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Beyond the divide: religion and atheism in dialogue

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Religiosity and Secularity in Europe

Simon Glendinning

The Secularisation Thesis

In post-war Britain, academic philosophers did not talk about the meaning of life. Analytic philosophy dominated British philosophy, and this kind of philosophy was, at the time, dominated by investigations of logic, language, mind and knowledge. Moral philosophy, along with aesthetics, mostly hid in a corner. But creeping out of that corner, discussion of meaning in a richer sense than occupied most philosophy of language began to make its way. In 1976 a distinguished analytic philosopher, David Wiggins, delivered a paper called “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life”. He began in these words:¹

Even now, in an age not given much to mysticism, there are people who ask “What is the meaning of life?” Not a few of them make the simple “un-philosophical” assumption that there is something to be known here. (One might say they are “cognitivists” with regard to this sort of question.) And most of these same people make the equally unguarded assumption that the whole issue of life’s meaning presupposes some positive answer to the question whether it can be plainly and straightforwardly *true* that this or that thing or activity or pursuit is good, or has value, or is worth something. Finally, something even harder, they suppose that questions like that of life’s meaning must be among the central questions of moral philosophy.

The question of life’s having a meaning and the question of truth are not at the centre of moral philosophy as we now have it.

Not at the centre of moral philosophy – and nowhere near the centre of philosophy in general. Not in 1976. Not in Britain. And while it is true that in Continental Europe philosophy was being done in ways that were at least more congenial to raising the question, still, there too, generally speaking, such ambitious efforts were rare.

They are still rare but not so rare today, neither in Continental Europe nor in Britain. And I know of a number of professional philosophers who are grateful that they can now write about the deepest questions of human life without embarrassment. It is an interesting question why this has happened at this time, why it has become possible to discuss this kind of theme again.

If we set this situation in moral philosophy in the context of wider questions of the culture of Europe’s modernity we might become aware of a new shift in recent years, a shift that is really quite profound, and which sheds light on the question of what is or has been “at the centre of moral philosophy as we now have it.”

Why might it be that discussion about the meaning of life went off the radar in philosophy during the twentieth century – and also off the radar beyond academia too, off the radar in Europe during the last hundred years or so?

At the risk of both gross simplification and a certain academic dullness, I want to suggest that the background to that state of affairs can be framed in terms of the acceptance by European intellectuals of what has been called “the secularisation thesis”. This thesis was developed by different thinkers in different ways, but social theorists like Weber, Durkheim and, in his own fashion, Marx, led the way in thinking we could describe the historical movement of modernity in Europe in terms of a transition from a society dominated by magic, myth, superstition and religion, into one with a cognitively superior outlook in which these things are disclosed as illusions and delusions which we shed in the name of reason, criticism and science.

This story belonged within an even more long-run historical narrative: one which conceived the movement of the whole history of the world in terms of a transition from an origin that was primitive, barbarian, savage – and basically animal – moving slowly and in stages through developments in human society towards a modern, rational and scientific end. There is here the idea of History as Progress towards an ideal End of Man and towards an ideally civilised form of social and individual life. The secularisation thesis dovetails with that wider discourse of world history: it is the idea that the movement into a rational and scientific age is one which is likely to see primitive and traditional conceptions not only of the world but also of the significance of our lives increasingly give way to rational and scientific ones. The old illusions will, in all likelihood, wither away, and in the future, soon, we will have *finally* emancipated ourselves from myth, superstition and religion. We will have finally learned how to live.

The secularisation thesis became increasingly matter of course for European intellectuals in the late 19th and 20th centuries. So when people were writing at that time – in philosophy, in history, in politics and in sociology – there was this unquestioned background that, while there were still some foolish believers around, the proper methods were finally making their way; and the methods with a future were rational and scientific. In principle, they would leave nothing unexplained, and such explanations would have nothing to do with religion (or “God and Fate”) *at all*.

Before I explore this thesis – a thesis which concerns nothing less than the becoming-secular of the world – we should pause to acknowledge that for many people the claimed changeover in our thinking and believing that the secularisation thesis presents was a cause for considerable anxiety. For many, though they may have kept quiet about it, the sense of loss of a religiously articulated understanding of the significance of our lives was not the loss of an illusion or delusion at all, but rather the loss of a way, perhaps finally the only intelligible way, through which we could make sense of the idea that, with respect to the question of the meaning of life, there really is *something to be known*. What seemed to be disappearing was the most profound, rich and satisfying discourse through which we might hope to come to know what is to be known about the meaning of life. And when religion falls away or is eclipsed then all you are left with is an utterly mundane life in which it is totally unclear why, ultimately, we should think that there is anything more to life than shopping. And this really is the bottom line. As some people might want to put it: today we worship only the Molten Calf of the Standard of Living. In a world that is becoming-secular we are all becoming-shoppers.

Of course, many of the proponents of the secularisation thesis thought there was a promised land ahead too: an end of history to come which would be some kind of ultimate realisation of human flourishing without illusion. So they wouldn't have thought at all that the disappearance of religion was leading towards a life without the means to grasp the meaning of life. But for many people the apparent eclipse of religion was a profoundly worrying event for European humanity. They felt that secularisation would leave us with a life deprived and devoid of meaning: a nihilistic post-modern condition, where "anything goes."

Today, however, something else is swimming into view. Today, the question is not whether there is anything left to value in an increasingly secular world, but whether we should regard the secularisation thesis, independently of an optimistic conception of an end to come it may harbour for some, as in any sense worth giving credence to any more.

I mean: religion, religiosity, a sense of spirituality, has simply *not* gone away.

Nietzsche, looking at his fellow Europeans in the late nineteenth century, found in the self-professed atheism he increasingly saw around him nothing but a retreat from the authoritarian idea of God as the "father" or the "judge".² That apart, the religious instinct seemed to him still "in vigorous growth". And this was in Europe, not in parts of the world where religion in various forms was more obviously still thriving and not withering.

I do not think that there have been any fundamental changes since Nietzsche was observing Europeans. It is becoming evident that in reality there has been little or no weakening in religiosity, even if there is a weakening of a certain difficult idea of God. The weakening of that difficult idea is leading, no doubt, to some weakening of ties to those ecclesiastical authorities which carry it. And as a result we see a decline in religious practices of certain kinds (regular church going, for example). But this is a decline in certain forms of religious authority, without a parallel decline in religiosity.

Europe, the supposed vanguard of world secularisation, is, we should now accept, simply not the exception in the world, not the vanguard of secular reason surrounded by great swathes of humanity still going on in its infantile ways as if nothing has happened. No, Europe, like everywhere else, has remained solidly religiously committed. Indeed, even in traditional terms the picture is not the one we might have been led to believe: self-identifying as a believer of some kind is still incredibly high among Europeans. In Britain in 2002, for example, over 70% of those responding to the census declared they were Christians – with about 45% or so still saying they believe in God too. (That's a great comparative statistic.)

Instead of increasing atheism, we should perhaps talk more neutrally of a decline in traditional religious theism. Rather than being part of a congregation or seeing oneself as being bound to a given ecclesiastical authority, we have new forms of *the pilgrim*, the one who is on a personal spiritual path. What one "finds" along the way may or may not be construed as a matter of finding God. Nevertheless, for most Europeans or those whose life is saturated with the European heritage, most likely is that one finds that one is a Christian of sorts.

For me, then, the secularisation thesis has simply been blown away – and blown away both by the facts about continuing religiosity and by its own utterly dismal understanding of what religiosity actually amounts to (namely, as akin to a belief in the existence of fairies). People today have turned around to see that this religion thing which was meant to be going away has not gone away at all, and it is not, in any case, what we thought it was.

The End of the End of Man

On the other hand, there has been a change. It is a change that the secularisation thesis was an attempt to come to terms with and to which it itself belonged; a movement or mutation within the default construal of the world and the significance of our lives.

What we need now is a new way of thinking about the change that has taken place in Europe during the last two or three hundred years. Three hundred years ago God and God's plan for Man was at the centre of the self-understanding usual among Europeans. We now live in a time when that is no longer true. The secularisation thesis was one way of trying to grasp that change. But it was inadequate. I think David Wiggins began a helpful kind of re-writing of that inadequate idea in his essay on the meaning of life when, in the heat of the Cold War, and writing now of our time as a time after Darwin, he said this:³

Unless we are Marxists, we are more resistant [today] than the eighteenth- or nineteenth-centuries knew how to be [to] attempts to locate the meaning of human life or human history in mystical or metaphysical conceptions – in the emancipation of mankind, or progress, or the onward advance of Absolute Spirit. It is not that we have lost interest in emancipation or progress themselves. But whether temporarily or permanently, we have more or less abandoned the idea that the importance of emancipation or progress (or a correct conception of spiritual advance) is that these are marks by which our minute speck in the universe can distinguish itself as the spiritual focus of the cosmos.

That's a big "shift" as he says:⁴ a seismic de-centring of our self-understanding. But the crucial point, it seems to me, is Wiggins' insistence that we should not interpret this shift as a loss of interest in emancipation or progress – or indeed of spiritual advance. In short, whatever changes we are looking at in Europe in the last three hundred years, the mistake is to interpret these changes either along the lines of post-modern nihilism or along the lines of the classic secularisation thesis. For my own part, what I would propose is that we conceive the becoming-secular of Europe not as a movement of the becoming-atheist of humanity (a movement towards our becoming, one and all, rational humanists) but as a moment *within* the long run event of the becoming-Christian of the world: it is a mutation within that movement, an alteration within an event that we can call the Christianization of the world.

Reflecting on the fact that Gustave Flaubert was writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, Jean-Paul Sartre, who was writing in the second half of the twentieth century, sketches the outline of this kind of conception:⁵

Flaubert writes for a Western world which is Christian. And we are all Christians, even today; the most radical disbelief is still Christian atheism. In

other words it retains, in spite of its destructive power, schemata which are controlling—very slightly for our thinking, more for our imagination, above all for our sensibility. And the origins of these schemata are to be sought in the centuries of Christianity of which we are the heirs, whether we like it or not.

And, indeed, one might add to this: not only whether we like it or not but also whether we know it or not. So this movement of becoming-secular of the world has to be seen as unfolding within the fabric of a world forged from the centuries of Christianity. It did not fall from the sky as some kind of ready-made alternative to a Christian world view – nor did it arrive from outside Europe, as an import of sorts. It grew from a European cultural tree, “which is Christian” – or, since Sartre leaves a place open for other controlling schemata, especially “for our thinking”, we might better say which is Greco-Christian or Pagano-Christian.

The missionary culture and messianic vision of an “end of History” held within the outlook of the secularisation thesis inherits the Christian eschatological heritage. The picture of the long run of history that I introduced at the beginning – the discourse of Europe’s modernity that tells of a transition from a primitive distant past, through ages which were given to magic, myths, superstition, and religion, breaking finally, and first in Europe, into an age which is not – that story runs profoundly parallel to the idea of providential history that belongs squarely within the Christian tradition. All the terrible things that we see going on in the world today and everyday – for the Christian we are to understand that there is compensation for all this, compensation for past and present suffering, in the idea that there is a redemptive end to come, that this is all part of God’s plan for Man, and that there will be some final end of things in which believers find their just reward. If we can only spread this good news we can *all* learn, finally, how to live. That Christian religious idea of providence can be translated very rapidly into the sort of conception of history implied by the secularisation thesis: a history in which “modern” Europeans belong to an advance guard in the emancipation of the rational subject or the emancipation of the working (universal) subject, a revolutionary movement that will lead towards some triumphantly final end of history where all the terrible things that have happened will have worked themselves out. These are secularisations of distinctively Christian conceptions of providence. It is not that secular concepts have come to *replace* theological ones. On the contrary: they *are* secularised theological concepts.

So I think one of the most important points we need to learn today is quite how fundamentally Christian is this secular world in general – and its secularisation thesis in particular.

Indeed, Christianity carries within itself the decisive conceptual resources for advancing the idea of a distribution between the secular and the sacred that we find everywhere in Europe today. In the Bible we read, for example, Jesus saying “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark, 12:17). That idea of the possibility of some form of “separation of Church and State” – what one might also call the death of God *in the world* – is already inside the Christian understanding of the world.

Developing this thought even more strongly, Jacques Derrida argues for seeing how the modern preference for political secularity is connected to a thesis in Kant on the

essential connection between *morality* – what it means to make decisions and conduct oneself morally as a rational human being – and *religion*, a link that will make this European political space *both* secular *and* Christian. The Kantian thesis could not be more simple, but Derrida asks us to “measure without flinching” the implications of it.⁶ If we follow Kant we will have to accept that Christian revelation teaches us something essential about the very idea of morality: “in order to conduct oneself in a moral manner, one must act as though God did not exist or no longer concerned himself with our salvation”.⁷ The crucial point here is that decisions on right conduct should not be made on the basis of any assumption that, by acting in a certain way, we know we are doing God’s will. The Christian is thus the one who “no longer turns towards God at the moment of acting in good faith”.⁸ In short, the good Christian, the Christian acting in good faith, is precisely the one who must decide in a fundamentally secular way. And so Derrida asks, regarding Kant’s thesis, “is it not also, at the core of its content, Nietzsche’s thesis”:⁹ that, in the world, God is dead?

Derrida does not flinch: this thesis – the thesis that Christians are those who are called to endure the death of God in the world – tells us “something about the history of the world – nothing less”:¹⁰

Is this not another way of saying that Christianity can only answer to its moral calling and morality, to its Christian calling, if it endures in this world, in phenomenal history, the death of God, well beyond the figure of the Passion?... Judaism and Islam would thus be perhaps the last two monotheisms to revolt against everything that, in the Christianising of our world, signifies the death of God, two non-pagan monotheisms that do not accept death any more than multiplicity in God (the Passion, the Trinity etc), two monotheisms still alien enough at the heart of Greco-Christian, Pagano-Christian Europe that signifies the death of God, by recalling at all costs that “monotheism” signifies no less faith in the One, and in the living One, than belief in a single God.

We should not understand the secularity of European societies that we see today as a kind of external imposition onto a Christian conception which is basically alien to it. Again, the deep flaw in the secularisation thesis is to conceive the movement of recent history as a break from a religious and especially Christian epoch. On the contrary, it belongs to the movement of the Christian world in mutation...in deconstruction.

How, then, might we begin to think about the question of the meaning of life if we forgo the traditional picture embodied in the secularisation thesis? First, we no longer need to regard the becoming-secular of the world as a radical loss of religious meaning, or as a movement into nihilism and shopping. On the other hand, in an age not given to mysticism or metaphysics, and in the light, I would add, of the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, it is clearly no longer so credible to conceive our lives in terms of some other grand historical narrative either. The old (“cognitivist”) idea that the World or History or Man has “an intrinsic meaning” that is on the way to realisation is not, in my view, the lens through which the meaning of life should be assessed.

How might we think about this issue otherwise? I want to recommend that we make a change in the vocabulary of this debate, and propose rethinking questions concerning “the meaning of life” in terms of the idea of *a life worth living* or *living a worthwhile*

life. This, I want to say, is not something that can be assessed except from the inside, and from the inside not just anything will count as living such a life, though nor will only one kind of life be regarded as such either. It is not, I want to suggest, a matter of finally *knowing* how to live but of *creating* a life (“experiments in living”) that can be experienced as worthwhile.

This may be regarded as yet another secularisation of a religiously significant construal. However, we do not have to think in terms of that (anyway problematic) contrast at all. One of the things I want to affirm is that a *non-believer* can accept that a *believer’s* attempt to understand the significance of our lives does not need to be regarded as something that prevents us making a step forward in the ambition to create a worthwhile life. Someone who has no or little instinct for religiosity need no longer think, as the modern secularisation theorist still must, that he or she is, at bottom, an enemy of a life that cleaves faithfully to God.

On the other hand, I am suggesting that someone today who is still interested in forming, say, a correct conception of spiritual advance, is going to have to do so without the old idea that what makes a life worth living is its alignment with a Truth about the Good Life for Man to which our thinking about the worth of our lives is finally answerable. We have to accept that the kinds of things that people say gives their life meaning are not “discoveries about the moral universe” but belong to an effort to create a life worth living. I am, I hope, aware of the extent to which we have – as becoming-shoppers – *failed*, individually and collectively, to achieve that.

Unless we are Marxists

There is a serious objection to the position I am defending here. Given that we are no longer to be “cognitivists” about the meaning of life, can we, today, give an account that would really allow us to make sense of the contemporary failure I have just asserted *as a failure*? To do so would seem to presuppose a standard against which to compare our life, a standard which could be regarded as capturing what is genuinely proper for human existence: an idea of the good life. Earlier in this discussion we saw that David Wiggins identifies as no longer available to us two conspicuously objective conceptions of what is proper to the good life: metaphysical and mystical conceptions of Man and History. We are more resistant today than people in the eighteenth- or nineteenth-centuries knew how to be to such conceptions, “unless we are Marxists.” He means, of course, unless we think of ourselves as Marxists. But one might worry that unless we *are* Marxists – or, at the very least, unless we can frame an objective and not exclusively religious conception of what is proper to the good life for Man – we have no basis on which to assess whether we are moving towards or away from the attainment of any kind of life worth living whatsoever. Any continued interest in “emancipation and progress” (which Wiggins affirms that we *are* still interested in) would be strictly nonsensical.

Wiggins claims that our increased resistance to teleo-messianic narratives does *not* imply that we have lost interest in “emancipation or progress themselves.” But can we retain that interest – and not be Marxist in the sense I am giving that here? Perhaps *we*, in our time, are Marxist just to the extent to which we can retain that classic interest.

This is not to invite yet another Marxist revival. Rather it is to acknowledge that we belong to societies with a history whose self-understanding *today* cannot be radically dissociated from a Marxist heritage. As Derrida notes, echoing Sartre on our being Christians, “whether they wish it or know it or not, all men and women, all over the earth, are today to a certain extent the heirs of Marx and Marxism”.¹¹ There is a complication to every discourse that would say that our continued interest in emancipation or progress could be radically non-Marxist or can simply do without Marx. Especially if we think we are not Marxist. Here is Derrida again:¹²

A messianic promise, even if it was not fulfilled, at least in the form in which it was uttered, even if it rushed headlong toward an ontological content, will have imprinted an inaugural and unique mark in history. And whether we like it or not, whatever consciousness we have of it, we cannot not be its heirs.

Unless we are going to be naively unwitting Marxists we had better attend to this inheritance. We need to attend to the spectres of Marx and Marxism in our time. Especially today, when it is so often announced that Marxism is dead.

I will come back to this, but first we need to acknowledge that Wiggins’ political naivety is coupled with a deep historical insight. It is, I think, plainly true that “we are more resistant [today] than the eighteenth- or nineteenth-centuries knew how to be [to] attempts to locate the meaning of human life or human history in mystical or metaphysical conceptions – in the emancipation of mankind, or progress, or the onward advance of Absolute Spirit.” And it is as one of the last great attempts to elaborate a grand teleo-messianic narrative of emancipation and progress of this kind that Marxism has its place in Wiggins’ account. If I was a Marxist, or a Marxist through and through, I would have an understanding of world-history which showed our present condition as alienated, and which pointed towards the promise of a historical movement of de-alienation – a historical movement in which it would all come right in the end, if we can only get our collective act together and build that revolution.

Would I be taking unjustified advantage of the “we” if I were to say (“unless we are Marxists”) *we don’t believe that*, we can’t fall back on a philosophy of the teleo-messianic history of the alienation and de-alienation of Man like that? I don’t think so. However, and with the greatest trepidation, I am inclined to think that what *we would* still really like to see, beyond minimal expectations for a life free of want, is effective in-the-world engagement in the creation of conditions for living a life worth living. I want this to be understood as an “end” that is not conceived as matter of achieving finality with regard to the question “How to live?”, but a way of living its inheritance that gives it a future *as always remaining to be thought*. (“The unexamined life is not worth living.”)

If this ambition retains the classic interest in emancipation and progress in a non-theological, non-mystical form, then it seems to me undeniable that it belongs “to a certain extent” to the inheritance of the first *great* discourse of this type: the interest in emancipation and progress elaborated in Marx. Here, for the first time in history, what has made its way is an undeniably world-affecting engagement (headlong to disaster, let’s not forget) in the creation of conditions for living a life worth living *in a form that was in principle philosophical and scientific, not theological and mystical*.

But, and this is to restate the problem that I began this section with, can we, the inheritors “to a certain extent” of this inaugural contribution, can we retain its “messianic *promise*” without inheriting its disastrous “teleo-messianic *programme*” of an end? Let me put this another way: can there be a discourse of emancipation and progress that is, precisely, emancipated not only from the old providential conception but also from the whole modern conception of the *telos* of Man? The objection to that (let’s say still-Marxist) ambition is that without *some* conception of the Truth of Man and History, and hence of the proper heading of Man, we cannot make *any* sense of the idea that not every way of living a life will *be* a life worth living. Have we resources for that kind of discrimination? We have (inherited) *plenty*.

To illustrate this, I want to return once more to Wiggins’ discussion of the meaning of life, and to an example he gives of a contrast between two lives – a discussion in which he invites his reader to accept that, yes, only one of these people is actually living a worthwhile life, and of *you* dear reader (that is to say, you as someone who belongs to and is a participant in a particular society with a continuing history) judging this *without more ado*. His example is this:¹³

There is a difference, which we as participants insist upon, between the life of a man who contributes something to society with a continuing history and a life lived on a plan of a southern pig-breeder who (in the economics textbooks, if not in real life) buys more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs, to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs... The practical concerns of this man are regressive and circular. And we are keenly interested, on the inner view, in the *difference* between these concerns and non-circular practical reasoning or life plans.

The latter (a life lived on the basis of non-circular life plans), Wiggins suggests, “fans out into a whole arborescence of concerns”.¹⁴ This kind of image is important to us in considering our own lives and the lives of those with whom we live. If we live in a society in which, by our lights, such a life is increasingly unavailable to most of us, then we will have failed to create conditions in which we can *think* we are living a life that *keenly sustains* the question of the worthwhile life – *and hence singularly failed to create the conditions of actually living such a life*. Equally, however, to suppose we know what the proper (ideal) form of that arborescence must take for a life to be “genuinely worthwhile” is to reduce the “messianic promise” internal to the experience of present inadequacy and failure to the heading of a “teleo-messianic programme;” reducing the always non-ideal ideal of the worthwhile life (construed, remember, as something “*always* remaining to be thought”) to the dogmatic faith in the “purity of a path” towards a definite end.

Within the limits in which any such judgement is possible, the lives that are most worth living today will belong to those who are *keenest* to “insist upon [the difference]” that Wiggins sees as available without more ado to “we as participants” in a community with a history, *those who keep it alive*. That is to say, the lives that are most worth living today will belong to those participants for whom *the idea of finally having done with the question* is experienced most intensely or most keenly as something *to resist*.

¹ David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life", in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Oxford: OUP (1987), p. 87.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (1973), p. 62.

³ Wiggins, op. cit., p. 91.

⁴ Ibid., p. 88.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'idiote de la famille*, Vol 2, Paris: Gallimard (1972), p. 2124, cited and translated in Robert Cumming, *Starting Point*, Chicago: Chicago University Press (1979), p. 225.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge", in *Religion*, eds. J. Derrida and G. Vattimo, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1998), p. 10.

⁷ Derrida, op. cit., p. 11.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, Abingdon: Routledge (1994), p. 113.

¹² Ibid., p. 114.

¹³ Wiggins, op. cit., p. 100.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 101.