

BEYOND RELIGION: THE BAD NEWS, OTHER NEWS, AND THE GOOD NEWS

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have documented the decline of religious belief and church attendance in “secular” societies such as Australia. Tom Frame offers a detailed study of unbelief in Australia and identifies some concerns about the possible intolerance of religion in the future. By contrast, Harvey Cox sees a positive opportunity in the emergence of “an age of the Spirit” and diverse forms of Christian expression around the world. These movements enable us to understand the nature of faith beyond the historic forms of institutional religion. Cox’s work provides a specific instance of Charles Taylor’s third sense of “secularity”, understood in terms of what it may be rather than what it is not. The challenge for Christian theology is, then, to explore the meaning of the Good News and the character of Christian community. Beyond “religion” there is a choice between the bad news and the Good News.

To paraphrase Mark Twain’s famous line, the rumours of religion’s death have been greatly exaggerated. For some decades, it has been suggested that religious belief would soon die out. What is certainly the case is that in much of the Western world church attendance and church affiliation has been in significant decline for at least the last half-century. At the same time, however, there has been massive growth in Christianity in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia—along with a similar spread in the religion of Islam. Pentecostal Christian groups have also seen extraordinary growth throughout the entire world. In some senses, “religion” is in decline and in other respects it is not.

In this essay, one major study of the decline of religion in Australia will act as a case study for the “end” of religion before considering a number of works which see a resurgence of faith or spirituality in different forms. These considerations clarify what it is that is lost in the decline of religion and thus to a better understanding of the “secularity” evident in Western societies. With these clarifications, it becomes clear that the decline of “religion” presents us with new opportunities to understand and respond to the Christian Gospel.

I. IS RELIGION IN DECLINE?

In recent decades, there have been many statistical studies of church attendance, religious affiliation and beliefs, all indicating the decline of “religion” in Australia. The census data is especially telling, with the number of people registering “No Religion” increasing from 6.7% in 1971 to 16.6% in 1996 and 18.7% in

2006.¹ A recent study by the Olive Tree Media found that 31% of respondents identified themselves as having no religion or spiritual belief.²

Tom Frame has written a detailed and wide-ranging study of attitudes to religion in Australia, which provides us with a helpful case study of religion in post-industrial societies.³ *Losing My Religion* is concerned to trace the decline of “religion” in (white) Australian society and contemplates the future of Christian belief in a minority and possibly hostile situation. As Frame presents it, the situation is mostly bad news.

Frame defines religion as “the performance of certain rituals and customs arising from a specific set of beliefs to which an individual or community conscientiously subscribes with respect to a deity to which the individual and the community is held morally and conscientiously accountable. Religion involves the assumption of an alignment of a person’s believing, belonging and behaving.”⁴ Frame goes on to distinguish religion from spirituality, which in Australia he says is “generally associated with any pursuit that dignifies personal life and encourages aesthetic reflection.”⁵ What seems crucial in Frame’s definition of religion, in contrast to the much more fluid or amorphous concept of spirituality, are three specific elements: the aspect of conscientious *belief*, having some reference to *a deity*, and the understanding that this belief has moral or *life-style consequences*. This last element indicates Frame’s interest in “behaving” as a crucial element in religion. What seems missing from his definition, however, is a clear indication of what he means by the term “belonging”. By using the terms “individual or community” he allows, perhaps unintentionally, that religion might be an entirely individual, or as people commonly say, “a personal matter”—with no implication of belonging or accountability to any group or community. As a description of how many Australians might view their religious beliefs, this is perhaps an accurate implication; but it runs contrary to Frame’s own assertions about the proper meaning and nature of religion as he intends to study it.

Losing my religion advances several major theses. The first of these is that Australians have not been especially interested in religion, but neither have they been strongly opposed. It is not so much unbelief but disinterest that characterizes the majority. Hugh Mackay has observed that Australians are “easygoing about religion” and “suspicious of extremists”.⁶ Similarly, Philip Hughes found an increasing number “who want to identify themselves as Christian but who do not want to identify with a particular denomination. A significant part of the movement is a rejection of Christian institutions rather than a rejection of Christianity itself.”⁷ The decline in church attendances and the increase in the “No religion” response in the census, are all part of an historical trend towards “declining interest in religious believing and religious belonging ...

1 At the time of writing, no data from the 2011 census is available.

2 *Australian Communities Report: Research into Key Belief Blockers and Questions About Faith, Christianity and God Held by Australians Today* (Research conducted by McCrindle Research, for Olive Tree Media, Sutherland, NSW: Olive Tree Media, 2011), 5.

3 Tom Frame, *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009). It should be noted that Frame deals only with the dominant culture of European settlers in Australia, making no reference to the indigenous peoples of the land and their historic cultures.

4 *Ibid.*, 25.

5 *Ibid.*, 27.

6 *Ibid.*, 103. Here Frame cites Hugh Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians choosing their future*, (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1999), 231.

7 *Ibid.*, 93. Here Frame cites Philip Hughes, Ruth Powell, and Sam Sterland, “The Christian faith in rural Australia,” *Pointers: Bulletin of the Christian Research Association* 13 (September 2003): 5. A similar pattern has been noted in Britain, in the study by Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

especially among younger people.”⁸ From all this, Frame concludes that “there is no alternative but to say that Australians individually and together are losing their commitment to formalised religion and that the kind of people Australians have been and the society they have built will be markedly different in the future.”⁹ He adds, rather gloomily, that those who claim that society would be better off if all religious belief disappeared may well see that claim empirically tested in the next decades.

In the middle sections of his book, Frame explores the possible causes of this decline in religious belief and commitment. He notes the debates in the modern period about arguments for the existence of God and the challenges to these conceptions of God arising from astronomy and biology. He concludes, “In the short span of two hundred years, God has moved from being a necessary element in the explanation of most physical phenomena to being completely irrelevant to accounts of natural processes.”¹⁰

Frame then turns his attention to the recent emergence of aggressive atheism, most popularly in Richard Dawkins’ book, *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens’ *God is not Great*. These and a number of other books, including Australian philosopher Tamas Pataki’s *Against Religion*, represent a new form of unbelief. Frame describes these works as “less of a philosophical and more of a political program.”¹¹ He notes that Dawkins, for example, simply asserts his faith in genetic science as capable of answering “all the great questions of life.”¹² Here we come to what is perhaps the most crucial issue in the current debate about “religion”. Is religion in fact about an “explanation”, of the kinds offered by science, in biology, physics and astronomy? Trevor Hart argues that there is a category mistake here. Dawkins and those who make similar arguments have failed to understand “how language works” and, by implication, what religion really is. Science, he observes, “is wonderful at telling us about nature; it’s not good at telling us what, if anything is behind nature.”¹³ Similarly, Terry Eagleton has challenged the idea that religion is, in essence, about explaining the universe. For Christian theology God is not a “mega-manufacturer” but is rather the one who sustains the universe in being through love.¹⁴ This means that the dispute between theology and science is “not a matter of how the universe came about, or which approach can provide the best “explanation” for it. It is a disagreement about how far back one has to go, though not in the chronological sense.”¹⁵ Wittgenstein’s statement that explanation stops somewhere is pertinent here: “Giving grounds ... comes to an end.” But the end is not simply a conviction that a certain proposition is true. The “end” is our action, our living in a particular way, Wittgenstein suggests.¹⁶ Once again, then, it is not sufficient to consider religious statements in terms of the content of belief. Their significance lies much more in the “behaving” they signify and, perhaps also, the “belonging” associated with them. Surprisingly, this is not the direction

8 Ibid., 79.

9 Ibid., 104.

10 Ibid., 150.

11 Ibid., 195; Tamas Pataki, *Against Religion* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007) is discussed from 230–40.

12 Ibid., 207.

13 Ibid., 215. Trevor Hart, “Belief, Too, Can Start With a Bang,” *Australian Literary Review*, (2 July 2008): 6.

14 Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (The Terry Lectures; New York & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 7.

15 Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 11.

16 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (ed. G.E.M. Amscombe and G.H. von Wright; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), propositions 189, 192, 204.

in which Frame proceeds. Rather, he contemplates the situation where religious believers (by which he means church-affiliated Christians) form a minority within Australian society.

II. THE FUTURE OF RELIGION: THE BAD NEWS

Frame argues that the Dawkins-style attacks have contributed to a shift in the public attitudes to religion. In the minds of some, religion is now seen as “a social, political and intellectual adversary to Western popular culture and liberal democracy”. As a result, it has become acceptable to ridicule religious ideas and mock religious people.¹⁷ Thus Frame comes to the conclusion that we are approaching “the end of tolerance”.

Frame envisages a markedly changed situation for the Christian churches in Australia in the decades to come. In particular, he foresees a growing marginalising of religious belief, with the prospect that many believers will turn towards a defensive or “ghetto” mentality, with at least some groups becoming militant in their opposition to society at large.

To disregard religious views is to hasten the possibility that those holding them will turn away from the public square. If religious groups feel they are not heard and, worse still, face only ridicule from the public, they are likely to form an enclave. While this will work against the group’s survival, it will also diminish civil society and destroy the body politic.¹⁸

The main problem, he argues, is “the manner that religious beliefs are handled by those who profess them—and by those who don’t”.¹⁹ It is a question of mutual respect and an appropriate form of tolerance. Here Frame alludes to Charles Taylor’s work, *A Secular Age*.²⁰ In a secular age, believing is one of a series of options or possibilities, whereas in an earlier context such belief went unchallenged. It was embedded in a “background” of many other cultural features and forms of behaviour. Frame’s interest, however, is not so much in Taylor’s overall argument as to use his definition of different ideas of secularity to support his call for tolerance of religion. In place of the present “combative” milieu, Frame proposes an attitude of constructive and respectful dialogue. We shall return to Taylor’s work later in this paper.

With regard to the churches, Frame believes denominational patterns will change. Roman Catholic and Pentecostal groups will continue, while Reformed and Orthodox groups will remain in largely separate contexts. Churches that fail to present a credible alternative to the prevailing culture, in particular “left-leaning, cause-driven, liberal Protestant churches”, will disappear. Frame offers no reasons for these judgments, but uses them as a basis to urge that churches “renew their commitment to resisting some aspects of popular culture and heighten the importance of their beliefs and customs.”²¹ Unfortunately no detail is offered here to help us understand what Tom Frame means. We might have wished that he had made more of the comments he quoted from Kevin Hart: In the face of the decline of religion, religious people need

¹⁷ Frame, *Losing My Religion*, 221.

¹⁸ Ibid., 259.

¹⁹ Ibid., 261.

²⁰ Ibid., 281, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). See especially “Introduction” and Chapter 1, “The Bulwarks of Belief.”

²¹ Ibid., 299.

“to look at how poorly we teach our young, in church and out of it, and how we make Christianity appear weak, dispensable, half in league with death and almost fully in league with boredom.”²² It is surely in the *formation* of Christian faith and communities, and not in the arena of ideas or belief alone, that the battle for hearts and minds, lives and values will be won or lost.

Fortunately, however, the situation may not be entirely as Tom Frame presents it, neither in Australia nor throughout the wider world. It is true that the so-called “mainline” denominations are in steady and even rapid decline, though some recent evidence suggests that this is not uniformly so.²³ There are other areas of rapid growth. It is the “institution” of Christianity that is in decline, perhaps, but in place of that institutional form other dynamic forms of faith and worship are emerging.

III. THE EMERGING AGE OF THE SPIRIT

A number of recent studies have suggested that beyond the decline of the historic, institutional forms of religion, a new and different form of Christian life and experience is emerging. In his recent work *The Future of Faith*, Harvey Cox has argued that we have entered an entirely different era in Christian experience, which he terms “the age of the Spirit”.²⁴ Cox’s thesis is that Christian history can be understood in terms of three broad epochs. The first, lasting approximately three centuries, he terms “the age of faith”. It is only in recent decades, through such discoveries as the Dead Sea Scrolls, that we have come to see how diverse and fluid was the theology and communal life of this period. This was the time before the formulation of the creeds and before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Cox sees in this time a great tolerance for diversity in worship, in leadership structures and in theology. But with the development of the imperial church, from the time of Constantine onwards, came “the age of belief”. The nature of Christian faith was codified and the many dynamic forms of communal life and ministry gradually were replaced by a common, episcopal structure. The church now became the institution of salvation. Crucially, as Cox sees it, the age of belief systematically shielded people from much of the mystery of life itself. Theology sought to “explain” the universe. Even more critically, this theology largely ignored the teaching and ethic of Jesus.²⁵ This situation lasted for many centuries, with the church forming part of the very foundations of society, especially but not only in those places where the church was a “state church”. Only in the last century or so has this form of Christianity begun to unravel, though the decline in religious belief has been developing for much longer. A new situation is emerging, as Cox sees it. This period has much more in common with “the age of faith” than with “the age of belief”. Cox calls this period “the age of the Spirit”. In this new

22 Ibid., 215; the source-note for this quotation is missing from the book.

23 Diana Butler Bass has published the results of a three-year study of several hundred “mainline” congregations across the USA which are experiencing significant renewal and growth, and documenting the formative practices which are consistently evident across these diverse communities. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

24 Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

25 Ibid., 46.

situation, “pragmatic and experiential elements of faith as a way of life are displacing the previous emphasis on institutions and beliefs.”²⁶ *Faith*, rather than belief, is again becoming the “defining quality” of Christianity.

The emergence of this new era of faith is especially evident in “the extraordinary growth of Christianity beyond the West”, areas which he describes as “far removed from Plato’s orbit”.²⁷ Christianity in India, Korea and Africa might even be termed “postdogmatic”, he suggests. “The *content* of the faith of non-Western Christians is much like that of the early church, even though the embodied *style* of their religion often resembles that of their non-Christian neighbors.”²⁸

In an earlier work, Cox undertook an extensive study of the rise of Pentecostalism throughout the entire Christian world, beginning with the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906.²⁹ A number of his conclusions from that study are relevant here. First, Cox was interested to ask exactly why this style of worship and spirituality is so attractive to large numbers of people who were otherwise not drawn to the Christian church. From extensive and detailed analysis Cox concludes that the primary appeal of Pentecostalism is experiential and this experience actually moves people beyond their intellectual resistance to belief. He even describes this experiential dimension as “shattering” the cognitive frame. As a result, for Pentecostals, “the experience of God has absolute primacy over dogma and doctrine”.³⁰ Thus a narrative theology is the only appropriate form. People do not explain their faith, they tell a story of how their lives have changed.

Cox’s own analysis suggests that Pentecostal experience engages with, and helps us to recognize afresh, three fundamental and defining aspects of religion. He calls these “primal speech”, “primal piety” and “primal hope”. Pentecostalism is not an aberration, but is “part of the larger and longer history of human religiousness”, which essentially includes ecstasy. What religion is about “ultimately defies even the most exalted human language”.³¹ Religion must use symbols, forms of language other than the indicative and analytical, and sometimes therefore also the ecstatic. Cox believes that this character of religious language is God-given. It is the work of the Spirit.

Perhaps most distinctive in this form of Christian experience is the emphasis on “signs and wonders”, which is the Pentecostal expression of what Cox calls “primal piety”. Here Cox poses a question crucial to our study: “Why is it that while many denominations are still losing members, despite the religious resurgence, the pentecostals continue to attract so many people?”³² He sees here “a tidal change” in what religion itself is. There has been a massive dislocation and uprooting in people’s lives, through urbanization and the development of megacities. Two specific features of this “dislocation” are named. First, these social shifts have “cut the nerve of traditional religion, which is often tied to specific geographical locations and cultural patterns”. But the sheer struggle of life in the urban masses has also “taken most of the glamour

26 Ibid., 3.

27 Ibid., 222.

28 Ibid., 222.

29 Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Cassell, 1996).

30 Ibid., 71.

31 Ibid., 92.

32 Ibid., 103.

out of the vision of modernity”.³³ As a result, Cox sees a widespread search for new forms of community “and an effort to retrieve and transform old symbols and beliefs.” It is in this context that he sees a renewed vision of religion as *healing*. “The idea that faith might have something to do with the actual healing of bodily illnesses has reemerged as an important element in Christianity only in the past two or three decades.”³⁴ Ironically, in this time many middle-class Pentecostals have begun to “soft-pedal” the ministry of healing, whilst in other contexts it continues to be a major feature. Interestingly, Cox notes that in the Azusa community, it was the healing of racial divisions that was seen as the most important sign of the Spirit’s renewal.

Finally, then, Cox writes of “primal hope”. “Pentecostalism has become a global vehicle for the restoration of global hope.”³⁵ Here, there is a vision of an alternative future to “the good life” as defined by materialist culture. Cox discusses the liberation of women within this context, which is a paradoxical feature of Pentecostal life as at official levels women are allotted a subservient place, while in practice they are often very much in the leadership. Music, especially the influence of jazz in Pentecostal worship, is another important element in the maintenance of this subversive hope.³⁶

Collectively, then, Cox sees these three elements of “primal” human experience as being addressed in Pentecostalism, and thus they help to define the character of religion in our time and explain the appeal of Pentecostalism. What is emerging is a new form of “religare”, binding together these elements in human life. Here again there is a form of speech, through which people may engage with God, and a form of community in which needs and longings are addressed, if not always “cured”, and finally these things elicit hope in the face of otherwise bewildering and disempowering forms of life.

It must also be noted that Cox is critical of a number of elements in Pentecostalism, including especially the tendency towards authoritarian structures of leadership and, in some groups, the continued segregation along racial lines and in some also an emphasis on “prosperity”. In his later work, Cox asks whether Pentecostal groups are fulfilling the promise he saw earlier: “Are they heralds of the Age of the Spirit?”³⁷ The picture is varied. In the USA, he notes that white Pentecostals have been influenced by fundamentalism and have retreated into a more “belief-defined” Christianity. “But in the global South, they are more informed by an ethic of following Jesus, and a vision of the Kingdom of God. They have recently become active in social ministries, but the hostility they sometimes show toward other faiths limits their ability to cooperate.”³⁸

What emerges from Cox’s work, then, is an image of religious life that is not primarily defined by pre-existing institutional forms or belief-structures and certainly not in decline. The question that now arises is whether the vitality of this form of religion is uniquely determined by its distinctive theology and style of worship, or does it indicate something of wider significance, as Cox suggests, about the character and future

33 Ibid., 104.

34 Ibid., 109.

35 Ibid., 119.

36 Ibid., Chapters 7 and 8.

37 Cox, *The Future of Faith*, 202.

38 Ibid., 202.

of religion as such? Does the “age of the Spirit” invite us to reconsider the nature of secularity and the purported death of religion in Western post-industrial societies?

IV. SECULARITY RECONSIDERED

Charles Taylor’s comprehensive study *A Secular Age* analyses the nature of religious belief in the modern era.³⁹ Believing in God is different for people living in 2000, compared to those who lived in 1500, Taylor explains. As already noted, in a secular age believing is one of a series of options or possibilities, whereas in an earlier context belief was embedded in a “background” of cultural forms, so that in a sense believing was not a distinct activity at all. It was a part of their way of life. With the decline or abandonment of many of those other cultural elements, the character of religion has undergone a transformation. For example, Taylor writes of the “dis-enchantment” of the universe in the modern era, or the “disembedding” of religious beliefs, which has been part of this change in the nature of religious belief.⁴⁰

Without going into the immense detail of Taylor’s study, our interest is in his characterization of religion today. His argument is well summarized on pages 530-535 and it is here too that we find his positive suggestion of what emerges within a secular age. The major phenomenon of secularization is that “the unchallengeable status that belief enjoyed in earlier centuries has been lost”.⁴¹ Taylor sees both loss and gain in this situation. The “fate” of belief, he argues, will now very much depend on “powerful intuitions of individuals, radiating out to others”.⁴² Religious beliefs will not be provided for us, as part of the society into which we are born. Faith is something we will need to find, to pursue. One danger Taylor sees in this situation is the potential for a retreat into privatism, a retreat from the public arena into an essentially private form of religion. But Taylor does not see this happening, at least not necessarily. He sees a greater freedom for individuals to speak their own minds, on all matters including religion. This freedom is linked to Taylor’s positive characterization of the “secular” age. Rather than using a “subtraction” approach, in which a phenomenon is explained through stating what is no longer the case, he describes the current context positively in terms of a “spirituality of quest”. Along with many other commentators, Taylor sees many “nagging dissatisfactions with the modern moral order”, giving rise to “the search for adequate forms of spiritual life”.⁴³ Understood in this way, secularity is not to be seen as the loss of institutional religion so much as a situation full of promise and possibility. At this time, the promise is seen in what has been called “minimal religion”, a spirituality shared within a person’s immediate circle, perhaps with family and friends, but not with a church. This spirituality of quest, though it arises outside institutional and confessional structures, “has its own kind of universalism, a sort of spontaneous and unreflective ecumenism, in which the coexistence of plural forms of spirituality and worship is taken for granted”.⁴⁴ There is much in common

³⁹Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). For what follows, see especially “Introduction” and Chapter 1, “The Bulwarks of Belief.”

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, in many places, but for example 146–158 and 426–427.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 530.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 531.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 533.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 534.

here with the situation Cox has described. There is no single paradigm or model for “religion” today. Taylor uses the new word “bricolage” to describe this situation. Individuals and groups engage in something of a “collage”, drawing from various traditions and influences, to formulate their own distinctive “religion” or spirituality.⁴⁵ Implicit in this concept is the idea that it is continuously in process. It is a journey, not a fixed position. It is a quest, not a set of beliefs or doctrines. It is a form of faith, and as such it defies the predictions of the death of religion, though it coincides with the decline of the traditional forms of belief and religious expression that have given rise to a “secular” age. What Taylor has been able to demonstrate is that secularity is in fact consistent with religion, in this new form.

Graham Ward presents a somewhat less positive view of the current trends. Ward’s study, *True Religion*, helpfully identifies a number of elements in the emerging forms of spirituality.⁴⁶ By attending to these, we may better distinguish the issues and challenges before us.

Ward sees two major features in the contemporary forms of religion. First, he notes the element of *re-enchantment*. Whereas traditional forms of religion have been “liquidated”, emptied of any specific content or meaning by the forces of secularism, Ward notes in contemporary culture a “fashion for angels” and for apocalyptic forces and images. “The resources of faith traditions—historical, symbolic, liturgical, textual, mythic—are being endlessly redeployed”.⁴⁷ The “symbolic capital” of religion is now being used to give some kind of mystical meaning to places and people. These “religious” expressions, in health clubs, sci-fi fantasy, architectural design, for example, are not actually “religion”, Ward explains, but are “simulations of religion... used as an aesthetic diversion from the profound uncertainties, insecurities and indeterminacies of postmodern living.” Here, religious elements or symbols are used to create an illusion of transcendence.⁴⁸ So Ward sees a quest for “transcendence” or religion, but this “re-enchantment” is expressed only in commercialized and sometimes kitsch forms.

A second feature of the contemporary situation is *confessionalism*. He observes a renewed vigour in a number of religious communities, but this “turn to the sacred” is in fact a form of resistance to the culture of postmodernity and globalism. Since the 1980s, he suggests, there has been “a noticeable turn to “theology”, to arguing and acting from an explicit confessional standpoint.” Within particular groups, Ward sees a renewed emphasis on what Frame calls “belief”, a desire to hold on to what Cox has called “the age of belief”.⁴⁹ The world today is basically antithetical to the truth-claims of these religious groups, hence the renewed focus upon confessional forms: “we have strong theological commitments increasingly confident about voicing, and voicing aggressively, their moral and spiritual difference.”⁵⁰ The potential here for “culture wars” and new forms of tribalism is very strong. What Frame envisages as possible, Ward already sees. Interestingly, he does not refer to the resurgence of religion in the Pentecostal forms Cox describes, which are decidedly not “theological” in character.

45 Interestingly, Cox uses the same term to describe the emerging form of faith, Cox, *Fire From Heaven*, 305.

46 Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

47 Ibid., 130, 132.

48 Ibid., 133.

49 Ibid., 134.

50 Ibid., 138.

Ward concludes, also in common with Frame, with a call for faith communities to adopt a more humble position, still confessional but not of the defensive or oppositional character just described. Ward suggests that if different faith communities can nurture relationship with one another, they will not so much lose their distinctiveness or forfeit their truth claims. Rather, as they discuss and contest the issues of faith with those of different traditions, their own genuine faith assertions will be proved.⁵¹

Before concluding this consideration of the available options within the current situation, it is worth noting the distinctive contribution of Australian scholar David Tacey. Here we will note specifically his work *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*, which deals with many of the issues already considered.⁵² In contrast to Frame, Tacey's work does not ignore the reality of the land in which we live, nor the fact of Indigenous spirituality as an element in our situation. Rather, he draws upon Aboriginal spirituality to invite a re-visioning of our life, following the "de-spiritualisation" of nature. In common with Cox, Taylor and Ward, Tacey envisages a new paradigm of religious experience, much more of the nature of a "bricolage", less focussed on institutional structures, defined beliefs and traditions and more democratic, more fluid and more "immanent" or holistic in its focus.⁵³

Furthermore, Tacey does not see this new spirituality as a crass adoption of the "spiritual capital" of earlier religious traditions, nor is it without theological depth. Rather, it seeks to work with religious traditions, but in a new way. Tacey writes of a multicultural and genuinely ecumenical vision of shared meanings, religious conversations and commonalities amongst religious communities. This is not a retreat into private experience, though there is much room for individual journeys and differences. In place of a resignation into privatism, Tacey sees a generosity of spirit responsive to the "inexhaustible richness and variety of sacred revelation" from "the mysterious One" who is known through the Many.⁵⁴

V. BEYOND RELIGION: THE GOOD NEWS

In this section I will argue that the "bad news" of the decline of religion in its historic, institutional forms may well be a special opportunity for re-discovering the nature of Christian faith and discipleship. This is what is implied in the arguments of Cox, Taylor and Ward, each in different ways.

First we must consider *the optional character of faith*. Taylor's argument contrasts the structure of religious belief in 1500 and in 2000, suggesting that in a secular age "religion" is one of the many options for what we call our "life-style". But there is a great danger in this situation, that religious commitment amounts to little more than a *preference*, having no significance beyond ourselves. This is what people mean when they say that religion is "a personal matter"—it is an individual's choice and is in that sense private. Ward describes this optional character of faith as the "liquidation" of religion, often expressed in crass or shallow forms. In this situation, Religion is just one more commodity in a consumer market.

⁵¹ Ibid., 153.

⁵² David Tacey, *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2000).

⁵³ Ibid., 228.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 262–263.

What would it mean to avoid the “liquidation” of our faith through the optional character of religion today? This question alludes to a pathway well articulated in an earlier situation by Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is most famously indicated by Bonhoeffer’s call for a “religionless Christianity” and the “non-religious interpretation of Christian concepts”.⁵⁵ These ideas, however, have a significant background in Bonhoeffer’s earlier work, but most importantly in Barth’s theological critique of religion.⁵⁶

There is a growing literature re-considering the meaning and potential of Bonhoeffer’s cryptic proposals about “religionless Christianity”. Tom Greggs has argued that Bonhoeffer, although critical of Barth’s “positivism of revelation”, was not so much wanting to separate himself from Barth’s theological project as to urge that Barth’s critique of religion needed to go further.⁵⁷

While we cannot pursue the detail of this argument here, the common ground for both theologians is the Christological centre. In this theology, faith is not our own creation, but is primarily a response to something, or someone, else. Christian faith is the response of obedience to the call of Jesus, “Follow me.” Similarly, Jewish faith is a response to the infinite mystery of the great “I am”, the unspeakable mystery of the creator of the universe. Faith is more than the adoption of a series of beliefs about God. It is a response to God. As a result, all belief statements must be held lightly, since they may signify the character of God, as religious symbols, but they must never take the place of God. The same is true of the church and any other religious community or group. The church is not the object of our faith. We may practice our faith through the life of the church, but the church is neither the object nor even the source of our faith.

Following this perspective, we may attempt a sketch of what this faith “beyond religion” might mean. Here I would propose three inter-related elements. In keeping with Bonhoeffer’s earlier work and with the Christological centre of both his and Barth’s thought, the first element here is *discipleship*. The character of faith arises from the call of Christ, in what Barth called the “determination” of the human person by the Word of God.⁵⁸ Faith does not create itself; it is responsive to God. As such, it may include both belief and unbelief, in the sense that it may recognize the limitation of all attempts to formulate its understanding of God. What we believe about God is always inadequate to the reality so indicated. A faithful response to Jesus Christ means that the disciple is just that, a follower, a learner, one who is not in control or all-knowing. There is an essential humility in this situation. Greggs has suggested that Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity” implies the elements of “anti-idolatry” and “anti-fundamentalism”, each expressing this humility. Those who are disciples of Jesus will not confuse God with their belief system or the concepts of

55 The primary reference here is a letter written in April, 1944 and published in the successive editions of the prison correspondence: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Letter to Eberhard Bethge, April 30, 1944. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8* (English edition, ed. John de Gruchy, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). 361–365.

56 See particularly Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), Section 17 “The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion.”

57 Among the many contributions here are Jeffrey C. Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times* (London: T&T Clark, 2008); Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Peter Selby, “Christianity Come of Age,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (ed. John de Gruchy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 226–245, and Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), especially Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

58 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 “The Doctrine of the Word of God” (2nd edition, trans. G.W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975). See especially Section 6.3 and 6.4.

God it imagines.⁵⁹ Nor will they set God and their faith over-against the world, as if to “save some room for God in the world”.⁶⁰ Rather, a “non-religious” Christian discipleship involves a whole-hearted trust in God. In a sense, this trust involves more than we can say. It is as much an “abandonment” to the Spirit as it is a “decision” to believe certain ideas or doctrines. Sometimes this trust may not even focus on such ideas or belief statements, as is the case in Pentecostal experiences.

A second feature of faith beyond religion is *community*. The literal meaning of community is “life together”, a common life. In Bonhoeffer’s thought, for example, this meant the possibility of Christians living in intentional communities, sharing a daily life of prayer, work and a level of mutual ethical accountability.⁶¹ In his later thought, however, Bonhoeffer’s concern moved to a much broader interest in how we live in the world as such. It is the world at large which is the context of Christian living, not the “community of faith”, the church. This development in Bonhoeffer’s focus arises from the radical conviction that there is no longer a “sacred” and a “secular” sphere. This is part of what is meant by the “end” of religion, but that does not mean the end of the “sacred”, or the impossibility of living by faith. Rather it means that all of life, in every sphere of activity and concern, is seen in the light of Jesus Christ. This, as several scholars have shown, is for Bonhoeffer (as for Barth) the consequence of his Christology. God has come into the world, in Christ, and consequently it is the whole of life in the one sphere of our living, that is called into response to God. “Living in one sphere”, Keith Clements has argued, is a central motif in Bonhoeffer’s theology.⁶² There is no separate part of life that is “the spiritual” realm or the preserve of “religion”. There is neither sacred nor secular, only the context in which we live in response to the revelation of God in Christ. Life in the world becomes a “community of faith”, the context for a religionless Christianity.

So what exactly does this mean for existing religious groups and communities? Will they retreat into their own protective communities, as Frame expects, or will there be a new form of engagement with the wider society? Taylor envisages many small, informal expressions of the quest for spirituality. Ward speaks of theological communities whose humble but true religion might offer an alternative to the consumerist world. Cox sees the growth of Pentecostal groups in the global South as offering some ethical and political challenge to the dominant culture of capitalist consumerism. He believes many of these groups have learned skills, through specifically evangelistic activities, which could also assist them in engaging in wider movements for social change, but the suspicion of other groups, Christian and not Christian, has limited that engagement.

The “bricolage” approach to spirituality has been well described as “minimal religion” or “believing without belonging”. The call to “live in one realm” will not permit a retreat into private, optional “faith”. Rather, faith must take some *social and ethical form*.

59 Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*, 65.

60 Ibid., 67.

61 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Volume 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

62 Keith Clements, *The SPCK Introduction to Bonhoeffer* (London: SPCK, 2010), 39–43.

Bonhoeffer's theology calls for the formation of communities of disciples, engaging with the whole of life as the invitation to follow Jesus, to live in the presence of God. At the heart of such communities would be two things: a commitment to prayer and to justice.⁶³ As Jeff Pugh explains, when religion functions to justify in God's name the existing political order, it rests easily or naively with the suffering of others. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ, grounded in "the suffering God", overturns this religion and calls forth a new and radical form of faith, in solidarity with the powerless.⁶⁴

The question remains, however, exactly what it means for such communities to engage in serious and constructive action in the world today. As Bonhoeffer clearly saw, there are situations where justice demands immediate action to obstruct the systems of violence—"to put a spoke in the wheel".⁶⁵ But it must also be said that Christian faith needs a renewed vision of the positive objectives of our life in society. What do we hope to build and to preserve, not just to obstruct and oppose? It is here that we may look to Cox's idea of the "age of the Spirit". The Pentecostal movement, in its first expression at Azusa Street, saw reconciliation across racial divisions as the first and most important sign of the "fire from heaven". It was only later that the gift of tongues began to take this role. What we need, in the power of the Gospel, is a renewed vision of the Spirit's gift of reconciliation: between the nations, between religions, between the generations, and between humans and the earth, and all these as expressions of God's justice and peace, announced in the mission of Jesus as the "reign of God". Beyond religion and beyond the "bad news" of the decline of religious affiliation, there remains the "Good News", the possibility of a life together with God.

63 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the day of the baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Volume 8 (English edition, ed. John de Gruchy; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 383–90.

64 Pugh, *Religionless Christianity*, 101.

65 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Aryan Clauses," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: letters, lectures and notes 1928–1936* (ed. Edwin H. Robertson; London: Collins, 1965 and 1970), 221.