

Religious Imaginations and Global Transformations

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In an earlier era of transformation and upheaval, amid crisis in the Roman Empire and after the Visigoths sacked Rome itself, St. Augustine imagined a City of God.¹ This was focused on eternal truths rather than the greedy pursuit of pleasure in sensual earthly existence. But though its truths were eternal, the City of God was also a historical project, part of a struggle between God and the Devil in which human beings could take part. Augustine's imagination was informed by visions of a New Jerusalem proclaimed by prophets from Ezekial to John of Patmos. It was informed by Rome, which was not just the Earthly City of iniquity but at the same time part of the path to the City of God. And it in turn informed the Roman Empire, the history of Christianity, and countless efforts to build a better world into our own time.

Today we live in another era of transformation and upheaval. Responses continue to be informed by the visions of Ezekial and John of Patmos, and by Augustine's effort to distinguish the good that is higher and eternal from the more evanescent apparent goods of earthly acquisition and experience. But with a wider global consciousness we recognize that these are but a narrow fraction of the sources shaping contemporary religious imaginations.

Nor are religious imaginations limited to otherworldly evocation of the City of God. They have material implications. Religious imaginations bring a message of healing the world and building community. They inform ferocious ethnic and nationalist conflicts. They inspire fear. They inspire hope. And indeed, they inspire social movements that are not themselves explicitly religious but nonetheless try to bring utopia into human history.

I

Though some seek in religion the transcendence of worldly existence or escape from the sinfulness of a fallen world, others mobilize religion to

¹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God against the Pagans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 (among many translations).

engage the world. Religion figures in the politics of nation-states and moral projects like trying to defend the sanctity of marriage or life itself. It motivates humanitarian action to relieve the human suffering brought by human conflict, technological failures, or natural disasters. Religion is part of a global social ecology in which change in one element affects others.

Globalization has reshaped national cultures as well as the reach of markets, the processes of capital accumulation, and the ability of states to claim complete sovereignty. After long seeming almost an evolutionary inevitability, democracy has been unsettled by shifting media, weakened political parties, polarization and the populist appeal of demagogues. New technologies have brought upheavals alongside conveniences and capacities we barely contemplated but now find it hard to live without. Some of these technologies raise not just material questions about employment or privacy. They raise existential questions about what it means to be human and whether what we value in humanity will long survive. Though hope is widespread for technological solutions to the impending crisis of climate change, technology at least as prominently joins climate change as another source of uncertainty and anxiety about the future. It transforms employment and poses cataclysmic risks.

In this context, many rely on religion as a source of security and confidence in the eternal. Yet religion does not remain stable while the world around it changes. Augustine tried to align Christianity with the eternal truths of God and thus make it a source of stability against a secular world of constant change. Indeed, one of the most fundamental meanings of 'secular' is concern with the temporal world in which history and change are basic. But at the same time, Augustine was part of a re-imagining of religion – indeed the very creation of Christianity.

Religion has been transformed not least by the processes loosely called secularization: declining participation, assertive atheism, reliance on scientific (and other) efforts to explain all there is by only what is visible or at least experimentally verifiable, and simple worldliness. Religion has also been transformed by renewed religious engagements in politics, movements of revitalisation and sometimes purification, a resurgent 'prosperity gospel', and intensified engagement in eschatology. Democracy and nationalism have each been approached as though they offered secular salvation.

Religious participation may be declining in the West, but not without exceptions and influential political engagements. Elsewhere, the picture is even more varied. Religions shape and influence each other in new ways, including by new alliances among peoples of different faiths, by new or renewed lines of conflict, and by mediated force of example.

This takes place in intimate personal life and devotion as well as on the grand scale of global affairs. And it takes place not simply in schools of divinity or in some separate part of life called 'religion' but also in politics, economics, family life, genetic engineering, and war. And if religion is transformed, religious traditions and imaginations also give shape to the ways people understand all these other dimensions of life.

Religion today is not well symbolized by monks in contemplative retreat. In this sense, large parts, indeed dominant dimensions, of most religions are themselves secular, engaged in the world. Judaism has informed both the creation of the state of Israel, and recent efforts to make it more explicitly, exclusively, and religiously Jewish. Movements of renewal and purification in Islam have joined with efforts to seek power as well as defence against what has seemed a world hostile to the faith and the clash of Sunni and Shi'a religious imaginations has brought war. Evangelical Christianity has been transformed by a new emphasis on action – including politics - in this temporal and material world.² Some Evangelical Christians even engage in the world to hasten its end, supporting Israel and notably its claim to Jerusalem in order to fulfil End Days prophecies from the Book of Revelations, secure the conditions for Armageddon, and hasten deliverance from this sad world.³ Worldliness needn't mean a simple love of the world.

All of this suggests that to understand religion today, or indeed to benefit from religion today, it is best not to approach it simply as a matter of settled doctrines. I don't mean simply that there is contestation and innovation in every religious tradition, though this is true. I mean that we should embrace imagination as a central dimension of religion, making important contributions to the actively religious and also to the world at large. And I mean also that in the contemporary world we may need to reimagine religion itself.

² See James Davidson Hunter's illuminating consideration in *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

³ Examples in this paper come mainly from the Christian tradition, but this is a reflection of where my knowledge is greater not an intention for the argument to apply only narrowly. I have tried to give enough other examples to make this clear, though not alas to be 'fair' to other traditions.

II

To stress imagination is not simply to assert that we can think whatever we want. On the contrary, what we are able to imagine is itself shaped and channelled by received categories, available examples, and personal inhibitions. We imagine the world – and the question of what is beyond the world of sensible appearances – not in a completely open way, but influenced by what we have learned of how people imagined it before, what resources we have for imagination, and what we think possible.

We can term the more or less routinely available and shared ways of imagining the world ‘social imaginaries’. Charles Taylor has for example described how we imagine democracy and markets through imaginaries of serial individual actions, voting, buying and selling.⁴ These produce imaginations that are neither false, nor perfectly correct descriptions. They are constitutive. They help to make the reality by enabling millions of dispersed individuals not only to perform the required actions, but to think the reality of the larger system. At the same time, they can be limiting. Democracy is much more than voting, and markets are shaped by structures of power and constraint beyond the voluntary choices of individual consumers.

Taylor’s account of social imaginaries draws on Benedict Anderson’s analysis of nations as ‘imagined communities’.⁵ Anderson evoked a range of practices and institutions like censuses, maps and museums that help reproduce the powerful salience of nations. He suggested that the ways in which novels entwine multiple biographies into shared narratives helps facilitate the imagining of multiple more individual narratives as part of shared national stories. To say that nations are imagined communities is not to contrast them to ‘real’ communities but rather to identify the way in which they became real.⁶ This involves production of a shared national imaginary inside countries but also a transnational nationalist imaginary that reproduces the tacit but influential view of the world as a world of nations (as we imagine the division of the globe’s landmasses into the sharply demarcated pink, grey and yellow territories on maps). All this depends not just on unconstrained individual creativity in imagination, but on the social reproduction of ways of imagining.

⁴ Taylor, *New Social Imaginaries*. See also D. Gaonkar and B. Lee, eds. *New Social Imaginaries*, special issue of *Public Culture* (Duke University Press, 2002), and C. Calhoun, D. Gaonkar, B. Lee, C. Taylor, and M. Warner, eds., “Modern Social Imaginaries Revisited: A Conversation” *Social Imaginaries*, v. 1 #1.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1983 (Rev eds 1991, 2006).

⁶ Calhoun, “The Importance of Imagined Communities – and Benedict Anderson,” *Debats* 130 (1): 11-16.

Religion has figured in national imaginaries, but religion is also shaped by its own imaginaries. Muslims imagine Islam through quotidian rituals like prayer that help to organize time itself, but also through an image of the actually or potentially unified Ummah Islam. They may remember past Caliphates or civilizational insults. Learning the Quran integrates images of the lives of Mohammed and his followers with both ideals and questions about life today. Divergent tracings of Islamic (and secular) history join with (partially) different ritual practices and calendars and a different sense of location in the world in separating Shia from Sunni and hindering the integration of the imagined Ummah Islam. Islam may be imagined in rich historical detail and nuanced Quranic scholarship or in simpler ways. There are specific occasions and practices, like fasts and feasts, a religious calendar, reckoning lunar cycles, zakat as obligatory charity, Islamic finance, the Haj. And so it is, with varied specifics, for Buddhism, Christianity, and all the world's religions.

So it is too for imagining religion as such, distinct from any one faith or tradition, somehow a common denominator or connection among all. Most imagining of a category of religion focuses manifestly on the distinctions and common denominators among religions. A list is offered, similarities and differences noted. But latent in this same project is the implication that religion is distinct from the rest of life, that it is one aspect of a way of life and not the whole of it. Or, perhaps better put, that ways of life can be carved up into their different aspects and each of these studied (or lived) more or less autonomously. This is of course a basis for academic disciplines, but it is not obviously or simply a reflection of reality as distinct from a way of imagining it. Is religion (or politics or economics) whole unto itself?

Trying to demarcate religion and non-religion is fundamental to the cultural construction of modernity.⁷ Religion must be sharply distinct from the secular, and in particular from science. Religion is private and should not be public (or publicly regulated or managed). Religion should be celebrated on Sundays and left behind on weekdays or provide a framework for holidays and the management of exceptional moments like weddings and funerals. Clergy who have little public voice most of the time should appear when needed for a coronation, or the mourning of lost soldiers, or the effort to reclaim community after an attack. Or so a misleading normative framework suggests.

⁷ This is of a piece, for example, with Max Weber's notion of the differentiation of value spheres. See *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, this ed., 1968. This remains important, and indeed definitive of modernity, in the work of Jurgen Habermas. See his *Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon, this ed. 1984.

In fact, in the contemporary world, religions are entwined with nationalism, philanthropy, higher education institutions, money and markets, local community life, networks of mutual assistance, prisons, and terrorism. Religion informs militarism and pacifism. It is enlisted by those who cause wars and it motivates those who put their lives at risk as humanitarians trying to reduce suffering. It is invoked in support of the human right to exploit nature and the human responsibility for stewardship. It matters in public because it matters in private and vice versa.

III

The idea of religions, as the plural tokens of a singular type, comes not from within any one religion but from their interaction. What Karl Jaspers described as the ‘axial age’ in which many world religions took shape – roughly from the 8th to the 3rd centuries BCE - was not just a period of great religious innovation, but of great mutual influence among religions.⁸ So were the years of early Christianity and early Islam. From the point of view of each, the others were generally primitive, false, or heretical. Only rarely, if at all, were they simply others – other examples of the same larger class of phenomena, of faiths as we might say now. Islam was distinctive in granting both Judaism and Christianity special status as fellow ‘religions of the book’.

From the point of view of the Roman Empire, non-Roman religions could more readily be seen in this classificatory way – as instances of a common phenomenon. And so generally empires have recognized the beliefs, rituals and sacred texts of multiple religions (with greater or lesser claim that one of these was true and right). Empires distinctively needed to be able to imagine religion as a category with plural exemplars in order to rule over peoples who were differently religions. Some modern nation-states have embraced a similar pluralism.

But if this established a category of religions, it didn’t settle very precisely just what counted as a religion, and the entire academic field of comparative religion grew to address this question and situate each exemplar in relation to others.⁹ In the 19th Century, especially, the

⁸ Jaspers analysed the ‘axial age’ of roughly the 8th to the 3rd Centuries BCE as a period of great religious and ferment and the formation of enduring faiths and philosophies from the Mediterranean through Asia. See *Origin and Goal of History* (Oxford: Routledge, Reprint edition, 2011).

⁹ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

European colonial project of accounting for and managing non-Western religions was complemented by the continued history of missionary activity and the development of various forms of scholarship. European Christianity was taken as a primary and sometimes distorting exemplar (with of course its own internal divisions). Older efforts at classification informed divisions like that which divided 'religions of the book' or the 'great religious traditions' from 'folk religions'.

This effort at classification reflected the long European Christian struggle for doctrinal purity and against 'superstition'. Throughout its history, Christianity has been shaped by efforts to establish internal doctrinal conformity and boundaries against innovations, deviations, and rivals. Already a theme in the Biblical letters of Paul, this became central to the Patristic era and the great Councils by which the early Church decided core tenets of faith and questions like which texts should be included as books of the authorized Bible. Settling such questions and maintaining orthodoxy was an important reason for the growth of priestly hierarchy inside the Church. It helped to make a field of struggles for religious authority.¹⁰ Never absent through the Middle Ages, struggle within this field was dramatically renewed in the early modern era.

Both the articulation of heterodox views and efforts to secure orthodoxy and heterodoxy were intensified. Religious imaginaries began to include a new level of codification and explicit pedagogy. Among both Protestants and Catholics this era brought high standards for personal devotion. This meant imposing standards of religious practice previously reserved for clergy and monastics on lay people. It meant developing 'high' traditions of theology, doctrine and critical inquiry. It meant centring religion around 'belief' rather than only practice – though it could include intense emotion as well. Ironically, these developments internal to religion may have helped to set the stage not just for secularism but for explicit atheism.

In addition to the doctrinal struggles between those who came to be divided as Protestants and Catholics, there was a struggle for doctrinal and devotional purity against residua of European folk religion – against 'doxic' or less reflexively lived religion. Some older traditions would return in new, semi-Christianized garb, like Saint Nicholas as Santa Claus. Others were repressed or marginalized. But a key point is that the imagining of what counted as religion was at stake, not only what

¹⁰ See Pierre Bourdieu's interesting sociological account which among other things stresses the difference of both orthodoxy and heterodoxy from a more 'doxic' attitude of unchallenged acceptance as distinct from belief amid challenge; "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," *Comparative Social Research*, vol. 13, pp. 1-43.

counted as the ‘true religion’ of Christianity. Witches were not granted the status of practitioners of an alternative legitimate religion, not even as much as persecuted Jews.

This became part of the imaginary of the larger field of religion – and non-religion – that European Christians took into their encounters with religion, ritual, and worship in colonial settings. Imagining was informed by accounts of polytheism and monotheism, efforts to construct evolutionary hierarchies, and questions like whether religion had to involve belief in supernatural beings. For some, texts and explicitly stated beliefs were crucial; for others ritual practice or spiritual expression loomed larger. But always, imagining religion meant not only internal classification but opposition to practices deemed not to rise to the level of religion proper.¹¹

IV

My intention here is not to enter the perilous waters of trying to define religion. Rather, I want to suggest the reflexive character of religious imaginations in the modern world. There was already reflexivity and mutual observation in the axial age and other earlier times, but today it is all but impossible for a religion to imagine itself entirely in and of itself, with no reference to other religions. The others may be considered legitimate, despised as enemies, or condemned as heretics. We may learn much or little about them. But to imagine one’s own religion is inescapably to imagine it in relation to a field of religions.

Outside of both governments and academia, the project of identifying and recognizing religions was embodied in the 1893 World Parliament of Religions and its successors. Like the United Nations, such organizations had to decide which potential members to recognize. In the case of the UN, recognition turns not just on the socio-cultural attributes of nations – language, say, collective identity, solidarity or a tradition of folk dress; it is based importantly on representation by a state. Organized representation matters in the case of religions, as well, though not all have churches, clergy, or their analogues in quite the same sense. Dealing with other religions and seeking recognition gives an incentive to formalization or finding plausible substitutes. And the idea of ‘world religions’ placed a premium on being large-scale, supra-local, and/or transportable.

¹¹ Atheism was seldom the form of unbelief with which either the promoters of orthodoxy or the classifiers of religion and non-religion were concerned. Rather, they worried about animism, ancestor worship, and a host of ‘quasi-religious’ heterodoxies.

Note that all of this involves imagining and reimagining both the category of religion and specific religions. Religions are not simply external phenomena available to be found. They are not simply available as neutral facts. How we imagine them, individually or collectively, is always shaped by perspective, examples, and personal understandings or commitments. And it always has stakes. The way we imagine religion shapes how we value it, rely on it or fear it. It may be biased, but it is also a starting point for access to and understanding of the religions of others. Imagining religion is not something that starts over afresh every time we ask a question. There are established practices and habits and what amount to instruction manuals for imagining religion.

The instruction manuals are not just academic treatises. They include legal doctrines, like those on which the US Internal Revenue Service relies in determining what organizations and activities are religious enough to merit tax exemption.¹² They involve norms, like just what is ‘too much’ religion for a secular politician to bring into matters of state. Even more profoundly, guidance in imagining religion is embedded in music, art, and ritual. Choral music immediately evokes spiritual significance for some. A steeple, a stained glass window or a soaring nave may do the same in architecture. More basically, the imagining of religion may rely on the simple presence of buildings dedicated to some sort of observance or practice, be they simple, ancient mosques, multi-colored and multi-tiered Hindu shrines, or modernist Jewish temples rendered in glass and concrete. The architecture and the sites can cross religions as Muslims repurposed the once-Christian Hagia Sophia and Buddhists the once-Hindu Anghor Wat. The reproduction of social imaginaries makes thoughts and reality graspable – and memorable and moving - by rendering them in images.

V

Because reality comes to us partly through imagination, it is always open to creative re-imagining. No religion is thus merely a fixed inheritance, nor is any imagining of the category of religions. This is not to say that no one defends hard views of doctrine as received and immutable truth. But contrary to what some assert, even seemingly fixed statements of doctrine take on new significance in changed contexts. Even more, the fabric connecting doctrine to action, feeling, and understanding is continually rewoven.

¹² See Deborah Podus, “Churches, Tax-Exemption, and the Social Organization of Religion,” *Comparative Social Research*, vol. 13 (1991).

In short, religions are recurrently invented and reinvented. The 'great world religions' were themselves once new. As noted, they were formed amid waves of religious innovation and experimentation. Their early years involved the absorption of multiple influences. But they also engaged in the formation of doctrinal and other approaches to internal cohesion and boundary formation. They worked to make themselves.

There are innumerable 'green shoots' of new religious practices today. Some are absorbed into existing religious traditions. Some form syncretistic mixtures, as bits of the religious practices and ideas of the peoples who preceded Europeans in North America are drawn into versions of Christianity or of New Age spiritualism. Some may become bases for enduring new religions. In the meantime, all are part of a spiritual supernova, in Charles Taylor's phrase.¹³ Amid decline in adherence to some established religions there is an explosion of explorations and inventions of new ways of being religious. There are seekers after spiritual satisfaction who wander among religious. This may issue in new assertions of orthodoxy but it is also a process of change.

Innovation is hardly limited to the early years of a religious tradition. Judaism, for example, has both preserved commonalities and been reshaped in a variety of diasporic contexts. From the Biblical stories of exile in Babylon and Egypt forward through the celebration of Passover around the world this became a feature of Jewish self-reflection. Their faith – and certain key practices – endured in Arab empires and it became European and was renewed and reshaped in each context; it was enduringly reshaped when transplanted into North American settings.¹⁴ And of course Judaism has been reshaped by the creation of the state of Israel and its subsequent history.

So basic was the theme of diaspora to Judaism that the very term was long treated as specific to Jews.¹⁵ In the contemporary global context, we readily recognize a range of diasporas including Sikh, Buddhist, and Ismaili. Religious expulsions occasion some and religious identities unify each. The fusion of religion with ethnicity, in-marriage and common descent may be more or less strong.

¹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

¹⁴ The ethnographic as distinct from theological dimension is nicely explored in Ewa Morawska. "Small Town, Slow Pace: Transformations of the Religious Life in the Jewish Community of Johnstown, Pennsylvania (1920-1940)," *Comparative Social Research*, vol. 13, 1991, pp. 127-178.

¹⁵ William Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," *Israeli Studies* v. 10 #1 (2005): 36-60.

Beyond diasporas narrowly understood, religion is a central feature of global migrations. This is not new. The Uma Islam was expanded through Asia by a sea-faring Arab traders and trade routes became in many cases migration routes.¹⁶ European missions and colonialism spread Christianity and relocated Europeans.

Migrants may spread religions; they may be more insular and stay minorities. Religion often gives them unity both within new contexts and across such contexts. But migration also reshapes 'host' cultures including religion. Hispanics migrating to the US have boosted numbers of Catholics, predictably, but surprised researchers more by how many left Catholic Christianity for Evangelical and how they in turn are reshaping this tradition.¹⁷ Religion itself is reimagined as it becomes trans-local and is subjected to new cultural influences.

VI

As important as the reimagining of religion are religious ways of imagining the world and religious contributions to broader or more secular imaginations of the world. We can see the former in the missionary orientation that shaped how Westerners understood the non-Western world throughout much of modernity. The latter is explicit in projects like promoting peace and justice, celebrating family, or seeing God in all things and protecting nature.

In the context of globalization, thus, different religions (or sub-religions like Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians or Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews) are not just competing interest groups. They are sources of different perspectives on the rest of the world and different motivations for action in it.

Religious imaginations shape projects that are not immediately or only religious. This is evident in humanitarianism. A mission to care for all people and mitigate their suffering is a religious expression for many. People of faith are over-represented in both formal organizations that undertake humanitarian action and informal, immediate responses to disasters. The volunteers who tended to migrants camped in 'the jungle' of Calais in 2016 were commonly organized by churches. Those who give

¹⁶ See Engsang Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006; Leif Manger, *The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-Building on the Indian Ocean Rim*. Oxford: Bergahn Books, 2010.

¹⁷ See Peggy Levitt, *God Needs No Passport: How Immigrants are Changing the American Religious Landscape*. New York: The New Press, 2007.

succour to refugees in the Middle East are often devout Muslims who see it as a duty. We recognize the religious roots of both the Red Cross and the Red Crescent.

Religion shapes basic ideas of moral obligation. The idea of witness (*temoinage*) as constructed in Catholic thought, is central to the practice and self-understanding of *Médecins Sans Frontières*. While for some this is part of a religiously-inspired ministry to 'heal the world', for others it is a more secular effort to minimize suffering in a deeply troubled world.¹⁸

Care may be offered primarily to co-religionists, Christians caring for other Christians, Jews seeking to save Jews, Muslims trying to help their brothers in need. But a strong theme in humanitarianism is reaching beyond this. For Christians the Parable of the Good Samaritan informs the sense of an obligation to strangers and those outside one's own group or faith. Christianity deeply informed the notion that humanity was and should be a common object of concern. Humanism took shape in Spanish Catholic debates about the souls, developmental potential, and proper treatment of the natives of the Spanish colonies in the New World.¹⁹ Promotion of human unity remained a project for both religious and secular intellectuals through the Enlightenment into modernity. Modern humanitarian action, from joining Catholic Relief Services to making a donation to Partners in Health or Oxfam draws on this heritage.

But the idea of a clash of civilisations has at least as deep a grounding in religious imaginations. So do many of the specific clashes that create humanitarian disasters. Religious imagination can be fierce as well as pacific; it can be joined with nationalist or tribal understandings of self or 'us' against others.

The idea of civilisation itself is deeply informed by religious imagination. Indeed, from Max Weber to Samuel Huntington the most influential categorizations of different civilizations have been at least partially based on religions: Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and so forth. Chinese

¹⁸ See Craig Calhoun, "The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress, and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action," in Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, eds.: *Humanitarianism in Question: Power, Politics, Ethics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008; and "The Idea of Emergency: Humanitarian Action and Global (Dis)order, pp. 29-58 in Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, eds., *Contemporary States of Emergency. The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*. Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2010.

¹⁹ On the famous Valladolid debates, see Lewis Hanke, *All Mankind is One: A study of the Disputation Between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indian*. Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974.

civilization is the most important possible exception – depending on whether Confucianism is considered a religion. It offers an encompassing system of morality but is not centred on ideas of the divine (though they are not entirely absent from then Confucian tradition and still less from the rest of Chinese civilization).

In any case, when we think of religion as central to civilization, as distinct from personal devotion or theology, we stress the ways religious imagination informs a broader culture and understanding of the world. Crucially, this includes horizons of value, the basic evaluative commitments that put others into perspective.

Jewish and Christian religion played important roles in the development of Western civilization's emphasis on the significantly autonomous individual. Themes ranged from the prioritization of guilt and innocence over honour and shame that was already prominent in medieval Europe. This informed the pursuit of witches and a succession of moral panics as we the development of elaborate legal systems. Reinforced by the ideas of individual soul it informed the Renaissance and early modern humanism already mentioned and through it ideas of human rights as well as the notion of a universal duty of care informing humanitarianism.

Ideas developed in one religious and/or civilizational context can of course be adopted and adapted in others. Judeo-Christian ideas of humanity have influenced the whole world, but they also propose challenges, not least for imagining the world as a connected whole. Buddhism and Asian religions more generally have stressed the 'implicate order' that joins all life. For many not originally Buddhist this has been helpful in imagining nature and other forms of life not as resources for human exploitation but as part of an interconnected order of intrinsic value.

Christian Biblical teaching is ambivalent. Passages in Genesis (notably 1:26) suggest God gave nature to Man for human use. Man was to subdue nature (1:28). This informed early modern treatment of wild nature as in need of appropriation and domestication. This was in some tension with norms limiting individual appropriation: taking only the fruit of one's own labour, only what one could use without spoliage, and only so much that enough and as good was left for others. These were subject to interpretation and debate as private property became more prominent in the West. John Locke thought money abrogated some of the Biblical limits. Others have thought the power of technology did so. The new emphasis on limitless appropriation helped open Western

civilization to capitalism.²⁰ But it also helped pave the way for destruction of nature in what has come to be imagined as the Anthropocene age.

Of course, Christians could also imagine the human relationship to nature differently. Not least, as God's creation nature deserved stewardship, not only exploitation – and movements of conservation and management of natural resources have been informed by this element of religious imagination. God's creation could also be appreciated aesthetically and honoured as a gift and exemplification of God's love. As the hymn has it:

For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the Love which from our birth
Over and around us lies...

This idea that God's love and therefore God and spirit is everywhere in nature informed the pre-secular orientation to life that Charles Taylor has called 'fullness'.²¹ By this he means an experience of life and the world as imbued with meaning, beauty, and connection. This may be a subjective experience, but it is of a reality taken to be objective. And it can inform an orientation to nature as not just goods, but part of a higher Good. This can in turn inform a 'resacralisation' of nature, bringing Christianity full-circle from its earlier hostility to animism to the newer image of Gaia.²² For many, this is bringing Christianity closer to what Buddhist imagination recognized all along.

VII

Different religious imaginations foreground different themes and foster different sensibilities. They reveal different notions of what is the higher Good against which mere material goods and pleasures may be judged. But, as Gaia and Taylor's imagery of 'fullness' suggest, there are commonalities. And there are dimensions of life to which religious

²⁰ C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

²¹ *Secular Age*, p. 5 and passim.

²² The scientific pioneer of the 'Gaia hypothesis' was James Lovelock, starting in the 1970s. See among other texts, *The Ages of Gaia*. New York: Norton, 1995. Lovelock's usage was not inherently spiritual but his approach to homeostasis did emphasize the interconnection of everything: all life, materials, and humanity. Usage has evolved, often in a spiritual direction, as Gaia has become a frame for imagining life and the predicament of Earth and humanity. See, e.g., Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

imaginaries may distinctively orient us, and which we may miss without them.

Transcendence is a way of referring to many of these. Religions call on us to transcend our narrow selfishness, and to transcend view limited to the everyday and immediate. Holidays, fasts, and feasts are all reminders of a 'higher' reality – sacred rather than profane. The ideas of Good and Evil – as distinct from mere material goods or pleasures and bads or pains suggest something of that higher reality. It is one in which moral horizons are clearer and less utilitarian. This, in turn, is one reason why religious imaginations sometimes have the power to move people in ways far beyond what seems in ordinary terms to 'make sense'. The movement may be to self-sacrifice - in the service of causes that we may deem good or bad, Good or Evil.

Religions call on us to recognise the 'not present, not now'. They commonly emphasize a vision of the world in which the merely evident isn't everything. This is in stark contrast to the dominant 'immanent frame' of our secular, scientific civilization, the notion that all that matters is materially present.²³ But imaginaries themselves are not materially present in quite the same sense, even if they are materially powerful. Neither are traditions that orient us in relation to a meaningful world, a sense of past and future, and ways of understanding. Religions not only reproduce such traditions, they call on adherents to 'curate' and reinterpret them, to be their stewards.

Religions also call on us to remember people (and sometimes places or events) that have mattered to us. They may argue that those who have died continue to live in some spiritual sense or they may not. But faced with fundamental matters of life and death, even secular moderns often reach out for religious support and fall back on religious imaginaries.

What is not present may or may not be 'spiritual'. For some it may be another, perhaps eternal life. But it may also be the future. For religious imaginations may call our attention not just to the eternal, or even to attaining the Kingdom of God, but to creativity or what Hannah Arendt called 'natality'. As for Arendt, remembering great acts of politics like the founding of the United States may be at least as important as religious celebration of natality. But religious imaginations do, in varying degree, recall to us that there is always a possibility of newness in the world. This may involve the creativity or art or literature or philosophy – or indeed war or cruelty. Most basically, it involves the creation of new human beings. And with this creativity comes not only the potential for

²³ The phrase is Taylor's, from chapter 10 of *Secular Age*.

things to be better in the future, but important obligations to future generations, and indeed, to the Earth.

As the example makes clear, the issue is not just science vs other ways of learning. It is a kind of reductionism that may be adopted or reinforced by some scientists but is not intrinsic to science. For science may also give us tools for seeing farther and more clearly into the past and future that would be conceivable without it. But reductionism – and presentism – are widespread features of our secular civilization. Religious imaginations help us to be articulate about what we may lack or be missing.

It is important to recognize that secularism is not simply the absence of religion. It is itself a way of imagining the world and thereby shaping it.²⁴ One feature of the secular imaginary, in fact, is what Taylor has called the ‘subtraction story’.²⁵ This presents contemporary secularism as simply the removal of religion – myth, superstition – while the rest of thought and reality are unchanged. But just considering ideas this is radically misleading, treating ideas as far more separate and less interconnected than they are. Removing (or attempting to remove) religion from politics, economics, education, health care and other social institutions is also transformative.

In the past, religious imaginations were sometimes hindrances compared with the secular understandings that followed. The point is not that religious thought is always better. It is, rather, that secularization involves transformation not subtraction, change of perspective not simply truth. There may be improvements of understanding, or knowledge or practice – just as there can be when religious engagements with a changing world produce transformations in religion. But shifts in perspective commonly bring new obscurities as well as new revelations.

Secularization as subtraction informs the approach to neutrality that has led many to try to banish religion from the public sphere. It is one thing to say that public decisions should not be made on the basis of religious

²⁴ Old usage in the Catholic Church distinguished secular priests – those who ministered in the world – from members of religious orders who tried to sustain a purer life separate from it. On the complexities of considering secularism as a phenomenon in itself, not just the absence of religion, see C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, and J. VanAntwerpen, eds: *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), and M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen, and C. Calhoun, eds: *Secularism in A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²⁵ *Secular Age*.

partisanship and quite another to say that religiously informed arguments should not be admissible.²⁶ Attempts in the tradition of French *laïcité* to banish all religious symbolism from public places go still further down the path of subtraction. But still, the secular or *laïc* is part of its own imaginary, not simply the removal of superstition to reveal unvarnished truth.

As has been observed, all secularisms involve their own imaginative representation of religion. The secularisms of India, Senegal, France, and the US are accordingly somewhat different because they face different configurations of religion as well as other differences in public institutions.²⁷ More generally, secular imaginaries present faith as merely one option among many, and often as one particularly beyond the reach of logic and evidence. They commonly emphasize instrumentality over meaning. Resisting religious imaginations of the interconnection of everything they often overstate separateness of what to other ways of thinking are parts of larger wholes. Individuals and their autonomous interests may be privileged in relation to community (though actually existing community is at least as much a secular as a religious phenomenon). The very notion of an individual may be asocial, neglecting for example how much each of us can exist – and think – only on the basis of what we share, like language.

VIII

In short, religious imaginations can speak to contemporary secular predicaments, to political upheavals, global transformations, and the challenges of new technologies. But how they do this is not a settled matter of sacred texts, doctrinal elaborations, or inherited perspectives. Traditions will change as they are renewed. Religions will be reimagined.

The common condition is a combination of connections and plurality – both among religions and among forms of unbelief. We influence each other but we do not become the same or feel as one. Themes like community, or peace, or the value of life are not unique to religion, but religious imaginations are important sources and reminders.

²⁶ See the considerations in Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

²⁷ This was a theme emphasized importantly by the late Alfred Stepan. See among many, “The multiple secularisms of modern democracies and autocracies,” in C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, and J. VanAntwerpen, eds., *Rethinking Secularism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Where religion matters less, we need to ask how ideas or institutions have been reconfigured and what has filled gaps – or not. Religious vocabulary and imagination have often lost their purchase without fully being replaced. Speaking of salvation, sin, soul, and redemption has never become entirely secularized. Even where the words are used more secularly the religious roots are close at hand. This is why secular thinkers like Jurgen Habermas point to the capacities for renewal of radical vision and motivation offered by religious vocabularies.²⁸

Religious imaginaries are commonly expressed in stories, narratives, images, and evocations of characters. Michael Walzer has called attention to the ways the story of Exodus has informed not only Jewish and Christian traditions but also secular imaginations, even of revolution.²⁹ The story of Job evokes struggles between doubt and faith. And so in other traditions are the *Bhagavad Gita* and Muhammed's Night Journey powerful bearers of religious imagination. Narrative is hardly the unique property of religion, and indeed these instances illustrate the power of imaginative literature as well as the power of specifically religious imaginations. But in each case, they point to ways in which religious imaginations exercise an influence that cannot be reduced to propositional logic, a set of truth-statements somehow alternative to those of science.

The strength of religious imaginations is not in any sense an alternative to science. It lies in support for efforts to establish higher values, moral orientations, and understandings of what the world means – as distinct from how it works technically. Such understandings can be the products of creativity as much as tradition. And they can speak to the deep challenges of the contemporary era.

To start with, we live in an era where intensified globalization is met renewed assertions of national belonging and resistance. This is partly due to demagogues who fan flames of fear and resentment. It is partly due to the extent to which national and international politics and global institutions have all failed to manage unbridled pursuit of wealth. This has brought not only inequality but degradation of nature and upheavals in social and cultural life. Wealthy and powerful corporations keep expanding markets and technological systems that seem at once as irresistible and as precarious as forces of nature.

²⁸ Habermas, *Between naturalism and religion. Philosophical essays*, transl. C. Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010; and see Habermas's forthcoming major study on the theme. Also, Calhoun, Mendieta, and VanAntwerpen, eds., *Habermas and Religion*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

²⁹ M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Clashing religious projects and identities are sources of division. But religious imaginations can be counterbalancing sources of connection and unity. This need not take the form of merger and overcoming difference. Rather, it can be a matter of developing the orientations and understandings needed for communication and collaboration across lines of difference.

The same is often true with regard to nationalism. Religion can be an exacerbator of anxieties about global threats to national identity. But it can also be a resource for imagining ways to relate to people in different settings, with different identities. The 'great world religions' all encompass multiple nationalities and far-reaching diasporas. They have an interest in peaceful co-existence, though it remains a question whether religious actors will choose that over more conflictual projects. Both globally and in specific national settings, religious imaginations are potential resources for developing mutual understanding and ways of working and living together.

Technology is not only part of the story of a globalization that currently fuels pessimism more than optimism. New technologies are themselves sources of upheaval. Jobs will likely be lost in large numbers and not replaced with alternatives as desirable. Communities are undermined. For many, a basic sense of belonging is challenging. Existential insecurity is real.

The challenges of new technology are not only economic or matters of risk from hacking and systemic failures. They include basic questions of value, understanding, and social solidarity. Will machines in some sense be 'like' people, sensate creatures that should be seen as a source of value in themselves? Or, does artificial intelligence mean that human beings will become irrelevant? Will 'superintelligence' mean machines dispensing with people?³⁰ The world of AI is full of breathless predictions and hype, but this doesn't mean that the issues are not momentous.

Both religious and secular thought have taken humanity to be a unique species, distinguished by agency and moral judgment as well as intelligence. Religions differ in the extent to which they treat human beings as distinctively valuable. Christianity and Judaism have strong understandings of discrete individuals created in God's image. Imagining *samsara*, a cycle of reincarnation is different. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism all offer a hope of escape from perennial rebirth through merging with oneness. Neither the liberation of *moksha* nor achieving *nirvana* is quite the same as the Christian notion of heaven (though there are

³⁰ Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, dangers, Strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

variants of Christianity that come closer than others). In this regard, Islam is closer to Christianity and Judaism. But, to be brief, different religions face different challenges and offer different resources for understanding live with – and the lives of – intelligent machines or hybrid systems of human and machine intelligence.

Questions at least as basic are posed by genetic engineering. Catholics and some Protestants have struggled to reconcile contraception with traditional morality and theology. How much greater is the challenge of CRISPR-9 and related, developing technologies that potentially enable the selection of specific genes (and at least greater predispositions to phenotypic traits)? How is such technologically assisted and manipulated birth to be reconciled with reincarnation as a moral process?

Religious imaginations will be called on to integrate these new realities into religious understanding and teaching. They will also be resources for more secular, or cross-religious, efforts to make sense of new possibilities and ethical conundrums. For example, debates over the nature of the soul long provided occasions for thinking about what is crucially valuable about human beings and why all human beings have a spark of the divine or are created in God's image. Will they be renewed to try to understand the possibility of sentient machines or artificially designed babies? Or can religious or secular imaginations provide other, better frameworks for considering these questions? At present, we are troublingly inarticulate.

Has the advancement of technology made human beings like Gods, as Yuval Harari asserts?³¹ And if so which human beings, backed up by what structures of power and authority? Will we be content to say, as Harari does, that most of humanity will simply be redundant in the new era of artificial intelligence and technologically enhanced life? Or, will we perhaps discern reasons still to value humanity as such? Will we, perhaps, still commit ourselves to the idea of God, an uncreated Creator, as the horizon of value?

These questions bear not just on the standing of human beings as somehow 'higher' than animals or 'different' from machines. They matter for whether we will continue to accept statements like 'all human beings are created equal' or 'one person, one vote'. They will inform understandings of human rights, citizenship, justice, and economic entitlement and inequality. They will affect the ways we form relations of solidarity with others, forge communities, establish collegial relations at work.

³¹ Y. Harari, *Homo Deus*. New York: Harper Collins, 2017.

To some extent globalization already poses similar questions about how we should relate to those different from ourselves. Some people and some countries have been exemplary at some times. But it is not clear that we are passing the test with flying colors. We have a hard time achieving an 'I/Thou' relationship with other people, as Martin Buber urged, suggesting all human relationships are also relations with God.³² We are apt to treat others instrumentally, as objects for our own projects, not ends in themselves (to switch to a Kantian way of speaking). And if we achieve the I/thou in directly interpersonal bonds and communication, we have a hard time extending it to larger scales. Especially when we categorize others as different, when we learn of their existence only through the media, or when we think of them in terms of statistics from crime rates to market demand to migration numbers we are apt to adopt the attitude Buber described as 'I/it'.

Not least of all, in any catalogue of global challenges, humanity faces the risk that processes it has helped initiate but failed to control will annihilate us all and the perhaps even life itself. If so, we have become as gods only to preside over suicidal destruction.

Whether we understand it through the quasi-religious imagery of Gaia or in some other way, we face potentially apocalyptic transformation of Earth's climate and degradation of nature. At the very least, we must live under a new climate regime, with more heat waves, more floods, more fires. Whether it will also bring more famines and massive forced migration remains to be seen.

So far, human beings and different cultures have not succeeded very well in imagining the scale of the crisis of climate change. Religious imaginations have been engaged, a little, but have so far not contributed enough. We might expect more from religious imaginations, for what is involved is at the epic scale.³³ Beginnings are being made in better imagining what it means to endanger the Earth and imperil life.³⁴ Beginnings are being made at articulating the moral demands this places on humanity and on individual nations and persons. Beginnings are being made at building the better relations necessary to more effective

³² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. New York: Scribners, 1937.

³³ Indeed, both the temporal and the geographic scale of climate change are impediments to literary imagination as well as religious. So far there is no climate change epic. On the difficulty of rendering this drama without protagonists, see Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

³⁴ *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis's 2015 Encyclical on climate change and 'care for our common home' is one such forward step, itself based on the work of numerous scientists and theologians.

action. But beginnings only, and against a tremendous weight of inertia in global capitalism and national projects of economic growth. And against the deterioration of global institutions and transnational structures of cooperation.

In summary, we face fundamental challenges of globalization, technological transformation, and potentially the most momentous upheaval of all with climate change. If this is not to be the age in which humanity ends, we are likely to see renewal of both religious and non-religious imaginations – and material projects. These will attempt not merely to help us cope but to guide us through a future that is at once hard to discern and yet in considerable degree ours to choose. But we will of course choose our future through a scale of interdependent action that none of us can control.

We see renewal of religious efforts to grasp our predicament but not yet a renewal of religious imaginations adequate to address it. We see strengthening of religious and religio-nationalist identities. Seeking stability amid upheaval, these are too often coupled with rigid appropriations of tradition. We see, too often, the deployment of religious imagination in ways that block us from meeting the challenges before us.

But we do also see imagination transformed by recognition of other civilisations and traditions, both religious and secular, and seeking bases for better cooperation and mutual engagement. We see secular imaginations shaped by engagement with religion. And we must hope for more. Imagination is crucial because we have no choice but to try to remake the world, not just find rules for navigating within the world as it exists.