The Leveling of Meaning: Religious Ethics in the Face of a Culture of Unconcern

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Christian practices and beliefs – and, quite probably, the practices and beliefs of most religious traditions – have generally presupposed a deeply rooted human need to have one's own life and the context of one's life make sense in a definitive way. If one accords this quest to find a "final meaning" for human activity a fundamental status in the make-up of human beings, religion functions as an important activity for the satisfaction of this basic human need. Indeed, religion may even be understood to be nothing other than human engagement in such a quest for final meaning. \(^1\) According to this view, meaninglessness, and its concomitant, despair, would eventually loom before persons and communities lacking a framework of such implicitly religious "final" meaning.

Yet what if it were possible for persons to live in ways that are – at least apparently – humanly satisfying, but without a framework of definitive (i.e. religious) meaning? Suppose that the human quest for meaning could be satisfied by a series of discrete, partial episodes of making sense which need not add up to a final, comprehensive framework – or suppose, even more radically, that one – or one's culture – came to accept that the quest for final meaning need not be satisfied at all. Suppose most people considered it not at all problematic to hold that life mostly consists – to use a colloquial expression – of "one damn thing after another" and that
few, if any, felt that there was any urgency to make of it anything more than that.\textsuperscript{2}

Against the background of these seemingly speculative questions, this essay advances for discussion the hypothesis that a set of dynamics for living without a framework for final meaning is, in fact, already operative at a number of levels (theoretical, practical, popular) in the emerging cultures of informational, economic, and technological globalization. These dynamics are unlike those forms of nihilism and atheism that, because they presume the validity or the significance of a human quest for final meaning, are paradigmatically "modern" in their theoretical and practical articulations. Modern nihilism and atheism, like the forms of belief they contest, take final human meanings to adumbrate connections that are more than merely accidental and discontinuities that are not simply random. They are matters enduringly inscribed in the human condition which mark out its depth – even if that depth consists only in the recognition of all meaning as a fragile human construct that is irrevocably shattered at one's death.

In contrast, at least some of the dynamics present in emergent forms of so-called "postmodern" global culture work from a quite different presupposition: meaning \textit{is not and can never be} final; it is only and always a matter of immediacy, contingency and "surface" – the connections that constitute meaning are merely transient links that one just as easily clicks on as clicks off. Since every meaning is evanescent, any meaning will do. One need not regret abandoning one form of meaning for another, or for yet another after that. Meanings have only limited, contingent usefulness, and so are disposable once their usefulness for the moment has run its course.

These dynamics, so the hypothesis runs, offer precisely the possibility of setting aside, without (much) regret, a quest for a life meaning that is unifying and comprehensive, while still finding life satisfaction precisely in whatever transient meaning can be constructed in and from the interrupted and interrupting interplay of life's particularity and contingency. This possibility is not altogether novel. A case can be made that this view was prefigured, in a much earlier age, by the Democritian atomism of Epicureanism, and that, more recently, David Hume eloquently proposed a similar view: an effective cure for the temptation to embark on a quest for final meaning – at least of the kind represented by metaphysical reasoning – is to find some pleasant social diversion that does not purport
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to exhibit itself as something deeper. Such clear-headed recognition of the absence of final meaning need not lead – as it did for the existentialists of the middle third of the twentieth century – to defiance or despair in the face of a cosmos ultimately indifferent to the fate of any of its particular components. This recognition simply allows one to get on with making one’s way through the partialities and contingencies of one’s own life with an equanimity that comes from putting aside as pointless bother any quest for a deeper or final meaning in it.

These dynamics can be appropriately called “the leveling of meaning.” They arise, I believe, from the convergence of a variety of vectors upon the conditions of human living at the beginning of this new century. Some of these vectors take an economic form that seems driven by a momentum fueled by late twentieth-century global capitalism’s dismantlement of its Marxist rival. In this context, the measure of “meaning” is economic loss and gain. As a function of market share, the bottom line, and the maximization of profit, this form of meaning has a far wider field than ever before over which to play as well as many more ways in which to play. Instantaneous transfer throughout a global network of markets has made it possible to catch, at anytime of day or night, just the right movement – up or down – to better one’s placement for yet more gain.3

Other vectors take a technological form, driven by the exponentially growing possibilities for accessing and organizing information and for global communicative interconnection. In this context, even as meaning accrues in the assemblage of information and through the pathways of its transmission, it is potentially subject at each juncture of its path to re-assemblage and reconfiguration. Meaning arises as a function of coding and decoding, and power resides in mastery of the code.4

Still other vectors take social and political forms that variously devolve governing power from the center into more localized bodies or demand due recognition of the practices that mark and sustain the particularity of linguistic, religious, or ethnic identity. Yet even as the forms of political power seem to be edging back to the local and particular, the shaping of the terms of the political discourse giving concrete meaning to the exercise of that power remain entrenched in dynamics that seem systemically to circumvent the possibility of accountability to any genuinely public realm, be it local, national, regional, or global. Political meaning – most notably, but not only, in electoral politics – comes to reside in how policy and personality can be packaged for this particular electorate at this particular
time. The temporal horizon for the endurance of political meaning stretches only as far as the next campaign.

Embedded in these vectors (and others that I believe can be identified within the interplay of forces shaping our contemporary world) — so my hypothesis continues — is an implicit account of, if I may modify a phrase appropriated from Charles Taylor, “the making of a postmodern identity.” This account, which arises from the context of what Taylor has termed the “fractured horizons” of meaning that are the inheritance of modernity, poses a serious and perhaps even radically new challenge to religious belief and practice — most certainly to those forms that have arisen from the traditions that stretch back to Abraham but perhaps to all that construe our human identity, be it individual or collective, to be in some core sense “spiritual.”

The challenge that this account presents is not simply that it is a reductive naturalism, i.e. the view that there is no spiritual ingredient in what it takes to constitute an individual as (a) human (person). The challenge is, rather, that it is a naturalism so seamlessly woven into the fabric of daily practice that this absence of a spiritual component in our human make-up is unsurprising. It is taken as a matter of course that human life is solely a matter of contingent particularity that need not add up, individually or collectively, to all that much. Whereas “modern” challenges to religious belief and practice more typically took form as an articulated theoretical denial or indignant protest (be it social or personal) in the face of claims made on behalf of transcendence, the “postmodern” challenge is far more likely to be, in practice, an expression of puzzlement or a shrug of indifference.

This shrug is directed not so much at the content of the claims of belief, but at the very possibility that belief in God — or its denial — is a matter of importance in the business of negotiating one’s way through life. As Taylor has succinctly put it, “The threat at the margin of modern non-theistic humanism is: So what?” The shrug of indifference, moreover, is no longer about what may be claimed about God; it is about what we may claim about our own humanity. If it is the case — and I think it is, though the point is arguable — that “modernity” has taught us that we can talk about ourselves and about the world without having to talk about God, then what “postmodernity” in some of its practical forms may be teaching us is to talk about ourselves without having to talk about ourselves as spirit.
I think it important for keeping discussion of my hypothesis on track that I point out that it is not principally concerned with the intellectual articulations that so-called “postmodernism” has given to matters such as particularity, contingency, interruptions and otherness. It is even less concerned with urging a program for a countervailing intellectual refutation of claims that are made in a postmodernist mode about these matters. I would, in fact, be willing to argue that such postmodernist articulations are particularly valuable precisely because they draw our attention to an emergent dynamic within our human circumstances which it would be perilous to ignore.

My main concern in articulating this hypothesis is that we attend to how our imaginative and conceptual construal of what it is to be human is affected by practices that are woven into an emergent global culture and affect our daily lives. These practices, on the one hand, enable and encourage us to construe the content of our human satisfactions more and more in terms of the immediacy that arises from the interplay of contingent succession; yet, on the other hand, they also promise us the possibility of having increasing individual control over that interplay. They place us on the brink of beginning to believe that within our hands will soon be nothing less than the possibility of us each achieving our own individual “designer” satisfaction.

I think that what is at issue here can be put in terms of a narrative that, even as it goes back to the formative period of Western philosophy, maintains considerable power as a diagnostic tool for our own circumstances: the myth of the cave told by Plato in the Republic. A contemporary retelling of this myth would, I believe, have to acknowledge that the shadows that play upon the wall of the cave have grown in the power they have to captivate human imagination. They have grown in power because we now seem to have gained a capacity to make them almost (shall I use the mantra “virtually”?) indistinguishable from that of which they are shadows. They have also grown in their power because we have willingly been enlisted in their making by the lure that we can make them whatever we want them to be. Unlike in Plato’s version of the myth, we need not be chained before the shadow show to keep us engaged in it – we readily stay in the cave, each taking our turn now as shadow-maker, now as shadow-watcher. There is no “outside” beyond the cave to make it manifest that the shadow show is no more than that. Insofar as we have come to believe that the shadow show is sufficient, that we need no
outside against which to measure it, such an “outside” has become quite unimaginable — and it is not even all that much of a bother to tune out the occasional noisy chatter of the few odd folks who claim there is.

Perhaps this is all too harsh, especially in light of the fact that other vectors are at work within the dynamics fueling an emerging culture of globalization which make it possible for us to discern more fully the level of enduring human meaning that religious belief and practice have articulated as the locus for the presence and operation of spirit. At its best, the culture of globalization should make possible a more effective concrete recognition of our human interdependence and commonality, even as it allows greater room for expression and recognition of the particularity that makes each human being and set of human circumstances unique. It would be genuinely exhilarating to see processes of globalization deepening and enlarging the range for our discerning the presence of the spiritual at the core of human existence by making it possible for us to affirm both the enduring strength of our human connectedness and the uniqueness of the rich variety of our human differences.

Yet it is also the case that the human knowledge and skills that make it possible for us to enlarge the complexity and the scope of our connectedness with one another have also made it possible for us to level our connectedness down to the linear simplicity of the discrete moments of transactional encounter and exchange in a marketplace that now is global. Our imaginative construal of the content of what connects us begins to be modelled on the means that now so easily enable us to make so many connections with one another: encoded packets of instantly transmittable information. Similarly, the knowledge and skills that make possible an articulation of difference as difference in ways that are potentially richer than any that were available in previous eras have also made it possible for us to level any difference down to the contingent coalescence of particularity that wins its meaning not as difference but as effective power against any other congeries of particularity that we perceive as posing a threat to our own particularity.

This duality of possibilities suggests to me that in order to make actual those that a culture of globalization offers for enlarging the realm of spirit, we also need to identify and engage the perilous counter-possibilities of our seriously contracting it. It is important that we recognize the ways that we might very well become willing accomplices to the self-stifling of spirit, a possibility that Charles Taylor has aptly likened to performing “spiritual
lobotomy” upon ourselves. How might we prevent that from happening? At this point, I really do not know—and my own perplexity in the face of the possibility that we may be facing the emergence of a culture of unconcern is precisely what has moved me to propose the hypothesis of this chapter for discussion.

If my hypothesis is correct, then an appropriate response on the part of communities of religious belief seems likely to require significant reshaping of both thought and practice in a variety of ways in order to address effectively the challenge presented by an environing culture that levels out all meaning. Just as I am quite sure that there is no one way, no single strategy that communities of religious believers can adopt to deal with these dynamics, I am equally sure that the wrong general strategy would be simply to seek some form of insulation from them—even though there may be circumstances in which creative strategies of protest and resistance may well be fitting. Far more appropriate, I believe, will be strategies that engage these dynamics in such a way as to enable them to become open from within to the possibility that the reality of spirit is so deeply embedded in the human that it simply cannot be stifled—no matter how hard we try.

Let me therefore propose the outline of one strategy for discerning and engaging the reality of spirit within the larger cultural dynamics shaping us at the start of the twenty-first century. This strategy emerges from a resource upon which the three forms of the reflective appropriation of experience that have long shaped my work in philosophical and theological ethics have regularly converged: the capacity for exercising imagination as a critical power for the discernment of what is most deeply human. In proposing imagination as an appropriate resource for countering the leveling of meaning in which the practices of contemporary culture can make us complicit, I am understanding imagination as more than merely “fictive.” Imagination is not the mere play of make-believe, a capacity for making up that which will never become actual. Imagination—as it is exercised, for instance, in the oracles of the Hebrew prophets, in the parables of Jesus, or in nonviolent resistance to injustice as practiced by Martin Luther King, Jr.—is rather a capacity to make manifest the deepest inner possibilities that can be made actual as well as to unmask the illusions that constrain us from acting on those possibilities.

In particular, the exercise of imagination that I think will be most needed throughout the century that has just begun is precisely that which
makes manifest to us that our own deepest inner possibilities as human are thoroughly spiritual. Imagination must be brought to bear to counter one of the losses that Charles Taylor thinks has taken place in forging the modern self—viz. an increasing inability to articulate our human identity as moral or spiritual in any but a private sense. Such a private construal of our identity as spirit almost inevitably proves too fragile to bear the weight of the quite public moral responsibility for one another in human solidarity, sympathy, and equality which, even in their naturalistic forms, our modern notions of the human self, agency, and experience have placed upon us.\textsuperscript{11}

On the cusp between modernity and postmodernity, the task of imagination is also to unmask the illusions that would keep us from acknowledging these inner possibilities. The postmodern has helped to unmask a core illusion embedded in the modern story: that it is within the reach of human power, and human power alone, be it through inwardness plumbed and expressed, or through attunement with nature, or through mastery over nature, to go beyond the conditions of our finitude. Yet, as Taylor argues, much that goes by the name “postmodern” is itself caught in the shadow of an illusion more subtle and far more dangerous, viz. that our finitude is all there is (to this I would add: and it is all the same.) What makes this illusion dangerous, on Taylor’s account, is that it fatally undermines the possibility of acknowledging the full significance of our lives as human—an acknowledgment Taylor holds to be central to the self-interpreting activity that is a key marker of our character as spirit.\textsuperscript{12} In the absence of that which stands beyond life, there cannot be an affirmation of life which is both sufficiently robust to acknowledge the plenitude of its goodness and sufficiently sober to recognize humbly that life is neither all that is nor all that matters.\textsuperscript{13}

What direction, then, might imagination take to enable a new recognition of ourselves as spiritual, one that enables us to address the leveling of meaning? Taylor suggests that it lies in the fashioning of “new languages of personal resonance to make crucial human goods alive for us again.”\textsuperscript{14} Although he notes the association that this notion of “personal resonance” has with the “expressive” strand of modernity, he distinguishes it carefully from the radical subjectivism into which much of both modernity and postmodernity have become fully enmeshed. The distinction is needed so that “languages of personal resonance” can effectively relate our human “life goods” to “constitutive goods” whose
meaning and reality stand in being beyond the mere projection of immanent human strivings. In this I believe that Taylor seeks to set imagination off on the Augustinian path along which the movement “inward” of the self is drawn into a movement “outward” and “upward” and along which may be encountered the God who brings all such movement into being.

This Augustinian echo suggests that the retrieval – or, indeed, reconstruction – of our selves as spirit/spiritual may be possible only by reference to what is encountered, recognized and respected as truly other as we move in the space that our valuings create. This Augustinian movement provides a theological context in which to read Taylor’s otherwise enigmatic descriptions of what it means to be a self: “We are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions, as we seek and find an orientation to the good.”15 On Taylor’s account – in contrast to what has become both a typically modern and postmodern account – our activities of recognizing and bestowing significance and worth are not confined to a space entirely of immanent human making.

On this account the most illusion-free ways of being a self – i.e. ways of valuing and being valued, of interpreting and being interpreted – thus involve recognition that value and meaning are not entirely ours to create. I think it is legitimate to read Taylor’s account here as an Augustinian and Hegelian transformation of one of the most powerful postmodern themes: recognition of the other as the space in which meanings emerge can now also be seen as the space of spirit, i.e. the space in which otherness can welcome and can receive welcome. Taylor’s rendering of this theme also has resonances of “grace,” perhaps most clearly sounded in his characterization of the hope needed to chart our course in the wake of modernity, viz. the hope that is “a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided.”16

Taylor provides little explicit guidance for articulating what this hope means for the project of retrieving a notion of “spirit” by which to interpret our human lives and activities. The very suggestion of grace as the horizon of his project could, I suspect, be easily dismissed as a mere rhetorical flourish – but such a dismissal would be typically modern, for only moderns are likely to consider a rhetorical turn to be “mere.” Both premoderns and postmoderns (as Taylor seems well aware) know better than to dismiss the rhetorical in this way. What direction, then, does Taylor expect us to chart for imagination from this echo of grace? How
does this horizon of grace as divine affirmation bear upon the possibility of interpreting ourselves constitutively as spirit? At this point I can offer only a suggestion that is as cryptic and as tentative as it is brief: spirit is the presence of others welcomed; spirit is presence to others welcoming; spirit is, first of all, being in the presence of the Other who welcomes all that is other.

EPILOGUE: CHRISTIAN ETHICS, IMAGINATION, AND THE RECOVERY OF THE HUMAN AS SPIRIT

If the diagnosis set forth in the main body of this chapter is correct, then the articulation of a Christian ethic for the twenty-first century needs to look critically and creatively at the resources available – both within Christian belief and practice and within the emergent globalized culture – that will enable the re-envisioning of spirit as a constitutive element of the deepest part of our reality as human. The easier part of this task may be locating the imaginative resources that lie within the traditions of Christian belief and practice. One does not have to stand within the ambit of Christian faith to recognize the power that the narratives within Hebrew scripture, the parables of Jesus, or the lives of Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa have to remind us – sometimes uncomfortably – that what is most deeply human within us (to use Taylor’s image) is the “space” we clear (or constrict) for recognizing and acting on the orientation to the good, which, however flawed it may have become, remains firmly embedded within us. When, for instance, we hear or read the story (2 Samuel 12:1–12) of how the prophet Nathan leads King David to recognize the enormity of the betrayal involved in his adulterous taking of Bathsheba, Uriah the Hittite’s wife, a chord of self-recognition should strike in our own hearts – we are just as capable of moral self-deception as King David was and we are just as ready to condemn the other’s conduct as we are to excuse like conduct of our own – until we are confronted by the humbling insight that we, too, are just as much the very “other” whom we were ready to shun and condemn.

In this retrieval of the imaginative resources that lie within the traditions of Christian belief and practice, Christian ethics must not overlook the two-edged danger they also bear within them precisely in their power to shape our self-understanding. As feminist, African, Latino, African-American, and Asian theologians have vigorously, vividly, and
variously reminded those carried along by the mainstream of European and North American theology, uncritically appropriated images can distort theology’s understanding of God, humanity, and the world and have misdirected – sometime disastrously – the practices of Christian communities. At the same time, awareness of the power that these resources have to disorient our movement toward what is good in the space of our valuing should not cause us to shrink from the other edge of their dangerous power. This is their capacity to surprise, subvert, and overturn even the most settled understandings we may have of ourselves and of the others we encounter in that space of our valuing. The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–29) hints at how the insistent intrusion of the other – who turns inside out the image of “dog” that Jesus meant to rebuke and repel her – could be dangerously subversive even for Jesus in that it prods him to extend the horizon of his mission.

More challenging for Christian ethics – and, I believe, more urgent – will be the work of discerning the resources within the rapidly shifting kaleidoscope of the emerging globalized culture which will enable an appropriate re-envisioning of “spirit” as a constitutive element of the deepest part of our reality as human. To the extent that globalization is driven solely by a dynamic of the greater production and distribution of information, goods, and services to be consumed, the more likely we will be tempted to shape ourselves solely in the image of homo consumens. As one religious educator has noted, “Advertising, society’s most potent educational force, teaches [our children] that their hunger for intimacy, security, success and meaning can be satisfied by conspicuous consumption. But if the deepest human needs can be met by owning and consuming products, what is left for religion to provide?” Yet, if it is true, as I claimed above, that the reality of spirit is so deeply embedded in the human that it simply cannot be stifled, then even as we make ourselves complicit in the attempted leveling of all meaning to the surface play of contingencies, there remains something resistant within us that yearns for heights and depths of meaning commensurate with the best aspirations of our being.

Some of this work has already started. For instance, Tom Beaudoin, in Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X, seeks to discern how a popular, technologized, and globalized culture has shaped authentic religious meanings for his “Generation X” cohort. Beaudoin’s work suggests that it will be increasingly important in the twenty-first
century for Christian ethics to attend closely to the concrete and particular ways in which contemporary culture – perhaps even without conscious intent on the part of its makers – encourages or challenges individuals to enlarge their horizons of meaning. So even as a dynamic of the leveling of meaning plays itself out in contemporary culture, it may yet turn out to be a graced occasion for rediscovery of the more enduring truth of the resiliency of human spirit.¹⁹

NOTES

1. This understanding of religion in terms of a human quest for meaning – or in terms of what Paul Tillich termed “ultimate concern” – does not require that the “final” meaning satisfying it be construed as that which is robustly “transcendent” of human reality, e.g. the God of the Abrahamic religions. It is thus an understanding of “religion” which is sweeping enough to encompass views and movements (such as Marxism or scientific naturalism) that even explicitly reject the doctrines and practices of those religions – or indeed of any formally religious tradition – insofar as this rejection is made in virtue of some alternative construal of what gives human activity and existence its definitive significance.

2. The universality of such a quest for what I call “final meaning” has been recently affirmed in John Paul II’s encyclical letter Fides et Ratio as a common basis out of which humanity’s philosophical and religious dynamisms issue. To that extent, I believe that the encyclical continues primarily to engage philosophy in its “modern” guise. It does not fully articulate the radical challenge posed by the forms of postmodernity which theoretically or practically set aside the presuppositions that human beings (1) necessarily find themselves engaged in such a quest and (2) must eventually attain such final meaning to find life satisfaction.

3. A point made – probably without conscious irony – in a recent television ad for an on-line securities trading service which is set in a meditation class: mantra-chanting students are asked to visualize themselves in soothing and tranquil circumstances. After one student evokes a seaside scene and another the forest, the third imagines himself at his computer making eight-dollar-per-trade transactions – a scene that immediately captures the imagination of the whole class, and the instructor as well, as truly relaxing.

4. Meaning as coding can also be seen at work in the hopes that have been pinned on the successful completion of projects to map the human genome: knowledge of the code of life will provide mastery to determine its future shape. The role of economic incentives in this project, moreover, is hardly peripheral: the U.S. Patent Office has been accepting applications
that would give to those who have deciphered segments of the genome rights over future use of those segments—for instance, in the case that they later provide a basis for new and effective medical therapies.


7. Ibid., p. 520.

8. These forms of "reflective appropriation of experience" are Catholic theology's understanding of grace as the freely given completion of all creation, Ignatius of Loyola's principle of "finding God in all things," and Immanuel Kant's recognition of hope as the critically founded focus for humanity's common moral endeavors.


10. Iris Murdoch is one author who has extensively explored—both in her novels and in her philosophical essays—the power of imagination to bring us to make real that which is good. For a thoughtful appreciation of her work, see Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 3–28.


13. I take this to be much of the burden of Taylor's argument in Part III of "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," pp. 18–28.


15. Ibid., p. 34. Cf. Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 3: "[T]o be a full human agent, to be a person or self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. A self is a being for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers."


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