Panel Presentation – Section Two - E Maynard Moore, PhD

Naturalism as Religion… is not Enough

A) **The Process Principle**

To know anything, we know relationally.

(1) Relational thinking reflects reality

(2) Process thought reflects interdependence

(3) Meaning emerges from personal experience

We need to begin this discussion with a definition and a reference to methodology. When I speak about "process," what do I mean? In this context, the word itself has to do with "relationality," – both process philosophy and process theology refer to the basic supposition that intellectual coherence in the 21st century requires "relational ways of thinking" -- about faith, about personal interactions, about the dynamism of life, and about the universe itself. Relational thinking integrates implications of a thoroughly **interdependent universe** into how we live and express our faith. Process philosophy requires thought about how we are all dynamically interconnected, that everything matters, that every action entails a reaction. Process theology, as a method, can be adapted to many faith traditions, but I will be speaking specifically with reference to the Christian tradition. Since theology (in any tradition) depends on philosophy for its analytical language, the term "process" is descriptive of both the philosophical tradition AND the theology, so I will here simply use the term "process thought" to apply to both. "Process" indicates a dynamism in a way of thinking about reality in all its dimensions, and "relational" indicates the supposition of the radical interdependence of all things.

Why is this important? Because we live in a scientific age, and it is my contention that the most coherent way to connect philosophy and theology to what science tells us about ourselves and the universe is process thought. Of course, as Christians we stand in a long tradition, but other religions – Judaism, Buddhism, Zoroastrian and Hindu philosophy – predate our own, and Islam, the Baha'i faith, and the Latter-Day Saints, have built impressive traditions of their own. Each has a distinctive trove of sacred writings, some of which are called scripture, which they draw upon, and each of us who identify as an adherent of a particular faith brings our own experience to the discussion as well. All of

this – scripture, tradition, faith, practice, and reason (our intellectual capacities)– melds into the phenomenon of personal experience – which is important because – in the end – it all has to "makes sense" to us. If it doesn't make sense in the time and place where we find ourselves, then commitment to **any** tradition is hollow.

When it all comes together in a comprehensive fashion, we refer to the structure of thought as a "system," and process thought can be understood in this way. Though it has precedents that date back to thinkers over centuries, even millennia, Process Thought as a system usually references the work of Alfred North Whitehead in the early decades of the 20th century, followed by the work of Charles Hartshorne, (who died in the year 2000 at the age of 103). Hartshorne's most eminent students in theology have been Dr. John Cobb at Claremont Graduate School in California and Dr. Schubert Ogden, with whom I studied at SMU in Dallas. When I matriculated to the University of Chicago for my doctoral program, the influence there of Charles Hartshorne was still very evident, and so I continue to pursue my own philosophical and theological endeavors within this system of **process thought** – which probably will become evident as we proceed in this discussion tonight. For me, it is the only way to make my theology cohere with what modern science tells us about the natural world in which we find ourselves.

Part two

B) **The Principle of Interiority**

All things that exist, large or small, have an interior dimension.

(1) We feel before we know.

(2) The space-time continuum does not exhaust reality

(3) Interiority applies to us as humans as well as all actual entities.

The truth of what is known in the gift of consciousness can not be proven. Philosophy in principle must limit itself to an account of what is given to us in the ordinary human experience. There is no logical process by which we can move from this common experience to the demonstration of what we might perceive to be some ultimate harmony of the universe. But there are exceptional experiences that stand out from the ordinary day-to-day sequence of fleeting events. From these exceptional – "our of the ordinary" experiences – arise those impactful, memorable, experiences that instill wonder, awe,

even humility when we intuit the extra-ordinary. And to be fully human is to reflect on these experiences, to “make sense” as it were, of this experience, and to ask, “what is the meaning of it all/”

Here we are on the threshold of religion, perhaps not yet boldly moving forward, but curious enough about **our feelings** to crack open the door for a peek inside. We don’t have to use the word “God” to give meaning to such experience, and, in fact, we can decline to use this word or its equivalent – but we sense that there is something more to the experience of the natural world than what appears on the surface. To give meaning to our experience is not a function of cognitive belief, or the acceptance of rational propositions, but is more akin to the direct apprehension of one’s relatedness to some aspect of reality that goes deeper than the information that comes from the five senses. In fact, there is often the realization that the five senses, important as they might be, provide simply sterile information, that we ourselves are the meaning-maker in life. Meaning might not be immediately apparent – in fact, we might say – when something becomes immediately clear, it is called revelation, but we can live our whole lives without experiencing anything of the sort. And even so, revelation is never objective – it is always subjective and dependent on our own history and the relativities embedded in our culture.

One can say that it is common to human experience to perceive that there are structures in nature, there are regularities and rhythms that can be recognized to be ontologically autonomous of the observer, and regularity is one of the characteristics that help us to provide meaning to experience. But regularity does not imply divinity any more than it entails eternity. As was made clear by Dan in Part One of this session, introducing divinity as an explanatory principle into any question of natural philosophy is a category mistake. Here one can affirm with Spinoza that there appears to be “one infinite substance” in the natural world, in the sense that there is a “given-ness” in nature that stretches beyond the manifestations of all actual entities, but this should not imply anything interpreted as “eternal” truth.

It is true that Aristotle, perhaps the greatest of all the original metaphysicians, introduced God into his philosophical system without reference to any specific religious influence. And his system of natural philosophy makes sense of the “real world” without positing a “creator” at the point of origins. To see that this is so, we can easily borrow some

terminology from Spinoza, and say that one can speak of an ultimate reality actualizing itself in all of the entities and instances we can know or think. It is in this sense that

Spinoza referenced “one infinite substance,” But for the process theologian, this “substance” is not a static entity – rather, it is simply the active “ongoingness” of things. But rather than relying on Spinoza’s “substantial monism,” all we need to do is reference the perpetual activity at the base of the “real world.” What this means is that in the perpetual occurrence of events, the sheer fact that something happens is not purely accidental and not subject to explanation by anything beyond itself. To use Spinozan terminology, it simply means that real world activity, whatever shape activities take, do so according to its internal attributes, ***in concreto***, which Spinoza called its modes. Within the rhythm of regularity, myriads of actual entities are recognized within the four dimensional space-time continuum. This is what Alfred North Whitehead called the “principle of concretion,” and what I am referencing here as the principle of **interiority**.

What this means is that each actualized entity in the real world takes shape according to its antecedents, and this implies limitations and reflection as we seek meaning in the environment surrounding us. An acorn can only become an oak tree – it can’t become a pine tree – and the acorn has its own limitations… as Spinoza would say, according to its internal modes of being. And we humans can recognize these modes in the “ongoingness” of things, large and small. We can recognize these patterns without reference to any external divinity or Aristotle’s “final cause.” And the same insight allows us to predict with near certainty, that the sun will set tonight on the Western horizon and not in the East.

Now, the remarkable thing is that we humans can recognize that this principle of interiority applies to ourselves as well as to other actual entities in the real world. It means, first of all, we recognize that we are part of the real world, we are a part of nature, and we have an interiority as well as the oak tree. Now this realization, across all cultures and throughout history, has become the source of religious veneration, even the foundation of worship. But the problem with this is that (a) humanity itself can become the object of veneration, perhaps the deification of something called the human soul, or (b) the natural world in all its glory and wonder, becomes the object of worship. And

this, it seems to me, is what led Spinoza to identify his “one infinite substance” as “god” and what leads religious naturalism down the dead-end street toward some notion of “sacred nature.” It is in this sense that nature if not enough.

Turning now to principle # 3

C) **The Aspirational Principle**

As humans, we live forward when our vision embraces meaning.

(1) Faith: What is your abiding commitment?

(2) Hope: What is your compelling vision for the future?

(3) Love: What is your guiding passion for action?

My first claim here is that each of these concepts, and the reality each points to, I take to exhibit what might be called a “human universal.” By this I mean that we, each of us, is endowed at birth with the capacity for faith, hope and love. How these capacities are activated and grow – largely depends on how we are welcomed into the world and what kind of environments we experience as we shape our identity and capacity. Each of the three is an interactive phenomenon, each is a social phenomenon, and fully developed capacity requires community, ritual, language and nurture. Each is shaped by people in our experience, including initiatives beyond our own making, initiatives of spirit and grace. How these initiatives are recognized, imagined and responded to, perceived or ignored, powerfully affects who we become as persons, and how, in turn, we manifest faith, hope and love in our lives. In short, faith is a journey, hope is a journey, love is a journey.

When we speak of faith, hope and love in connection with each other, we are affirming what has come to be called the **three theological virtues** of Christianity. But this does not mean that these three virtues are exclusive to or the possession of Christianity. Each of these can be found in all the great religions, and – more to the point – each can be affirmed by someone who identifies with no religion at all. But within Christianity, the three together have deep roots – articulated by Paul in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians – and the three together carry significant meaning. For the Christian, there is a dimension of **passion** in the three virtues, each is linked to action or movement. When the three are manifest as one, we reach full participation with our shared experience of

God's goodness.

Here I want to acknowledge my debt to Dr. John Haught, emeritus professor of theology at Georgetown University, whose several books and articles have been formative for my thinking on these issues before us. And in particular I would refer people to John's 2017 book **The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe** (Yale University Press) in which he says (among other things) "Over the past two centuries scientific advances have made it clear that our universe is a story still unfolding," a story, of course, in which we participate. This is a profound statement that all of us in the 21sr century need to acknowledge and to explore its implications deeply. And it is a concept completely compatible with what I have already outlined in the first two sections of this talk, the process principle and the principle of interiority.

Specifically, to adequately address this question about Naturalism (as well of some other traditional theological concepts) there are several basic presuppositions: (1) The universe only can be understood as ***process***, which continues even now – this frames the process principle, and (2) The universe, from the inception of the big bang, includes ***subjectivity, which is the essence of interiority. This simply means that there is an "insidedness" to reality, that what you see on the surface, what comes to us from our five senses and in three dimensions, is NOT all there is.*** Science passes over this, but Haught insists that the universe is an unfolding story, a drama, quote, "namely, the emergence of an interior world consisting of sentience, intelligence, moral sensibilities, and religious passion." unquote p. 3 Haught will go on to show that all of the great religions (those emerging from the *axial age* (Jaspers), all of them recognize this aspect of reality. He refers to Hinduism (Brahman, the Upanishads), as an example (p. 4), and in each subsequent chapter he identifies twelve common aspects of these great religions to make his claim.

Now – to the point of <u>this</u> discussion, I want to claim that we, as humans, as homo sapiens sapiens, have a distinctive place in this unfolding drama, and what distinguishes us from the rest of creation is **aspiration**. This is much more than what Spinoza identified as "appetite." Our sensitivity to our environment, the range of our feelings and aversion to pain, the relentless drive to survival (whether the individual, the tribe, or the nation) – all these basic drives and emotions are part of the "natural world" and are shared by many other species, even in some primitive forms like the amoeba, the paramecium, and the garden worms. But even our closest relatives in the natural world, the mountain gorilla, the forest-swelling chimpanzee and the upright bonobo – can anticipate only as far as the next meal, the next forest enclave during the change of

seasons, or the next encounter with an encroaching enemy. Only the human aspires to something greater than the present circumstance. Only the human can plan a hunt and organize an expedition to fulfill a dream. Only the human can think beyond the earth as a present habitat and initiate an enterprise than launches a probe into the beyond.

This is the work of the mind that stretches beyond the structures of the brain. The brain, of course, is the basic physical requirement, and the development of the brain through

the millennia of evolution has encompassed and preserved many of those sections such as the thalamus, the hippocampus, etc, that generate instincts and emotions such as hunger, fear, defense, flight, reproductions and all the rest. But only the human can aspire to a different future. For every other species on the planet – and perhaps the universe itself – the future is just more of the same. Only the human can dream "over the rainbow." It is in this sense that we become aware of the cosmic story, and – more than this –conscious of our part in it. Ir is within this consciousness that – in Haught's words, "the universe is waking up," and we are witness to its dawning.

This is the foundation of the religious mindset – it means that we have become conscious of a "rightness" to life, a right way to live, to think, to act, to work, to pray. Haught actually quotes Whitehead and points out that the "something" in the human vision of which Whitehead speaks is the very "rightness" that is at the heart of the religious quest. For example, the Buddha (500 BCE) outlined his Noble Eightfold Path, to teach right wisdom, right action, right appreciation (p. 11). In China, Laozi was looking for the Right Way. Similarly did Micah and the Hebrew prophets, and then the apostle Paul speak of Jesus' "works of righteousness" and "justification" meaning "to make things right" (p. 12). This yearning for rightness is what provides the essence of the subjective world – and only human beings have this yearning for an "imperishable rightness" (p. 16).

And science has taught us that this emerging subjectivity was implicit in the properties of the earliest universe. Of course, there are those who do not recognize this story, or do not grasp its full implications. There are those who deny the reality of this process, who scoff at these notions of interiority and affirm "scientific naturalism" – the belief that the modern scientific method is the only correct way to understand the world and that the physical universe is all there is. Still others might be mired in pessimism about the future, and cannot recognize the trajectory in which is embedded the unifying power of a vision of cosmic becoming. Be that as it may, and in spite of the nay-sayers,

“anticipation offers a coherent alternative to a sterile analysis of the past as well as the claim that everything in the history of nature is predetermined by inviolable physical laws … It accepts the new scientific narrative of gradual emergence and the sense that something ontologically richer and fuller is coming into the universe in the process.” (p.38) The marks of religious maturity are thus gratitude that we can discern meaning in the unfolding story and patience with the cosmic future.

But we should remember that this “awakening” is a new phenomenon. The universe has taken 13.77 billion years to get to this point, and the religious sensibilities that we are talking about – this awareness of the “inferiority” of all things cosmic – is only about 15 or 20,000 years in the making – the blink of an eye on the cosmic time scale. Being so new, we can see that religion itself “is still in the process of becoming” (p. 20) and thus harmony can only be anticipated. “This dawning, must be thought of as not compelling but inviting those of us conscious of the dawning toward the horizon ahead” (p. 21) This means the universe is a “work in progress” (p.22) and offers for us a “scientifically congenial point of departure” for understanding all that is. (p.23) It is “the inspirational principle” and offers us a way to understand ourselves as an integral part of the cosmic future. The vision that rightness is still early in its rising, showing dimly on the horizon, looking always to the not-yet, ready to welcome new truth, new beauty, new being into the present moment.

Specifically, let’s turn to the triptych of faith, hope and love that comes to us from Paul. Paul was writing these words to the Christian community in Corinth while he was imprisoned in Ephesus, so the first thing to note about these three words is the essence of practice. These three words are not abstractions – they must lead to action. First…..

FAITH

Faith is a complex, mysterious phenomenon. In particular, faith must be distinguished from belief. Faith is not simply mental assent. Its embodiment is necessarily interpersonal and public, not otherworldly and private. In all Paul’s theology, faith and practice go together. These are points on which almost all contemporary scholars of Paul would agree. Secondly, faith has no meaning unless it is personal. Now, you may be saying, “I know nothing of faith...” OR “I am not religious, so why should I engage in a conversation about faith?” OR you could say, “I have this faith thing settled… My faith is clear, and firm and tested… why should I risk confusion with complexities?” Each of these responses, and many others in between, I believe to be a mistake, and results in a rather shallow life. To dismiss faith is to misunderstand it.

Faith is relational. Even in its most rudimentary form, faith exhibits a pattern of relationship. It manifests itself first in the parental relationship, where bonds or trust and loyalty first develop. These are the bonds our of which a sense of selfhood develops. As one grows in faith, there develops a sense of participation in a family story, a story that includes both reality and myth. Out of this dynamic, we shape our commitments, and we learn that we can participate in a board range on relationships, while we shape our core identity. We live in a dynamic field of forces, and we learn to use our imagination to fully shape a future for ourselves. We build our own story, within an ever-widening story, far beyond the family and neighborhood, participating in the widening story of the world and the universe. In this sense, faith and imagination go hand in hand.. We enter into and transform our relationships with reciprocity and meaning as we make sense of our lives. As this interactive relationship broadens with both possibility and everyday events, faith enriches our life and is a continuous trajectory into the fixture. That brings us to hope….

HOPE

Barack Obama's best seller prior to his Presidency was called "The Audacity of Hope" in which he outlined his purpose to be "reclaiming the American dream." … which on the face of it, raises a simple question: Hope or Hype? Perhaps better than anything else in recent memory, this illustrates the mendacity of how the word hope has become hollow. But

Again, let's see what Paul was saying here. Paul's message is made to fit into a pre-existing history rather than seen as something that begins with the message of Jesus.. That means, in practice, that the message is constrained by the past and develops out of it. But to be clear, for Paul, God does a genuinely new thing in Jesus, and that genuinely new thing breaks into history and becomes the vantage point for understanding everything that preceded it and everything that will follow. The difference may seem slight, but in fact it has profound consequences for theology. Beginning with the past constrains the present, limiting it to what has already been or at least what can be imagined based on prior experiences. Beginning with Jesus's death – and followed by resurrection -- offers radical hope for new beginnings. Indeed, Paul describes himself as "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13). His identity is being pulled into the future, not defined by the past. This absence of nostalgia or evolutionary thinking certainly challenges churches that pride themselves on their long histories as a means to resist change, but it also inspires hope and animates ministry among those whose histories cannot yield any positive perspective on the

present.

Where the continuity is crucial is in the fact that Paul's vision of hope is rooted in the God who led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, the God whom the prophets of Israel insisted was present with the poor, the oppressed, the left behind... the God of Jesus who preached liberation for those downtrodden under Roman exploitation, and the God who manifested a vision for Africans who were sold, whipped, tortured and, yes, lynched under the system of chattel slavery in the United States. Hope is inextricably embedded in the phenomenon of Black religion, woven into Jesus' promise to liberate the poor and the oppressed… it is the vision of a future that breaks through despair and radically changes one's perspective on life. It is rooted in aspiration and gives the future a revolutionary mindset to create a future where suffering and oppression will be banished forever.

In his dissertation to the Romans (Chapter 15), Paul spoke of the "God of Hope." This is a crucial concept for us. It means that our God has the future as God's essential nature. Sure, we claim that Jesus as the Christ is "emannuel," God with us, and for me, as a Christian, I affirm that "in Jesus, God is present to us." But this claim is not exhaustive. Ax Paul reminds us, There is nothing, "no power or principality, now or in the future, that can separate us from the love of God." And for Paul, this is the God who was present at the Exodus, and in Hebrew prophecy as well as Jesus. But the point is that we can never possess God, that on our journey, God is ever before us, who encounters us with a promise about the future, the God who is always beckoning, calling us into that future in active hope. This a something new and different.

Aristotle, it is true, could speak of hope as a "waking dream," but for the Greeks it was as often as not a journey into either tragedy or comedy. Hard to find meaning in either event. But the alternative is not a heavenly utopia. Hope is not pie in the sky. Hope is a good habit by which we move forward toward a future good that, though difficult to attain, draws us ever forward. As theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it, for the Christian it is "hoping against hope." It is leaving behind all contradictions and suffering, whether physical or mental, and living into the future which never exhausts the possibilities before us. With Kierkegaard, we affirm "a passion for what is possible." As my mentor Bishop Jim Mathews once said to me in his last days, "I don't know what the future holds for me, but I know in whose hands the future rests." Hope is therefore the companion of faith – faith is the foundation on which hope rests, and, in turn, hope nourishes and sustains faith in the future. Together, faith and hope provide a dynamic to

life and allows us to love in all our relationships.

life and allows us to love in all our relationships.

LOVE

Everybody knows this word… After all, “that’s what makes a Subaru a Subaru.” – right? Perhaps no other word reaches such a dimension of triviality as this one. But, that being said, IF it is true that all reality is relational, then love is the ultimate manifestation of that truth.

Again, in the words of Paul: “Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offense. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over another person’s sins, but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to love’s faith, its hope, its endurance…. In a word, there are three things that last forever: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of them all is love.” This is the Christian’s credo, the triptych of virtues.

Theologian and colleague Thomas Jay Oord says, defining love well is fundamental to understanding the Christian life. Quote “I define love as action: acting intentionally in sympathetic response to God and others, to promote overall well-being” in the world. Loving acts are influenced by previous events, of course, but one executes actions with the intention and hope in increasing the common good. And Oord makes the point that this is entirely within the framework of our understanding of modern science. In the physical sciences, it is the mutual attraction of specific elements that create the world that we know. Without the binding of oxygen and hydrogen, there would be no water. Without the interaction of hydrogen and helium our atmosphere would dissipate. In the social sciences – anthropology, psychology, sociology and the rest – analysis of actions, behavior and thought itself relies on observing and affirming the inter-relationality in the complexities of all events, In fact, any investigative endeavor with the scientific method requires attention to the origins and consequences of interdependent entities.

In his significant three volume work **Being and Value: A Constructive Post Modern Metaphysics**, philosopher Frederick Ferre suggests that the whole domain of actuality is a pulsing field of achieving value. Only in what he calls a “kalogenetic universe” in which all existing things have value, can one account for a possibility as fundamental as love.

Now one does not have to posit the existence of a deity, not even a monotheistic one, to affirm the truth of this insight. Atheists, agnostics, and any stripe of nontheistic outlook, can join with us all in affirming the relational reality of the universe, and the great religions of the world simply extract from this the application of the principle to human relationships, which we call

love. Those religious traditions that do affirm deity as fundamental to reality, do so with a

sense that all things, and all creatures, exist as a consequence of this love. Philosopher of nature *par excellance* Henri Bergson calls creativity “reality itself.” Charles Hartshorne called this “the principle of principles.” Of course, the enterprise of metaphysics and the broad array of scientific endeavor are all ongoing ventures, but it hardly seems possible today or in the future to return to the notion of unattached particles however small or large as unrelated one to the other. For the Christian this is what we mean when we say “God is love.”

Sometimes it’s so, sometimes it isn’t? So, what shall we say to these things? Who’s to know? Say who abides in love abides in God. Say God is love. Love God. Love one another. Say grace is undeserved and plentiful. Say if we’re saved, it’s mostly from ourselves.

D) **The Protestant Principle**

The ultimate is beyond our grasp

(1) We question any absolute creedal claim

(2) We question any search for certainty

(3) We question any authoritative prescription for truth.

Finally, let me turn to my fourth principle in this quadrilateral on naturalism. And here again, I need to say this is not intended to be a paean to Protestantism as over against other traditions. It’s just that the term emerged from a very specific historical period and has implications for us today. One might say that Protestantism is a system – a conglomeration of religious congregations, some of which are organized as church judicatories -- but also Protestantism is an idea – and ideas change the world. And that’s what irritates and frightens the secularists in our midst – newspaper editors and college professors and political activists – all of religion’s cultural despisers. Faith they can deal with, even a system of faith: an illogical remnant of bygone ages, perhaps admired in a few other cultures, but mocked in our own.. But an idea? Now that’s a problem, and the last thing they will admit to is an idea that might change <u>their</u> world.

Two basic themes from the 16

th century Reformation subsequently helped shape American values. In 16th Century

Europe, to be a Protestant was to be anti-catholic, protesting some of the spiritual practices that had become tooted in the Roman church. But In frontier America, "**protestation**" became secondary and Protestantism became a movement of regeneration and revival. Protest, when it did occur, was directed not at traditions or old authorities but rather toward an emerging secular lifestyle that revivalist preachers judged to be immoral and irreligious.

Through the last four centuries in Western Christianity, and in America specifically, the spirit of Protestantism too often meant that no sect was too small to divide, and with each subsequent splintering of denominations, enmity and exclusivism were bred into the American religious psyche. Pablo Richard identified this as a "sacralization of oppression" as churches blessed the American faith in Manifest Destiny and the exploitation of some immigrant and minority groups. The Bible was often used as a weapon in that process, assuming a position of authority that even the original reformers would have questioned.

This is partly what led twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich to articulate what he called "the Protestant principle:" – that God alone – not a pope, not the Bible, not any doctrine, not any community of faith – is to be venerated.

This principle, universally significant, is effective in all periods of history; it is pertinent to all the great religions of mankind; it was powerfully pronounced by the Jewish prophets; it is manifest in the portrayal of Jesus as the Christ; it has been rediscovered time and again in the life of the church and was established as the foundation of the churches in the Reformation; and it will today challenge even <u>these</u> churches whenever they leave their roots….As a principle it is the critical and dynamic source of all relativizations, but it is not identical with any of them. It cannot be confined by a definition. It is not exhausted by any historical religion; it is not identical with any structure of the Reformation or of early Christianity. It transcends any cultural form…. The Protestant principle contains the protest against **any absolute** claim to truth, to any absolute claim made for a creedal affirmation, even if this claim is made by a Protestant church. The Protestant principle is the judge of every religious and cultural reality, including the religion and culture that calls itself "protestant."

Seventy-five years ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) called for a "religionless" Christianity, a vision of what he saw emerging within a thoroughly secularized society. But perhaps Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), who more than anyone else shaped the rules

for sociological research, was closer to the truth when he argued that society itself is a religious phenomenon. According to the contemporary theologian Harvey Cox, this

religious phenomenon." According to the contemporary theologian Harvey Cox, this means that the task of a postmodern theology is not to work out a "religionless" interpretation of Christianity but to recover the real purpose of Christianity, bringing it out of its modern debasement into a conscious means of personal self-discipline and actual social construction. The context of Cox's remark is the recognition that our time is crucially different from that of Bonhoeffer and extraordinarily different from the 16th century Reformation. The contemporary context is shaped by the phenomenon called naturalism. The urn back toward Naturalism is part of this phenomenon. But Naturalism AS Religion – in my view at least – falls flat in the world of meaning-seekers.

Dr. Ursula Goodenough, professor of biology and renown geneticist, now retired, – in her highly impactful book The Scared Depths of Nature – teased out a number of experiences accessible to the human being that opens us up to that dimension of reality that transcends the physical world in which we live: wonder, awe, imagination – all perceptions present to the scientist as well as a naive bystander. But in the end, we still ask, **is nature enough to address the big questions of life**? Wherein do we find the meaning that we seek in life? How does nature account for critical intelligence? In fact, **how does nature account for ANY subjective experience at all**? And if reality requires an understanding akin to process thought, and with our existence in an unfinished universe, **what is the source of our aspiration**? It is not the beauty of the natural world that provides meaning to our existence, as satisfying and as inspiring as that can be. Rather, it is the awareness that our intelligence -- as limited as it may be by time and finitude, is embedded in **a cosmic process of unfolding life**, evolution and emergence that is being called into a future that is open and adventurous. As Dr. Haught has said, "The forward thrust of nature is not a fiction that humans wishfully invent, but it is a hallmark of the entire cosmic process." So – for me, meaning emerges in the desire of the human to know, an aspiration that finds full flower in the religious hope born out of creativity, and which finds fulfillment in love, and the divine intention for shalom to reign upon the earth.

Cox's book, *The Secular City*, **[23]** which appeared in 1965, provided a framework within which much of Christian theology took shape in the last half of the twentieth century. And it is this overarching phenomenon that marks the key difference between our time and the Reformation.

Why is this important, and what does this mean, that we live in an age of secularization? Charles Taylor, emeritus professor of philosophy at McGill University, who has thought more about this issue than most of us, puts it this way:

One way of understanding secularity is in terms of public spaces. These have allegedly been emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality. Or, taken from another side, as we function within various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations that we act on are internal to the "rationality" of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political arena, and so on. This is in striking contrast to earlier periods, when Christian faith laid down authoritative prescriptions, often through the mouths of the clergy, which could not be easily ignored in any of these domains.**[24]**

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