

Editorial:

What is the meaning of religion in a secular age?

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This issue of *Kritika & Kontext* addresses the question of what it means to be religious in a secular age. Most citizens of the North Atlantic states would agree that they live in a secular world: church is separate from political structure in most, and where it is not the relation is pretty low key; in most, religious based educational institutions do not receive public funding and church attendance is generally on the decline. So, given this situation, it is legitimate to ask whether in these societies religion will survive, or whether it even should.

According to some, the so called “New Atheists”, religion in all its forms is no more than a pathology that it is time to leave behind. They believe that scientific discoveries of the last two centuries have rendered the canonical texts of the Abrahamic religions not only false but even absurd. By contrast, most of the contributors to this issue would argue that while it is true that many factual claims made by Scripture have been disproved by science, its deepest teachings call for philosophical and not scientific examination. They would agree that if religious faith is to become once again a creative inspiration in human history it needs to be revitalized. And, that would mean not just to respond to challenges from science, but also from the changing relations between individuals,

and between individuals and their communities. Those of our contributors who speak from a perspective of faith see the revitalization of the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) in terms of a renewed emphasis on justice, charity and hospitality – not just toward one’s kin, but especially to the stranger at one’s door.

We have invited a number of leading philosophers to send us their replies to our questions. As it turned out these replies reveal different religious, philosophical and national perspectives. Herman De Dijn is a Spinoza scholar, a Professor Emeritus of The Catholic University of Leuven. He has contributed to a previous issue of *Kritika*. In addition to De Dijn, Allen, Connolly, Goodchild and Ruse have all sent us essays as well as replies to our questions, allowing the reader to gain a deeper insight into their positions. Henri Laux is the director of the Jesuit Centre Sèvres in Paris. His *Spinoza for a Critical Theism* in the “Spinoza” issue of *Kritika* anticipates, in many ways, the theme of the present issue. Gábor Boros, who is also a Spinoza scholar, argues for an open dialogue between believers and non-believers. Of the other five contributors, also philosophers, Connolly and Ruse, who bring a uniquely American perspective to our questions; Goodchild, speaks from the specific cultural milieu,

of Great Britain. Frantisek Novosad, a Bratislava philosopher, sees a strong connection between religion and political power. However, he is sceptical about attempts to “create a society without religion”. Another Slovak philosopher, Egon Gál, puts emphasis on the secular origins of religious faith. He agrees with Vattimo’s explanation of incarnation as God’s becoming human. Sarah Allen is from Canada. Her views also reflect openness and sensitivity to the question of religious faith in a secular age.

From the beginning it was Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* that provided the inspiration for this volume. This book written by a Catholic philosopher constitutes a major intellectual achievement. Taylor gives, in great detail, a masterful account of the development of secularity in Latin Christendom. He sees this as a move from an enchanted world in which individuals were open to forces external to them – in his words they were “porous” to the outside – to a disenchanted world where individuals cut off from each other and their world – again, in his words, they are “buffered” from their human and material environment. Taylor also makes an important contribution to the debate about the “truth claims” of science and religion. In his view all belief operates within a framework of background understanding. But religious belief operates within a “life world”: a framework within which human individuals cope and flourish. Bela Egyed’s *Questioning Atheism* is a modest attempt to familiarize our readers with Taylor’s text. But, in addition, we have included a brief comment by Taylor introducing Ivan Illich’s moving account of the tensions within Christianity.

As in previous issues, we have solicited essay contributions from scholars who have published works on our theme. Most of these essays were prepared specifically for this issue of *Kritika*, some are original contributions, others are reconstructions from already available material. Of the five essays, not including Taylor’s, Illich’s and Egyed’s, two address the question of the relation between science and religion directly. Herman De Dijn argues that a) while science and religion are different they are not necessarily in opposition to one another b) science helps religion to purify itself from superstitious and magical elements and c) under certain conditions science can bring its practitioners to a special kind of religious experience. In making the third point, De Dijn appeals to Einstein and Spinoza. Michael Ruse, an atheist philosopher of biology, also argues for the compatibility between science and religion, as long as religion does not make factual – science like – claims. What makes Ruse’s position unique, and what has earned him the reproach by the New Atheists, is that he takes religious orthodoxy seriously. He believes that a) the doctrines of orthodox Christianity cannot be refuted by science b) these doctrines may be challenged on theological and philosophical grounds and c) religious doctrine addresses questions that science does not raise, and it provides answers that science cannot provide.

Philip Goodchild, a Deleuze scholar who teaches theology at the University of Nottingham, is interested in the practical, socio-economic dimension of secularity. In the essay published in this volume, after a brief review of Taylor’s account of the process of secularization, he provides

additional evidence of the way in which modern economic developments since the 18th Century have contributed to this process. More specifically, he argues a) that religion has always played a major part in the conservation of economic life by providing the grounds for social co-operation and by its insistence that human flourishing can be attained only by renouncing worldly goals and bonds in favour of spiritual bonds b) that atheism becomes a live option when the orderly distribution of economic goods is achieved, no longer by Divine edict but by a self-ordering system c) that in this self-ordering system life is no less ascetic than it was previously and d) that, for that reason, it is less secular than it takes itself to be.

William Connolly in his *Letter to Augustine* takes the Bishop of Hyppo to task a) for demeaning human existence here on earth b) for his cruel judgements on those who do not share his faith and c) for failing to acknowledge that by his doctrine of lifelong uncertainty, anxiety and dependency he plays into the hands of the politically powerful institutions of the church – and the State, when the two are allied.

Sarah Allen in her essay throws light on Levinas' ethics as a uniquely Judaic contribution to contemporary discussions on theology. She argues a) that for Levinas "ethics" has the profound sense of obligations to others who are constitutive of the self in its very subjectivity b) that these obligations are not formulated in terms of duties, rather, they are manifest through emotions such as shame or desire which open up the self to listening and responding to others on terms dictated by others in dialogue c) that by revealing

to the self its dependence on others it opens it up to transcendence, thereby introducing it to "the true religion" d) Levinas' politics is inherently secular: it is an embedding of the ethical in human society e) that for Levinas Judaism is a religion of peace whose primary concern is to ensure peace with one's neighbour whether they be Jewish or not; in this sense Judaism is the quintessential religion for a secular society, for its ethical vocation whether there is a God or not.

Ivan Illich, who was best known as an exponent of radicalizing educational institutions, was also a radical catholic. We have reproduced selections from his dialogue with David Cayley. He shows us how faith is possible for one who has renounced Christendom. We have also included selections from Charles Taylor's introduction to Cayley's book.

Once again, as in the issues on Nietzsche and Spinoza, the editor has selected a number of quotations touching on the topics discussed in this volume. However, in this issue the quotations are, for the most part, from the New Atheists: R. Dawkins, D. Dennett, Ch. Hitchens and S. Harris, and some of their critics, such as M. Ruse, S.J. Gould and Ch. Taylor. We have also included quotes from William James as a reminder of what one of the greatest, most sober, American thinkers said about religion. And as a representative of today's Radical Theology we have included quotes from Thomas Altizer, along with Nietzsche and Hegel who are the key sources for his *Christian Atheism*. The quotations can be read in any order. However, some attempt has been made to structure them thematically.