What is Religion for Now?
A pragmatist inquiry

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Introduction

The rise of post-metaphysical thought from the late nineteenth century liberated those it influenced from the tyranny of metaphysical truth-claims about the cosmos, its origins, God, human nature, the relationship between them, and much else.[1] All such truth-claims arise from human interests and needs, and have no validity beyond that, Nietzsche taught. His American contemporaries in the pragmatist school of philosophy tacitly agreed: *utility trumps so-called Truth in our working understandings of ourselves and our world.* But powerful institutions with vested interests in metaphysical truth-claims have kept them alive notwithstanding, and most westerners have missed the post-metaphysical bend in the road. Thus celebrity view-holders like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, for instance, can still make a very comfortable living arguing the toss about 'the God question'.

In this talk I will leave them to it (with the traditional Buddhist blessing May all beings be happy!) and instead pursue a pragmatist inquiry – one free of metaphysical truth-claims[2] – into religion's historical service to human survival and development. On that basis I'll propose some themes on how religion may continue to serve us now, under our peculiar cultural conditions of secularity and individualisation.

The pragmatist premise

In contrast to most other species, human beings survived, thrived and transformed themselves by using tools. They used bits of wood to club down other species for dinner and to ward off enemies, and soon complemented them with sharpened sticks, and stone tools for digging, grinding seed and shaping wooden objects. Then came the deployment of fire – for cooking, pottery and metallurgy among other things. And so on.

But not all the tools our early ancestors created were physical objects. They also invented 'strings of marks and noises'[3] with which to co-ordinate the group – handy for organising food distribution and village defences. So language, too, began as a tool in aid of physical survival and well-being. It continues to be a tool – rather than a series of representations – that we can and do repurpose at will.

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[1] A sectarian split runs through much of western philosophy, pitting 'Continental' philosophy (the home of post-metaphysical thought) against the Anglo-American (or 'analytical') school, which still asserts the value of metaphysics. See Critchley 2001.

[2] See Gianni Vattimo's (2011) wonderfully provocative 'farewell to truth'.

[3] Rorty 1991: 5

For pragmatists like Richard Rorty, we should hone and wield the language tool to be useful, not to be 'right'.[4] And the more we develop and deploy our tools, the more this process extends human capacities. Post-metaphysical thought abandons the whole idea of a fixed human nature: individually and collectively we are always in transition – events rather than entities, unfinished projects demanding our own reconstructive attention.

Religion seems to have emerged as a tool, too, one which we've sharpened, deployed and then redeployed in much the same way as language. Archaeological evidence – for example, in the form of 50,000-year-old Australian Aboriginal drawings of totemic animals in desert caves, and the musical instruments, etchings and totemic figurines left by ice-age human bands in Europe 25-40,000 years ago – indicate that our early ancestors invented religious observance when adverse conditions threatened their survival and cohesion.[5] The birth of graphic and musical art (and probably the further development of language as well) accompanied this development as forms with which to express and ritually perform religious life, including peak experiences.

Ludwig Wittgenstein describes human beings as 'the ceremonial animal', and the contemporary philosopher Terry Eagleton calls us 'the linguistic animal'.[6] We might speculate that the development of religious discourse and ritual enormously extended the range and uses of language, as well as regulating human interaction and reproduction, and the induction of children into tribal forms of life. Religious moral codes enforced these forms of life, which reformers like Jesus and the Buddha later modified by overlaying them with universal ethical commitments, starting with compassion, generosity and wisdom.

By degrees western religious culture took aesthetic expression to greater lengths in the celebration of life, including everyday communal life, as well as communal commemoration of what we nowadays call our life-events: birth, puberty, marriage, having children, mourning the dead, and facing our own deaths.

For those of us who think and express ourselves in English, one particular religious artefact has served us and our predecessors to an extent that can hardly be exaggerated – the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (hereafter 'BCP'). It exemplifies religion's historical and multifaceted utility, and has been the subject of two remarkable studies over the last two years.[7] I want to spend a few moments on it here for that reason. And having started down this ethnocentric track I'll stick to it, purely for the purposes of keeping my argument reasonably straightforward.

The BCP first appeared in 1549, at a critical moment in western – and especially English – affairs. It sealed Henry VIII's break with Rome, which ushered in a wholly new form of political community that has since become the global norm: the modern nation-state, with its precise borders and exclusive

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[4] C.f. Rorty 1991: 3-5

[5] See the Australian Broadcasting Commission's 2013 documentary, *First footprints*, and Cook 2013.

[6] Wittgenstein 1993: 129; Eagleton 2005: ch. 1.

[7] Cummings 2011; Swift 2013.

sovereignty over all who dwell within them. It was also the beginning of the English Reformation, and largely the work of the liturgical-poetic genius, Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556).

The *Book of Common Prayer* in its successive versions was 'common' in two important senses. First, it set out to be common to the entire population of England (and later Wales and Scotland), the form of religious observance everyone was legally obliged to perform each Sunday, and also mandated for the solemnisation of the life-events of birth, marriage and death. In this way the BCP was very much *a nation-building device*, its ambiguities carefully calibrated to encompass several theological persuasions at a time when religious conflict was rife and bloody, and religious conviction was passionate. To participate in one of its rites was to have a living experience of communal belonging in which God, king and country overlapped perfectly. To go to church and perform a rite from the BCP was to act out one's piety, patriotism and civic inclusion at a single stroke.

The second sense in which the BCP was 'common' lay in its ability to capture – in scintillating vernacular language – common experiences of everyday life. 'More than a book of devotion,' Brian Cummings comments, 'this is a book to live, love and die to. This is no other-worldly or unworldly book of the spirit removed from the body, but a book of the daily experience of the body, and of ordinary routine temporarily endowed with a quality of the eternal…Religion is revealed as a much bigger, less private, and less sanctimonious phenomenon than many modern secular readers assume.'[8]

For this reason, many people treated their relatively cheap personal copies of the BCP as everyday intimate accessories, not as sacred objects. Surviving personal copies from Elizabethan times, for instance, display the jottings of their original owners: some are serious – updating the names of the royals to be prayed for at Morning Prayer, own-family genealogies, and even idiosyncratically correcting points of theology; but others include handwriting exercises, arithmetical puzzles, drafts of love letters, and lists of ingredients to go into that night's main course.[9]

In the heyday of the BCP one didn't need to be at all sanctimonious to find church-going fulfilling. Take, for instance, the word of Samuel Pepys – less-than-sanctimonious bon viveur, ladies' man, historically significant naval administrator, and famous diarist. His entry for Sunday 13 November 1664 illustrates how easily religious observance wove through a life well lived:

> This morning to church, where mighty sport to hear our Clerke sing out of tune, though his master sits by him that begins and keeps the tune aloud for the parish. Dined at home very well. And spent all the afternoon with my wife within doors and getting a speech out of *Hamlett,* 'To bee or not to bee', without book. In the evening to sing psalms; and in came Mr Hill to see me, and then he and I and the boy finely to sing, and so anon broke up after much pleasure. He gone, I to supper and so to prayers and to bed.[10]

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[8] Cummings 2011: xii

[9] Swift 2013: 40

[10] Quoted in Cummings 2011: xi

And what contribution did this down-to-earth religious text, the BCP, make to our language? According to commonplace wisdom, Shakespeare's plays and the King James Bible were the two mighty early-modern contributors to the language we speak today. But consider this: as Englishmen, both Shakespeare and the authors of that bible were marinated in the BCP's vocabulary, metaphors and poetic idiom. Daniel Swift's study reveals the salience of the linguistic debt in Shakespeare's case, and further, that several of Shakespeare's actual plots drew on the BCP's baptism, marriage and funeral rites. He turned liturgy into plot points in such major plays as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

More generally we need to acknowledge the enormous role religion has played in making us 'linguistic animals' ever more articulate and therewith intelligent – more and more capable of thinking through existential issues, and of interpreting ourselves and our predicaments. That contribution has not stopped at linguistic development, but has extended even more strikingly to graphic and musical art, and to architecture.

Secularity and individualisation

Less than two centuries after Pepys penned his unintended tribute to ceremonial religion, Matthew Arnold wrote his haunting lament, *Dover Beach,* over the ebbing of 'the sea of faith', a metaphor that our host network honours in its name. At this distance Arnold perplexes us about exactly what he's grieving. Majority opinion holds that he wrote the poem on his honeymoon in 1851, eight years before Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* and thereby shook the foundations of literalist Christianity. So in 1851 scientific naturalism was not yet the problem. Rather, Arnold belonged to the Victorian age's notably angst-ridden culture, and most of the pre-Darwinian angst found ready religious expression, as *Dover Beach* illustrates.

My own guess is that Arnold was recoiling from four emerging and linked cultural conditions: religious diversity following toleration, and thus the breakdown of a 'common' religious communion; intensifying secularity; and individualisation gradually eroding community. The image of the teeming indivisible sea receding, and leaving only the cold and sterile shingles (atomised individuals) grating against each other, seems to clinch the loss of an organic community underpinned by a common religious tradition, one that offered shared existential certitudes.

If I'm right, then from where we stand today we can see *Dover Beach* as truly prophetic. Religion could no longer fulfil one of its original purposes as it once had – the maintenance of cohesion and commonality of belief. But in hindsight we may question his nostalgia and regret: the slow-burn cultural transformations I've just mentioned were producing a different kind of human being with different needs and interests for the religion tool to serve. According to pragmatist wisdom, *what we are now* is much less important than *what we have the potential to become*.

Theological toleration and diversity of belief turned out to be a strength, not a necessary evil. After all – to paraphrase Stephen Batchelor – the truth is not metaphysical, it is practical and ethical.[11] Secularisation inoculated our public institutions against sectarian hatred, making them stronger and more responsive to our felt needs and interests. At the same time, the rigid, hierarchical communities that our ancestors inhabited gave way to the larger, freer societies in which we could make less constrained choices about how (and with whom) to live, love and work. Democracy and the semi-sovereign individual *co-arose*, as we Buddhists say.

Naturally we encounter pitfalls along the way. Vaccines have yet to emerge to deal with the periodic epidemics of psychodynamic narcissism[12] and socio-economic egotism that our western societies host, even as it becomes more and more patently obvious that our well-being depends on well-resourced public amenities serving highly complex and integrated societies. These ills tend to lead to another: the new information and communication technologies so often clog up with content designed to dumb us down rather than provide us with new means with which to deepen into our self-understanding and into those most fundamental of all questions: *how should I live?* and *what sort of person might I become?*

Religion as a malleable tool

In spite of the sweeping transformations of modern culture and society, and the advocacy of Messrs Dawkins, Harris & co, the religion tool has clearly not found its way onto the scrap heap of history along with the horse-drawn plough and the penny-farthing bicycle. Religious vocabularies and aesthetic repertoires continue to serve and enrich. Take for example Johannes Brahms, a non-believer for whom only religious forms and metaphors sufficed to articulate his most profound themes, among other places in his *German requiem* and *Geistliches Lied.* Or for another example the contemporary British composer John Tavener whose choral work is so influenced by Russian Orthodox liturgy.[13] Equally deep issues surface when authors rework old religious narratives, as in Colm Tóibin's *The Testament of Mary*, currently shortlisted for the Man-Booker prize.

In our largely secular societies, religion has had to find its due proportion, of course. As we ponder ultimate questions many non-religious discourses serve us well, too, and religion has to co-exist with them. Religionists have to abandon grandiose messianism and take a more relaxed, Darwinian view of religion's place in our overall evolution, past and future.

The percentage of regular church-goers in western society continues to shrink. Anecdotal evidence suggests that an increasing proportion of them, too, disbelieve the supernatural premises of liturgy, but

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[11] Interview on 7.6.11 with Rachael Kohn on ABC Radio National's *The Spirit of Things* programme at http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/spiritofthings/confessions-of-a-buddhist-atheist/2914590.

[12] See Twenge & Campbell's (2009) *The Narcissism Epidemic.*

[13] Tavener claims that all the major religions are 'as senile as each other', but still sees himself as Russian Orthodox, albeit not a regular church-goer: Tom Service, 'Transcendence in brevity', The Guardian Weekly, 19.7.13.

that is not going to stop them enjoying the fellowship of an ethical community and a good old sing-along. Belonging (and singing) trump belief. The spirit of Samuel Pepys still moves among them.

Particularly fascinating is the survival of the old religious traditions, not least as repositories of cultural history, among the thickets of 'new religious movements'. The BCP remains the normative liturgy of the worldwide Anglican communion in much the same form that Pepys sang along to – the 1662 version. (But apparently you have to shop around to find a church that still uses it in preference to the Lego liturgy of the modulated *Common Worship* launched in 2000.)

At the same time, important living philosophers like Charles Taylor and Gianni Vattimo announce their *choice* to stay within or rejoin the Catholic church – not on the basis of its exclusive possession of absolute (or any other) Truth, but in much the same spirit in which we might choose to live by the sea. As Taylor argues, the most telling change that secularity has wrought affects *the conditions of belief*.[14] While exclusive possession of metaphysical truth is no longer an option, the very human ethical and aesthetic fulfilments of religious adherence endure.

When we see religious development in this light, we may feel inspired to doff our caps to one of the pioneers of pragmatist philosophy, William James, for his influential *Varieties of Religious Experience,* first published in 1902. Here was a book about religion that didn't focus on privileged religious objects, but rather on their devotees, and the way in which religious practice enhances their lives. In what ways is religion *useful* to us in enlarging our lives? he asks.[15]

Ninety years later the then doyen of the pragmatist school, Richard Rorty, sketched the aspirations for intellectual inquiry and cultural development, which aspirations – I suggest – progressive religion today could make its own. As heirs of the French revolution, our public task is to work for an open and free social order in which 'every human potentiality is given a fair chance.'[16] In our private endeavours to *tinker with ourselves* in the service of ethical character-development, Rorty argues, we face a (religiously significant) choice between two strategies – ascetic *self-purification* or aesthetic *self-enlargement*. Self-purification involves 'the desire to slim down, to peel away everything that is accidental, to will one thing, to become a simpler and more transparent being'. The opposite strategy of self-enlargement entails 'the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and the future.'[17]

Self-purification presupposes a metaphysical belief in an original, fixed 'true self' (or soul) to return to, and rules out the post-metaphysical and pragmatist view of the human person as a work-in-progress – the view that supports self-enlargement, and returns to William James's basic idea of

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[14] Vattimo 2011; Taylor 2007

[15] James ([1902] 1994: 550-1) writes: 'Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, and any and every level of development, is the religious impulse.' In this way, he adds, religion 'exerts a permanent function' irrespective of questions of truth or falsehood.

[16] Rorty 1991: 18

[17] Rorty 1991: 154

religion as life-enriching. Self-enlargement attracts the moral obligation (first announced by the Egyptians and the Greeks) to *know yourself*, now precisely as a work-in-progress. And that task in turn requires creativity – 'the acquisition of new vocabularies of moral reflection', and our becoming 'increasingly ironic, playful, free, and inventive in our choice of self-descriptions'.[18]

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Our ancestors developed our religious traditions as tools in aid of survival, well-being and self-improvement. Along with other significant inventions, they have served us well and utterly transformed us into self-aware moral agents. To the extent that they remain living traditions they can go on serving us, welcome our creative honing in order to remain fit-for-purpose, and so accompany our future evolution. As Darwin put it at the end of his *Origin*, 'There is grandeur in this view of life.'

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[18] Rorty 1991: 154, 155