



## VISION-CENTRED RELIGION

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*The contemporary inclination is to interpret religion in personal terms. This inclination may be legitimate, but raises two troubling questions: one about the content of such interpretations and one about the conduct such interpretations sanction. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interaction between ideology and politics was dominant; in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the interaction between religion and politics dominates. Personal interpretation of religion makes this interaction hazardous. In this paper I consider personally interpreted religion with the help of an unlikely pair: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michel Foucault.*

“It is a fine thing to establish one’s own religion in one’s heart, not to be dependent on tradition and second-hand ideals.”

– D. H. Lawrence

“Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction.”

– Blaise Pascal

These quotations from Lawrence and Pascal set the parameters for what follows. Today more people are interpreting religion in their own terms. Doing so may be legitimate, but personal interpretation of religion raises a perturbing philosophical question about the *content* of such interpretation, and a disquieting socio-political question about the *conduct* of people who see their actions as sanctioned by personal religious views.

John Gray laments that “[c]ontemporary philosophy is a discipline in which religion hardly figures.”<sup>1</sup> Against this, Mark Jensen tells us that “[w]here the dominant theme of twentieth-century political theory was the interaction between ideology and politics...the domi-

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<sup>1</sup> John Gray, “A Rescue of Religion,” review of Leszek Kolakowski, *Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing? 23 Questions from Great Philosophers*, (tr.) A. Kolakowska (New York: Basic Books, 2008), in *The New York Review*, vol. 55, no. 15 (October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008), 43–45, here 43.



nant theme of twenty-first-century political theory is the interaction between religion and politics.”<sup>2</sup> Given what we are presently seeing of religion’s role in U.S. politics and in militancy in the Middle East, philosophers should follow political scientists’ lead and look again at religion. In this paper I do just that with the help of an unlikely duo: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michel Foucault. I also offer what I believe is an original contribution to consideration of personally interpreted religion.

### Going it Alone

Religion is undergoing a significant development enabled by the historically new prioritizing of personal choice that began in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Since then, “there has been ‘a huge anthropological change in favour of...freedom of choice.’”<sup>4</sup> This change has had profound effects on everything from people’s dress and diet, through their social and political views, to their most basic self-defining values and beliefs. Of greatest interest here is that the priority given personal choice not only fostered more options regarding religious affiliations and conversion, as could be expected, but had the more important effect of enabling *personal* interpretation of religion of a kind that prior to the 1960s would have been considered either heretical or simply abandonment of religion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mark N. Jensen, review of Bryan T. McGraw, *Faith in Politics: Religion and Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011, [<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24570-faith-in-politics-religion-and-liberal-democracy/>]. See also Thaddeus J. Kozinski, *The Political Problem of Religious Pluralism: And Why Philosophers Can't Solve It* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> *The Economist*, “The Void Within,” vol. 396, no. 8694 (August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010), 20–22, here 21, quoting Giuseppe Giordan.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Keen, *To a Dancing God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as DG; Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Aurora: The Davies Group, 2002); Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); William Hamilton and Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966); Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1961); John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), *Eternal Life: A New Vision* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Sam Keen, *In the Absence of God: Dwelling in the Presence of the Sacred* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010).

Central to the change regarding freedom of choice is that the priority given to individual preferences impedes critical assessment of personal interpretations of religion because individuals' interpretations of religion are seen as protected by the right to hold their own views. Not even the theologians and clergy of the religions being interpreted may assess or criticize individuals' personal interpretations.<sup>6</sup> In a word, prioritization of personal choice has enabled members of organized or communal religions with doctrinal orthodoxies to interpret their religions according to their own inclinations with neither felt obligation to conform to established doctrines nor concern about assessment of their interpretations.

Practically speaking, the most common form of personal interpretation of religion is when people reconstrue particular doctrines to better suit their ways of life. The reconstruing takes various forms, a prevailing one being the tempering of doctrinal demands that pose day-to-day problems, such as those governing reproduction, diet, and dress. These are interpreted as needing to be observed only at special times or in special circumstances, or as demands whose violations are minor and readily forgiven transgressions. Less common but more significant are reconstructions of religious doctrines as overstated for devotional reasons, and hence not needing to be taken as categorically as originally presented, or as having been articulated in ancient historical contexts and hence allowing more flexible contemporary observance. These various doctrinal reconstructions are noteworthy, but they are not the sort of personal interpretation that is the focus of this paper. The interpretation of religion that concerns us is radical in two ways: it is *non-theistic* and exclusively *individual*.

As a factor in the development of religion, personal interpretation is not new, having affected all of the world's great organized or communal religions. Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism have all undergone doctrinal changes over their long histories.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes those changes were prompted by personal interpretations on the part of individual members of the various faiths rather than by debate among theologians. Personal interpretation has resulted in minor and major changes to fundamental doctrines, in the formation of separate sects within the same religions, and in the creation of new churches or religions. Luther comes to mind as an example in the Christian faith, and developments like the Reformation have

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<sup>6</sup> This parallels how holistic and other forms of medical options have diminished physicians' authority.

<sup>7</sup> Buddhism, one of the world's great religions, is not categorically theistic, so not of immediate relevance.

occurred in other religions, sometimes producing fairly distinct faiths but more often resulting in orthodox and reformed factions within the same faith.

What characterizes earlier personal interpretation of religion and distinguishes it from the current sort that interests us is that those previous interpreters' intentions were to redirect their religions in ways affecting all their members. Interpreters were concerned to reorganize or transform their religions, invariably claiming they had discovered or rediscovered the true meaning of the doctrines at issue. Against this, the interpretation of religion I consider here involves no such intention; its whole point precisely is *individual* reconception of religiosity. There may be tacit or explicit invitation to others to appreciate the interpretive turn taken, but there is no intent to establish a new or revised orthodoxy. Contemporary personal interpretation of religion is not producing new factions, sects, or churches, but a new kind of fundamentally individualistic, non-theistic religiosity.

Godless religion itself is not new. Early versions are exemplified by Stoicism, perhaps particularly in its third or Roman phase. Stoicism had to do with conformity with nature and willing acquiescence to fate, and was non-theistic. A later example of non-theistic religion, though a critical one, is Ludwig Feuerbach's mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century rethinking of religion as anthropomorphic projection of idealized human attributes: projection prompted mainly by fear of death.<sup>8</sup> Closer to the sort of interpretation that concerns us here was Rudolf Bultmann's demythologized religion, or understanding of religion as being about human potential rather than a supposed transcendent or imminent deity.<sup>9</sup> But in such cases and similar ones, what is central is *espousal* of something, of a particular stance or perspective, and espousal as adoption is adoption of something not initially one's own.

Contrary to this, contemporary writers who have defined and most influenced current non-theistic personal interpretation of religion have insisted that not only must the impetus to interpretation of religion be rooted in one's *own* experience, that experience centres on struggle with challenged faith in a previously held religion. In this way current personal interpretation is *reactive*; it is the result of individual struggle with espoused religion. It is only in

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (tr.) M. Evans and G. Eliot (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, Ltd, 1890).

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

rejection of previously held religion that is not one's own that contemporary personal interpretation of religion arises. Non-theistic religion, whether it be the Stoics' or Bultmann's, is like theistic religion in that it is the *occasion* of personal interpretation of religion.

It is this insistence on personal genesis that poses problems regarding both the content of personally interpreted religion and its implications for social and political conduct. Present-day non-theistic personal interpretation of religion is not communal, but understanding just how it is individual requires recourse to both Wittgenstein and Foucault.

### **Displacing Deities with Visions**

I characterize radical non-theistic personal interpretation of religion as abandonment of communal *deity-centred* religion and adoption of *vision-centred* religion. It is of major importance, though, to recognize that for its adherents vision-centred interpretation is *not* abandonment of religion despite being abandonment of belief in God. Rather, it is complete rethinking of religion as directed, not on a transcendent deity, but on a personal vision of life's meaningfulness and aspirations to moral perfectibility.

The occasion for vision-centredness is, as Sam Keen puts it, acknowledgment of "[t]he crisis in the metaphysical identity of man reflected in the metaphor 'the death of God': in confrontation of "*the unsolved philosophical and spiritual dilemma of modern times.*" (DG, 84) Productive confrontation of the death of God provokes abandonment of theism and "a sudden reorganization...of perceptions, attitudes, and dispositions...satisfying to the maturing self." (DG, 144-45) This reorganization is the fruit of intimately personal reflection, decisions, and reconstructions particular to the individual. It is this special singularity that requires recourse to Wittgenstein and Foucault.

Present-day personal interpretation of religion has historical precedents<sup>10</sup>, but since the 1960s it has grown considerably, earning it discussion in the popular press and learned literature.<sup>11</sup> In 1965 *Time* magazine published a cover story, titled "The God is Dead

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: An Essay towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (New York: MacMillan, 1883), 16; also 23, 46, 116. See also Wright, *The Evolution of God*.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Streng, Charles Lloyd Jr. and Jay Allen, *Ways of Being Religious* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

Movement,” which focussed on so-called “God-is-dead theologians” like Thomas J. J. Altizer, Paul van Buren, William Hamilton, and Gabriel Vahanian.<sup>12</sup> Central to the *Time* article was that it captured how the thinkers discussed saw Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God as a *redemptive* event: not as a terminus, but as an event enabling a more genuine and intellectually mature form of religiosity. The key passage in Nietzsche is: “Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: ‘I seek God!’... ‘Whither is God?’... ‘I will tell you. We have killed him.... *God is dead*.... There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us...will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”<sup>13</sup>

There were other important contributors to the non-theistic turn in religious thinking than those recognized by *Time*. For example, John Robinson maintained that conceiving of God as an almighty person actually is idolatry and that “statements about God” are not about a transcendent deity but about “the ‘ultimacy’ of personal relationships.”<sup>14</sup> Donald Evans endorsed non-theistic religious responses to encounters with what he called “the Void” or the possibility that existence is ultimately meaningless.<sup>15</sup> John Hick supported the view that rather than worship of God, religion is about self-governance in light of insights into the nature and potential of human morality.<sup>16</sup>

Although he lacked the academic status of an Altizer or a Hick, Keen was arguably the most broadly influential figure in the death-of-God movement; he certainly seems to have been the most widely read. While still writing and still widely read in the present day, his influence was greatest in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> Particularly relevant to our concerns is that he made most explicit—if he did not actually estab-

<sup>12</sup> *Time*, vol. 86, no. 17 (October 22, 1965), [<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,941410-1,00.html>]; Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism*; van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*; Hamilton and Altizer, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*; Vahanian, *The Death of God*. See also “Is God Dead,” *Time* (April 8, 1966), [<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835309-2,00.html>].

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (tr.) W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §125, emphases added.

<sup>14</sup> John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 50; see also 45–50, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (Toronto: SCM Press, 1963).

<sup>16</sup> John Hick, “Religious Faith as Experience-As,” in *Talk of God*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures 1967/68, vol. 2 (New York: MacMillan, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> See his Amazon.com “Author’s Page” at [[http://www.amazon.com/Sam-Keen/e/B000APRXOG/ref=sr\\_ntt\\_srch\\_lnk\\_1?qid=1355394216&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Sam-Keen/e/B000APRXOG/ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_1?qid=1355394216&sr=8-1)].

lish—the key element of contemporary personal interpretation of religion: its individuality. Keen insists that “[i]f I am to discover the holy, it must be in *my* biography,” adding that “our starting point must be individual biography and history.” (DG, 99) He maintains that religion cannot be gained or sustained by “appropriating an event in the past—the life, death and resurrection of Christ.” (DG, 22–23) Keen argues that “[t]o the degree that I accept the principles of my faith from the opinions, conclusions, dicta of any external authority, I am living out another person’s life.” (DG, 129) Therefore, “[i]t is up to the individual to give his [or her] own life meaning” (DG, 95), and the search for meaning begins with a question one asks *of oneself*: “Is there anything in my experience which gives it unity, depth, density, dignity, meaning and value?” (DG, 99–100)

Also relevant to our interests is that Keen offers something of an answer to the question of why confrontation of the death of God results in found meaningfulness and value that still constitute religion despite abandonment of belief in God. He acknowledges that “[t]raditional theists...will deny that any principle grounded in purely human commitment is a candidate for theological honors” (DG, 104), but maintains that “[a]ny language is authentically theological which points to what is experienced as holy and sacred.” (DG, 103) It is how the individual perceives and regards meaningfulness and value that determines their religious nature. For Keen, “[t]he crisis in the metaphysical identity of man, reflected in the metaphor ‘the death of God,’ remains *the* unsolved philosophical and spiritual dilemma of modern times,” and resolving the dilemma requires finding meaning and value in one’s life. (DG, 84) Doing so begins with confrontation of the dilemma, and confronting it successfully results in “locating the holy in the spiritual depths rather than the heights—in the quotidian rather than the supernatural.” Keen maintains that when we accomplish this, only “the form and imagery, not the substance, of the religious consciousness is changed.” (DG, 104) This is why when we discover meaning “at the foundation of personal identity, we have every right to use the ancient language of the holy.” (DG, 103)

Frederick Streng, Charles Lloyd Jr., and Jay Allen attempted to impose order on developments in the interpretation of religion and described the ongoing changes in terms of four successive stages.<sup>18</sup> According to them, beginning with initial commitment to theism, the process of personal interpretation of religion starts with realization that much or all of what one is expected to believe is not sustainable.

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<sup>18</sup> Streng, Lloyd Jr. and Allen, *Ways of Being Religious*.

This is stage one. The realization initially prompts negative responses such as feelings of guilt, unworthiness, and alienation, which in turn provokes profound self-reflection that in due course leads to stage two.

Regarding the first stage, the focal point of doubts for many is often the irreconcilability of belief in a perfect and all-good God and the undeniable reality of evil and injustice in the world. The focus may also be more abstract, involving inability to accept recondite theological conceptions of God. An example is the conception of God produced in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Anselm of Canterbury, which held that God can be understood and defined only as *that than which no greater can be conceived*.<sup>19</sup> According to Anselm, the being of God can only be grasped as extant perfection, but perfection is comprehensible only as complete in consisting of every possible excellence. For many, Anselm's was the terminal point in the evolution of conception of God from its beginnings in idolatry through its anthropomorphic adolescence; however, it is a conception that leaves most believers perplexed regarding how to pray to a God so conceived and what point rituals then have.

The second stage of the progression involves efforts at reorganizing and restructuring beliefs held to better deal with the dissonance that arises in stage one. Stage two usually involves identifying what is most worrying about beliefs held and considering the implications of changing or abandoning those beliefs. Though not specifically mentioned by Streng and company, it would seem that it is in stage two that individuals manage to differentiate between the value they put on religiosity and the particular content their religiosity has had prior to the onset of the doubts prompting stage one.

Stage three begins with recognition that radical change is necessary and continues with the working out of a personal response to the volatile combination of valued religiosity and unacceptable doctrinal content. It is this stage that Keen focuses on, and the one which most concerns us, because it is this response that shapes the new focus of personally interpreted religion.

Assuming productivity at the third stage, stage four is the working out of a social interpretation of the personal response: a general-

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<sup>19</sup> W. I. Matson, *The Existence of God* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 44-47. This idea, together with misconception of existence as a property, led Anselm to frame the Ontological Argument, which claims to establish God's existence *a priori*: if God has every perfection, and existence is a perfection, God must have existence since it is self-contradictory to assert that the Being with every perfection lacks one perfection.



izing and applying-to-others of one's own confrontation and overcoming of the death of God. This is where Streng and his co-authors part company with Keen, who, while more than ready to invite others to tell their stories, is unwilling to impose his own on them. (DG, 100) For Keen, the personal response achieved at stage three is the inception of personally interpreted religion, and it remains wholly personal; it cannot be tailored to others who must themselves work their way through to their own responses or religious visions.

### **The Matter of Content**

The question raised by stage three of the progression Streng and company describe is about the actual content of individuals' personal interpretations of religion. Attempts to answer this question invariably involve appeals to *spirituality*. Belief in God is thought by Keen and others to be neither exhaustive of nor necessary to spirituality. Belief in God, they hold, is just one form of spirituality. For them, the non-theistic vision acquired by some in stage three of the progression still constitutes possession of spirituality despite abandonment of God. Unfortunately, the notion of deity-free spirituality is elusive, which is why some lament that there is "not an insignificant group" of individuals who today try to be "spiritual but not religious," in the theistic sense, without it being clear just what that amounts to.<sup>20</sup>

A typical dictionary defines the spiritual only in a negative way by opposing it to the material and then unhelpfully identifying the spiritual with the sacred or religious and with the soul or spirit.<sup>21</sup> Basically, spirituality is defined in contrast to materiality and as opposed to concern with materiality, but this is of no use regarding the actual content of Godless spirituality. In the end, I conclude that "spirituality" is one of those pious-thought words with what A. J. Ayer once called "wooly uplift."<sup>22</sup> My impression is that non-theistic spirituality is most widely understood as a state of mind, even a mood people attain in certain situations, but which they do not understand beyond feeling that, for the moment, they are in touch with something important. This impression is supported by the consistency with which non-theistic people resort to aesthetic experience regarding art or music to illustrate what they mean by spirit-

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<sup>20</sup> Raymond J. De Souza, "Package Deal," *National Post*, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010, A10.

<sup>21</sup> D. Thompson, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1342.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1947).

uality. These appeals come to saying that individuals take themselves to be experiencing the spiritual when they feel awareness of the timeless value of something.

Rather than rely on the ambiguous notion of non-theistic spirituality, I am describing personal interpretation of religion as adoption of a *vision*. I choose the term “vision” because of its historical connection with deity-centred religion in its use to describe epiphanies or visitations, but while I want the word “vision” to connote the having of an epiphany, it must be clear that “vision” as used here does not denote a visitation. We are not talking about apparitions at all. Rather, the vision is recognition of a *mode of being*: an attainable way of life, or better, *form* of life. This is where Wittgenstein comes in, because he offered an understanding of being religious as the having of an ever-present picture: a self- and action-defining view of one’s reality, world, conduct, and self.

### Wittgenstein and Foucault

The central role of personal experience in vision-centred religion brings out how it is indeed vision-based and not belief-based as is traditional theistic religion. The content of vision-centred religion is not fundamentally cognitive because vision-centred religion is *attitudinal*. Wittgenstein captures the essence of this idea when he describes being religious in terms of a “picture” to convey its nature.<sup>23</sup> He asks us to consider “that a certain picture might play the role of constantly admonishing me, or I always think of it.” Wittgenstein then observes that there is “an enormous difference...between those people for whom the picture is constantly in the foreground, and the others who just [do not] use it at all.”<sup>24</sup>

Being religious, then, is having a picture ever in mind: a picture that is totalizing in affecting and shaping everything one thinks and does. Importantly, Wittgenstein notes that this picture-understanding of religion is not at odds with description of being

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<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein did not address what I am calling vision-centred religion except by implication. His concern was to describe being religious in the broad sense. Wittgenstein's views were endorsed by a number of philosophers of religion who referred to his understanding of religion as “fideism,” notably D. Z. Phillips in *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Schocken Press, 1970).

<sup>24</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 56. Those unfamiliar with Wittgenstein's work should not confuse these remarks with his picture-theory of meaning.

religious in terms of holding beliefs. But this is not because he thinks that, ultimately, being religious is a matter of holding certain beliefs. Rather it is because “there is this extraordinary use of the word ‘believe.’ One talks of believing and at the same time one doesn’t use ‘believe’ as one does ordinarily.”<sup>25</sup> What is being talked about is not the holding of beliefs but rather the having of a belief-determining picture constantly in mind, one that molds and conditions attitudes and behaviour by shaping perception of the world as sacred or holy, for instance in manifesting meaningfulness or moral integration.

The Wittgensteinian view of being religious as the dominance of a picture, of a way of seeing oneself and everything around one, provides us with a way of better understanding what it is that those who personally interpret religion achieve when they confront the death of God. If productive in Keen’s sense, the confrontation results in coming to have a picture of oneself and one’s world, a picture that constantly admonishes one to think and behave in a certain manner and perhaps especially to hold certain aspirations.

However, if acquisition of the life-altering picture is the inception of vision-centred religiosity, the trouble is that the scope of the change effected seems too great to be a matter of discarding one perspective or attitude and adopting another. The adoption of a new Wittgensteinian picture on confronting the death of God is too profound a change to understand simply as coming to see things in a new way. This is where Foucault is of use.

The adoption of vision-centred religion is the abandonment of one picture and the embracing of another, but the change—at least in the case of religion—is too holistic and consequential to be purely attitudinal. Foucault provides a way of better understanding that what occurs when individuals confront the death of God and adopt vision-centred religion is not a matter of subjects changing their minds but of subjects changing *as subjects*.

Foucault understands ethics as primarily about the self.<sup>26</sup> For him, ethics is mainly self-directed rather than other-directed; ethics is about “the self’s relationship to itself” first, and only then about behaviour toward others.<sup>27</sup> Foucault tells us that for the Greeks, *ethos* was “deportment and the way to behave. It was the subject’s

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<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, (tr.) R. Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1988); C. G. Prado, *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Arnold Davidson, “Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics,” in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, (ed.) D. C. Hoy (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 221–33, here 221.

mode of being and a certain manner of acting.”<sup>28</sup> It is then the subject’s mode of being that determines behaviour toward others. The relevance of this conception of ethics to vision-centred religiosity is that it provides a model for better understanding its nature.

The key point is that, for Foucault, ethics is above all about “the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject.”<sup>29</sup> In renouncing deity-centred religion and embracing vision-centred religion, a subject ceases to see meaning and value as deriving from God and instead sees them as residing in his or her own nature and potential. This is not simply a change of beliefs. It is a fundamental change of subjectivity; it is a turning of oneself into a new subject, a new subject whose behaviour is then different. Confrontation of the death of God results in the redefinition of the subject because it is now a subject shaped by a new and all-encompassing perspective, a novel Wittgensteinian picture that defines a new form of life.<sup>30</sup>

Seeing the results of productive confrontation of the death of God as Foucauldian remaking of the subject explains the extensiveness and pervasiveness of personal vision-centred interpretation of religion far better than does merely talking about new perspectives, or points of view or attitudes. Vision-centredness is not just a new outlook; it is a new subjectivity.

The root of vision-centred religion is a person’s own struggle out of a subjectivity that no longer works, a subjectivity defined by integral belief in a deity. Vision-centredness is unlike other non-theistic options, such as Bultmann’s demythologized religion, because it is not merely a stripping away of theism and reconstruing references to God, to angels and devils, to heaven and hell, as the employment of uplifting metaphors and allegories. That alternative to theism leaves in place too much that is communal, too much that is imposed on the self by others. What Keen and like-minded individuals seek in productive confrontation of the death of God is purely personal edification and reorientation. To put it provocatively, what

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *The Final Foucault*, (ed.) J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 1–20, here 6.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” afterword to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1983), 208–26, here 208–209.

<sup>30</sup> What is missing here is the role of power relations in the redefinition of subjects. Keen ignores external influences, taking it that individuals are capable of redefining themselves.

is sought is not just dismissal of the existence of an *external* divinity but achievement of individual *internal* divinity.<sup>31</sup>

### **A Step Forward?**

Keen's search for internal sacredness is fuelled by the fact that for whatever intellectual or psychological reasons, religion continues to be valued by him and others despite their inability to maintain faith in the existence of God. But while understanding what is retained of religion when God is abandoned is not easy, vision-centredness is not the embracing of a secular ethic or way of life. Despite explicit rejection of belief in a transcendent deity, vision-centred religion claims still to be *religion*.

Prompted by, but separate from the turmoil of confronting the death of God, the embracing of vision-centred religion essentially is the reconceptualizing of religion as a dominant and all-encompassing view of life as meaningful and the self as morally perfectible. This vision displaces the deity of traditional theistic religion, thereby recasting religious language as figurative and reconstruing references to God, to divine will, to divine law, to heaven and hell or the afterlife, and to the soul, as metaphorical rather than literal. Theistic religion's God is reconceived as an allegorical figure, a symbol of human perfectibility, rather than an objectively existent deity.

In the end, how vision-centredness remains religion has less to do with philosophy than with psychology: the all-pervasive and subjectivity-defining role of the Wittgensteinian picture in adherents' awareness lends it an importance that demands special observance. The omnipresence of the picture and its unceasing shaping of subjectivity through its admonitory function elevate it to the status of sacredness or holiness in adherents' thought and estimation.

This is why, despite their renunciation of traditional religion's God, espousal of vision-centred religion is not seen by its adherents as the embracing of an alternative religious position. They do not see vision-centred religion as opposed to traditional deity-centred religion; rather, they see it as the intellectual maturation of theism.

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<sup>31</sup> But even Keen has not quite let go of theism. Forty years after his trendsetting *To a Dancing God*, he wrote: "We cannot easily locate God in the house of our longing.... God's missing presence echoes throughout the empty rooms.... We exist in a God-shaped vacuum. That which is no longer present...gives shape to our aspirations and longings." (Keen, *In the Absence of God*, 3)

Adherents of vision-centred religion see its espousal as finally coming to understand the *real* nature of religion. Confrontation of the death of God, then, is perceived as a step forward, a moving beyond the entrenched mythology that has dominated religion for thousands of years. There may be some truth to all of this, and for many, vision-centredness may prove a more productive and rewarding kind of religiosity than traditional deity-centred faith. Moreover, by having recourse to Wittgenstein and Foucault, it becomes clearer what it is to embrace vision-centred religion. But there is still a serious practical problem.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the interaction between politics and religion has increased significantly in our time. We are seeing more and more reliance on religious beliefs and alliances in the formulation, justification, and implementation of political positions and agendas. One need only look at a few headlines to see that religion has become an integral element of political activity.

Unfortunately, religion's new political importance poses enough issues without adding to them the likely consequences of people acting in socially detrimental ways that are first prompted and then justified by personal—and hence relativistic—religious visions. Regrettably, matters are worsened by the increasing contemporary determination to uncritically protect freedom of religion and what is done in its name. For instance, there are presently efforts being made to enact defamation laws to protect “systems of belief” from censure.<sup>32</sup> If enacted, such laws could silence legitimate criticism of communal or personal religious views motivating conduct with negative social and political implications and consequences. Moreover, there are no established criteria for determining what is and is not religious, so the door is open for individuals and groups to consider almost anything as covered by their religious views and so protected from criticism.

The practical problem is that vision-centred religion is personal, private; it is not communal, hence it is not governed by accessible doctrinal guidelines or balanced, ongoing learned and public assessment and monitoring. Vision-centredness is, in fact, a long step onto the slippery slope to arbitrary validation of any action whatsoever on the grounds of claimed and effectively uncontested personal enlightenment. Vision-centredness effectively relativizes religion, one of the most potent of all stimuli to dedicated endeavour,

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<sup>32</sup> Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk, *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1–3.

to individual perspectives. Philosophers need to take a hard look at personal interpretation of religion.

### **Anthropomorphism's Role**

I want to close with a point that I have not seen made elsewhere, which is that when we look beneath the shift from deity-centred to vision-centred religion, we find that anthropomorphism plays a surprising pivotal role in the formation of the new, subject-changing Wittgensteinian picture. At first sight, vision-centred religion appears to some as the maturing of deity-centred religion into a new way of making the most of human life, and while this may look like a move forward, what is interesting about vision-centredness is that it presupposes the same primitive conceptual move as does the deity-centred religion it displaces.

Vision-centred religion is enabled by what we can describe as preconditional anthropomorphism. To the extent that anthropomorphism is operant in the enablement of deity-centred religion, it plays basically the same role in the enabling of vision-centred religion. The way it does so proceeds in three steps. First, idealizations of some of our own attributes are subliminally projected outward as existing in their perfect form in God when a deity is conceived. This step is shared with deity-centred religion. Second, in the confrontation of the death of God, the projected attributes are effectively exalted *in themselves* as holy or sacred when the existence of God is denied and the attributes are recognized as independent of the God denied. This is new in vision-centred religion. Third, the attributes are then reappropriated as our own when their idealization is recognized as in fact their potential.

In other words, acceptance of the death of God reveals God's perfections to be projected idealizations of our own attributes; it thereby makes possible appreciation of those attributes as not alien to us because perfect, but rather as being perfectible human attributes.

Anthropomorphism, seen by many as the root negative factor in deity-centred religion, actually becomes a positive factor in vision-centred religion by recasting our nature as incorporating holiness or sacredness through the reappropriation of outwardly projected attributes. Instead of only projecting our attributes outward onto a deity in order to make that deity intelligible, we find sacredness in ourselves by coming to understand that what is projected outward are in fact our own attributes. Their imagined perfection, which makes them appear alien, is recognized as only potential. The best I can make of Keen and others' vision, then, is that when the death of

God is successfully confronted, there is realization that what challenged theists value as perfectly extant *in God* really is nascent *in them* as possible moral perfectibility.

The part anthropomorphism plays in this profound shift of focus is that, in projecting idealized versions of our own attributes onto a deity, we objectify and idealize those attributes and thereby effectively portray their full potential. When deity-centred religion is foregone, part of the process is recognizing as our own the attributes we initially understood as the defining properties of God. The overwhelming realization that constitutes the adoption of a new Wittgensteinian picture, and the formation of a new Foucauldian subject, is the insight that what religion is really about is the striving for perfections that become visible only when they are projected outward in theism.

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