old philosophical questions. A logical consequence of how the materialists intended to ground reality entirely in the empirical, and liberate it of metaphysics, subjectivity or phenomenology, appeared in the relatively new field of Consciousness Studies and artificial intelligence as a 'hard problem'. This hard problem, described by David Chalmers (1995, p. 200), refers to the issue that, while consciousness or artificial intelligence may be described from the outside, i.e. physically, a scientific description is insufficient to explain how observable processes create something from the inside, that is to say, the mentioned perception, subjectivity and phenomenology.

What science is mainly interested in, is the objective world, often without realising that it approaches this with what Kant called *a priori* knowledge, i.e. time, space and causality, which are all related to subjectivity or phenomenology. It increasingly asks itself where this comes from (and then, sometimes, answers, for example, that time does not exist). While a priori concepts are indeed abstract, and intangible, they are at the root of empirical reality. After all, empirical observations cannot take place outside of time or space. But time and space are, in the same time, the root of phenomenology, which is, by definition, subjective. The thought that underpins the theory which I will lay out is that Deity exists as the source or root of this (subjective) reality, not as its manifestation. Deity is the root abstract 'concept of concepts' ordering our nat-

[13] Incidentally, the similarities between Plato's and Kant's thoughts seem to be systematic rather than coincidental. For example, Kant's concept of the Ding an sich (thing in itself) seems similar to Plato's archetypal forms (Schopenhauer, 1818/1996, I, p. 247).

ural world. Deity is, roughly said, at the bottom of our consciousness or perception,[14] rather than a content of our consciousness, which is the reason that it can never be 'found' by natural scientists. It is co-constitutive of our identities, while, due to the set-up of our minds, having necessarily to be perceived as an Other to our minds. In what follows, I will explain in greater detail what this all means, as my argument unfolds, as well as demonstrate how my hypothesis can pass most tests, not of scientific verification, but of alignment with what we know about Deity from sacred texts and our understandings of it – and, also, to help us take a look at these in a new light.

While this underpinning thought is not exactly a proof in the classical, Popperian sense of the word, I would like to remind the reader that proof in this sense even according to Popper is only applicable to the world of the empirical. As to the realm of the metaphysical, Popper maintained that there are different possibilities to support the truth claim of statements: one of these is the ability to solve problems (1963/2006, p. 269). I assert that my solution does solve a great number of problems around the understanding of Deity, from the view that Deity is invisible to scientists (i.e. Deity is not empirical) to how religious texts explain Deity. How this works in different circumstances I will address in the following sections. First, however, I will discuss further some of the factors influencing the position of religion in contemporary society.

[14] I explained this in some detail in a separate article (Bilagher, 2010) and will explain it further in subsequent sections.

2

Factors determining the position of religion in present-day Western society

Science, religion and sources of authority

The main challenges to the existence of Deity, in any form, have in the past 500 years or so not come from philosophers like Popper. They arguably came from the natural sciences. From Copernicus' theory that the known universe (or what we now call the 'solar system') is heliocentric, contradicting the tenets of the Catholic Church of the time, and promoted around 100 years later, in the 1600s, by Galilei, to Darwin's theory of evolution in the 1850s, which challenged the Biblical myth of creation and, finally, Richard Dawkins' strong criticism of religion in general (2007), have a close relation with a growing secularisation of the general worldview over the past few hundred years.

At this point, the cosmopolitan reader will, likely, observe that the above seems to represent a conflict between *Western* religion, and in particular Christianity, with modern science, which is widely considered a Western development. This is a fair qualification. My focus is, for the moment, on Europe, where the relation between (revealed) religion and 'rational' or scientific reason has for a long time constituted a difficult question, with important implications not only for the worlds of theology and philosophy, but also for cultures and societies, including politics. However, the same can roughly be said about the Islamic-Arab world as well, where, as far back as the 12th century, the works of the Spanish-Arabic philosopher Averroes (*Ibn Rushd*) were burnt because of his assertion that religion and philosophy did not need to be in conflict with one another, but that, instead, "there was a harmony between faith and reason in Islam" (Goodman and Russell, 1991, p. 16).

However, with reference to religious, for example, Biblical stories like

the myth of creation, not just the natural scientist but even the logical thinker could argue that a world could have not been created in any number of days before the sun and moon, which cause the very notions of night and day, had been created. This argument was put forward by the 17th and early 18th century British scientist Thomas Burnet (Kroonenberg, 2007, p. 56). Less well-known is that even St. Augustine had already mentioned this in 'The City of God', over a thousand years earlier (Augustinus, 426/2007, p. 503). In the view of St. Augustine, the reason for this apparent logical discrepancy is that, in regard to the story of creation, we have to think of time in different terms than one would in his, or our time; for St. Augustine, the real meaning of the word 'day' in the Bible is 'time' (426/2007, p. 989).

Indeed, such an argumentation as that of our logical thinker – and the idea that theories such as Darwin's invalidate the myth of creation – holds only in as far as Christianity does not reject an allegorical reading of the Christian sacred texts. In the Middle Ages, allegorical reading of the Bible was the norm, arguably as suggested in the Bible itself, for example in Galatians 4:24 (as per the Saint James translation: "Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar"). For St. Augustine, a non-literal reading of the Bible was natural (426/2007, p. 762) yet, on the verge of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, an epistemological shift[15] took place. Interestingly, this 'new' notion that the Bible is to be interpreted literally has itself made Christianity as a belief-system significantly more vulnerable, as 20th century theologian Tillich (1963, in Dobzhansky, 1969, p. 34) argued, when saying that: "The first step toward non-religion of the western world was made by religion itself. This was when it defended its great symbols, which were its means of interpreting the world and life, not as symbols, but as literal stories." The same, in essence, had already been said almost a 100 years earlier, by the 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued, in his work 'The birth of tragedy' (1872/1953, p. 68):

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[15] An epistemological shift is understood here as a shift in the understanding of a certain reality and how we can have knowledge of it.

> Denn dies ist die Art, wie Religionen abzusterben pflegen: wenn nämlich die mythischen Voraussetzungen einer Religion under den strengen, verstandesmäßigen Augen eines rechtgläubigen Dogmatismus als eine fertige Summe von historischen Ereignissen systematisiert werden und man anfängt, ängstlich die Glaubwürdigkeit der Mythen zu verteidigen, aber gegen jedes natürliche Weiterleben und Weiterwuchern derselben sich zu sträuben, wenn also das Gefühl für den Mythus abstirbt und an seine Stelle der Anspruch der Religion auf historische Grundlagen tritt.
>
> *Therefore, this is how religions tend to die off: when the mythical underpinnings of a religion are systematised under the rational supervision of a consequent dogmatism, as a ready sum of historical events, when one commences to fearfully defend the credibility of myths, but to act against any natural life and growth of the same, when, therefore, the feeling for myth dies off and, at its place, religion makes claim to historical truth.*

Yet the mentioned epistemological shift is quite understandable. When the reformation movement began to challenge the Church, which had until then been the highest authority, it needed an even higher authority to refer to: the Bible. Therefore, to an extent, the mentioned shift was not just a shift between the Middle Ages and the renaissance but also, or rather, between Catholic Church and reformation. Protestantism rejected the Catholic tradition of allegory in favour of the notion of *sola scriptura*, i.e. that only the Bible is considered a source of theological knowledge among other factors in order to decrease the authority of the Latin-speaking Catholic clergy and empower readers of the Bible. While this led to translations of the Bible into various languages, it also led to a fixation on the Bible itself as a literal and not an allegorical text.

In the same 16th century as the one in which the reformation started, with the publication of Martin Luther's 95 theses in Wittenberg (1517), the Catholic Church was challenged from another angle. It seems rather certain that the struggle of the Church with science began with Coperni-

cus' above-mentioned discovery that, in contradiction with both scientific and religious beliefs at the time, the earth revolves around the sun (1534). This, Goodman and Russell wrote (1991, p. 66), was a view that would destroy the newly developed synthesis between religious tenets and (Aristotelian) philosophy, scholasticism; something that the establishments – both Protestant and Catholic – would not accept without resistance. It is understandable that the prestige of the Church was to a large extent based on the perception that it had expert 'cosmological' knowledge, that is to say, knowledge of the ultimate order of things. Therefore, if the Church would admit that their worldview had been mistaken on one account, on how many other accounts could it have been mistaken? After all, Copernicus' theory seemed to contradict at least one passage of the Bible, namely Joshua 10:12-14. What could this mean for its position? It is hard, Goodman and Russell find, in relation to this affair, "to avoid the cynical view of historical conflicts that they are rarely about principles, but nearly always about power" (ibid.).

There are some parallels between this and a similar history in the Arab Muslim world. As briefly alluded to earlier, in this cultural realm as well, (scientific) reason had been contrasted with revelation. Either idea – that reason was superior to revelation or that revelation was superior to reason – was represented in a school: in Baghdad, in the 8th century, a university was founded with the name House of Wisdom (Dar al Hikmah). This was associated with the rationalist school of the Muta'zilin, which fostered great scientific advances in the Islamic world. In the 10th century, however, the anti-rationalist school of the Ash'ari emerged, which considered the rationalists a threat to Islam. Consequently, this school and, in particular, the philosopher Al Ghazali engaged in battle with the Muta'zilin and, ultimately, towards the end of 14th century, emerged victorious. Both schools could sustain their arguments with references to Islam's main sacred text, the Qur'an. The notion of the primacy of revelation over reason seems supported by some verses (Ayas), which say, for example, that posing too many questions can lead to unbelief (Sura Al Maidah 5, Ayas 102 – 104). Parallel to this, however, exists the claim that there is no inherent contradiction between Islam and scientific advancement. According to the foreword to the Qur'an of

the Ahmadiyya movement (1994, p. 166), Islam and the revelation of the Qur'an are aligned with scientific advances such as evolution theory. An oft-cited example in this regard is the Aya describing the development of the human foetus (Sura Al Mominoen 23, Aya 15).

The literal reading of the Bible, and the authority with which this source was endowed, implied a separation of reason and science: reason was adapted to the prevailing doctrine and scientific exploration allowed in as far as it would not contradict it. In a way, this suggested that truth could only be found through deduction,[16] where the primary premise would be the truth of the Bible. In light of the importance of the deductive style in Greek philosophy, it is not surprising that, in the later Middle Ages, Aristotle became the philosopher of the Church (a synthesis of the theological and philosophical theses of the Church and Aristotle was achieved by Thomas Aquinas); earlier on, Plato had had a greater influence, for example on St. Augustine and, incidentally, according to Goodman and Russell, also "[f]or some Muslims the logic and reasoning of Aristotle was seen as a valuable tool to defend the basic tenets of Islam" (1991, p. 16).

It is probably not surprising that the Church, which had united with and grown into a worldly power after becoming the *de facto* religion of state of the Roman Empire in 380, would not look kindly at the scientific method if it were a competitor for power. While this alone would be enough to explain the discord that Goodman and Russell described, which occurred in the late 16th and early 17th century (around the beginning of what is referred to as the scientific revolution), part of this hostility was also based on the fact that, in that time, experimental science had a clear link to what was considered 'magic' (alchemism, the quest for the philosopher's stone, Hermetism) and was therefore thought of as impure. Interestingly, some authors, such as Frances Yates, saw this "active, magical, manipulative approach of nature as the principal cause of the Scientific Revolution", as Goodman and Russell (1991, p.

[16] In the vocabulary of the philosophy of science, deduction is contrasted with induction. Deduction stands for inferring specific statements from general statements, whereas induction stands for inferring general rules from specific observations.

28) assert. In spite of this, a remainder of a split between 'official science' and alternative science can still be recognised in the medical sciences, nowadays, where the official medical sciences, or allopathic medicine, are contrasted with alternative medical methods, such as acupuncture, phyto-therapy and homeotherapy.

The pressure on the Church, which had already been struggling because of the Protestant secession, and which itself launched a Counterreformation, increased when, in Italy, Copernicanism was revived by the Tuscan astronomer Galileo Galilei. The world picture of the Catholic Church was at stake and, as mentioned, along with that, its claim to power. As a consequence, Galilei was declared more dangerous than Luther or Calvin (id., p. 112). Be that as it may, with growing empirical evidence in support of Copernicanism, the position of the Church was bound to become ultimately untenable (although, as Goodman and Russell said, in Portugal, Copernicanism was not fully accepted until as late as the 18th century,[17] 1991, p. 127). To reconcile Copernicus' position with the perceived needs of the Church, in 1623, Galileo introduced the concept of the 'Book of Nature', which was meant to stand next to the Bible and of which the subject was to be what is scientifically true (or real). In contrast, the Bible was understood to address what is morally true (or good). Where the Bible, the Book of the Creator, was written by the ancient Prophets, the Book of Nature, that is, the book of Creation, would have to be written by scientists.

Incidentally, the concept of the Book of Nature had already existed before Galileo, in Christian thought. However, at the time, it stood for something else: the idea that nature was filled with signs from the Creator that could be interpreted via the scriptures (the Bible). The fact that, in Galileo's interpretation, human beings (or rather scientists and not prophets) would become the writers of this Book of Nature was something the Church could not accept. While Galileo's Book of Nature would still accept the concept of a 'creation created by a Creator', what would the Church think of a creation (i.e. nature) that was its own Creator? According to Toulmin and Goodfield (1982, p. 163), the

[17] See also Hooykaas, 1973, p. 58, in: Goodman & Russell, 1991, p. 63.

last drop contesting the scientific authority of the Bible was Darwin's theory of evolution of 1859, according to which the human species was not directly created by a Divine Creator, but through a process of chance called 'natural selection'. Darwin himself became quite critical of religion in his later life, eventually comparing the urge to believe in a Creator to a remnant of an atavistic instinct, such as the hate of a monkey towards a snake, principally based on fear, in his autobiography (1958, p. 93). It should be noted that this idea was omitted from the first published version of his autobiography at the request of Darwin's wife Emma, but it was restored in a later version by his grand-daughter, Nora Ballow.

Parallel to this development in the history of science, which weakened the position of the Church in the West politically, there was another development that supported the ascent of science as the ultimate authority on truth and, therefore, reality: its alliance with, and the successes of, technology. Technological developments, principally from the 19th century onwards, would make things possible that had hitherto been relegated to the realms of magic and mythology: to see an image of a person when she or he was not physically present (daguerreotype photography, 1839); to speak with others at a distance (telephone, 1871); and the ability to fly (1903), until then considered a most prohibitive realm, as the ancient Greek myth of Icarus suggested. Moreover, technology seemed to make the miracle possible, which was considered privileged territory of the Christian faith – although, in the famous Biblical story, it was Satan who tempted the Messiah to deliver a miracle (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13 and Luke 4:1-13) in exchange for unlimited power, which Jesus refused, ostensibly for not wanting to be followed because of his super-natural powers (according to Dostoyevsky, in the Great Inquisitor, the Church's desire for power and its association with the miracle constituted a deviation from the original spirit of Christianity, 1879-1880/1958, p. 319-320). Technology seemed to deliver the miracle directly and visibly, without a need for prayer or ritual. It did not require what in relation to religion would be called a 'leap of faith'.

In addition, technological progress helped produce advanced weap-

onry, making the connection between the attainment of truth, that is to say scientific-technological knowledge, and power, very tangible. Only one example of the consequences of this is the colonisation project, where it was, likely, mostly the superiority of weapons that made the conquest and exploitation of massive parts of other continents (notably the Americas and Africa) attainable for Europeans. And, especially in Latin America, invaded by Catholic Spain, the Church became one of the main political forces. In fact, it continues to be so to this day, even to the extent where it has recently 'delivered' its first Pope, Francesco. In addition to the darker pages of world history that are colonisation – which to this day have continued to leave a forceful signature on the state of affairs in international politics – it must be emphasised that technology gave new impetus to utopian dreaming, too. Albeit with a tone of regret, Martin Buber (1972, p. 18) argued that:

> … under the influence of a pan-technical current of thought, also utopia becomes an exclusively technical matter; the conscious human will, on which it traditionally rested, is now understood technically: like nature, society will now have to be controlled through technical calculations and technical constructions.

The idea that a technologisation of the environment can lead to a false consciousness has been elaborated by exponents of the Frankfurt School of social science, notably Herbert Marcuse. To Marcuse (1975, p. 172), the reconfiguration of nature through technology also entailed a reconfiguration of humanity. The view that developments in the fields of science and technology impact upon ethical conceptions, on ideas of what is good or not, is now quite broadly accepted. One need only think of the debate on abortion, for example. How, exactly, technology might have threatened the position of the Catholic Church becomes more clearly visible if the history of religion is approached via the central notion of control: as long as human beings feel they have no control over their destinies, they will be inclined to believe in an Almighty Power, which controls their fates. The reason for this is that there seems to be an inherent element in humanity that cannot believe in pure chance. Religion then functions as a sort of proxy, through which human beings can

exert control over their life, and some form of agency – if not through direct action, then via worship of a deity that can intervene in nature or alternatively, is nature itself (Freud, 1927/1961, p. 19; on the use of magic see Malinowski, 1931, in Dobzhansky, 1969, p. 14).

As soon as human beings are able to understand (and predict) natural phenomena through scientific exploration and, simultaneously, to exert control over them by means of technological interventions, their feeling of autonomy will increase and they (or rather, we) will cease to feel the need for a proxy. Technology, in this view, is only the extension of ourselves, and we ourselves the source of knowledge of what is good and what not, which reflects, in essence, the main idea of humanism: the belief that holds that humanity itself is or at least should be the standard for its ethical rules and guidelines. To briefly return to the notion that, for now, we are referring mainly to European history, Dutch anthropologist Anil Ramdas, in the 1990s, associated a rationality based on science and technology explicitly with the Western world, in opposition to a holy, mystical, magical and irrational East (1993, p. 7). It is interesting to note that, over a 100 years earlier, Nietzsche had already said something quite similar, when asking (1872/1953, p. 141):

> Worauf weist das ungeheure historische Bedürfnis der unbefriedigten modernen Kultur, das Umsichsammeln zahlloser anderen Kulturen, das verzehrende Erkennenwollen, wenn nicht auf den Verlust des Mythus, auf den Verlust der mythischen Heimat, des mythischen Mutterschoßes?
>
> *What is indicated by the enormous historical need of unsatisfied modern culture, the act of surrounding itself with countless other cultures, the strong will to acknowledge, if not the loss of myth, then the loss of a mythical home, the mythical womb?*

It thus seems unsurprising that it is the 18th century movement of the Enlightenment that has often been considered constitutive of European identity. This age, preceded by the scientific revolution, is widely seen as that when humanity emancipated from superstition and through a greater understanding of nature became rational. Its essence is, at times,