

## Post-truth and Liquid Religion\*<sup>1</sup>

Jordi Corominas

<sup>1</sup> \* Translation of [Rose and John Soler](#). Saint Paul, Minnesota. USA.

*In a time of universal deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act.*

G. Orwell

*A non-religious man in a pure state is a rather rare phenomenon, even in the most secularized of modern societies. Most men without religion continue to behave religiously without knowing it.*

M. Eliade

I understand by post-truth a personal, cultural and political situation where the appearance of truth and the emotion and feeling that this appearance arouses, is more important than the truth itself. Unlike the liar who knows the truth and tries to hide it to obtain some benefit from the lie, the one that generates “post-truths”, like the eternal charlatan, dispenses with the truth about how things really are. The truth is what one creates<sup>2</sup>. A grave issue of our time is that the culture of post-truth has become an essential dimension of our social system. Without it, the current world political-social system could hardly be maintained. It is not a question of

<sup>2</sup> H. G. Frankfurt, *On bullshit, sobre la manipulació de la veritat*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2006.



a few politicians who manipulate us, or of a few countries with a poorly educated general public that are fooled, but of a culture of global proportions in which, willingly or not, we all end up participating to varying degrees<sup>3</sup>. The culture of post-truth affects all knowledge. However, perhaps the political and religious are its most fertile breeding grounds. It is about the latter, about the religious dimension of post-truth, that I want to reflect on in this article.

<sup>3</sup> I cannot explain all this within this article. I share the thesis of J. Albert Vicens that post-truth is today a crucial element of the social system. In his article he describes very well some of the more or less surreptitious mechanisms and dynamisms that lead us to collaborate with this culture. Cf. J. Albert Vicens, “La Postverdad como sistema”. Revista Periferia, 2018.

One might think that post-truth is precisely the terrain on which religions have always moved and that, thanks to enlightened efforts, they are progressively disappearing from the map, at least in Western culture. The fight against religions would also be part of the fight against what we now call “post-truth”. But, is this so? Does post-truth and religion always and necessarily go hand in hand? I will try to argue that there is no intrinsic unity between post-truth and religion. Is it true, however, that the religious sphere is shrinking? Everything seems to indicate that religion, far from retreating, is spreading. The loss of the social relevance of institutionalized religions, the so-called secularization of societies, has not brought about the disappearance of religion, but rather its expansion through the transformation of its forms of social presence.

For this reason, there are many authors who speak of “post-secularization” understood as a process of reintroduction of religion or re-awakening, in a generalized social and cultural crisis<sup>4</sup>. This reconfiguration of the religious has multiple, desinstitutionalized and radically changing manifestations. I would even say that the dominant religious forms, or at least those fastest growing forms, are today a kind of religion à la carte, mixing raw vegan diets, homeopathic treatments and the latest scientific par-

adigm (quantum theory, string theory) with neo-orientalisms and neo-esoterisms. However, despite the variety of the menu, we inevitably find three basic ingredients: 1) the imperative of “feel good”, 2) a strong individualistic character with a predisposition to abandon any form of commitment to social and political life and, 3) a gnostic vision of the world.

Z. Bauman introduced the liquidity metaphor to typify the post-modernity in which we live. “Solids retain their shape and persist over time: they last, while liquids are formless and constantly transform: they flow. It is like economic deregulation, flexible manufacturing and the liberalization of markets”<sup>5</sup>. Everything flows like water: we change jobs, spouses, lovers, friends, housing, values, political and sexual orientation, and of course religion. And although Z. Bauman applied the image to different phenomena (loves, times, fears, life, liquid art) and not to religion it seems to me that religion is the quintessence of postmodern liquidity: it has become so liquid that we do not even realize that it envelops us everywhere.

My thesis is that the culture of the post-truth is an expression of the crisis of modern reason and that in the religious field it acquires special emphasis in liquid religion. The total criticism of reason carried out by postmodernism perme-

4 J. Habermas, Ch. Taylor, J Butler, C. West, *El poder de la religión en la esfera pública*, ed. Trotta, Madrid, 2011; L. Duch, *L'exili de Déu*, Fragmenta Editorial, Barcelona, 2017

5 Z. Bauman, *Modernidad Líquida*, F.C.E., México, 2003, p. 7

ates large sections of the population and this lack of reason has left us in a situation where truth not only does not matter, but does not exist. That is why it can be said, without blushing, that the spaghetti monster<sup>6</sup> is the same as a thoughtful Buddhist reflection on the essence of yoga, that treatment with sea water is better than a standard oncology treatment<sup>7</sup> or that the techniques of personal transformation and alternative medicine are more successful than psychology and experimental medicine. Undoubtedly, criticism of modern reason was absolutely necessary. Faith in a reason detached from the senses has created monsters and continues creating monsters by confusing reason with scientific-technical rationality. But the remedy proposed: the absence of any hint of universal approaches, the idea that everything is valid if it serves one and one believes it, the indifference to or relativistic acceptance of all positions can be much worse than the disease.

There is still a fairly generalized idea that one can distinguish between science and pseudoscience by resorting to Popper's falsification criterion. To be

6 The pastafarismo or religion of the Monster of the Flying Spaghetti is a social movement, recognized as official religion in Holland and New Zealand. Pastafarismo is fundamentally an invention of B. Henderson, a physicist from the Oregon State University (USA) who wanted to ironically demonstrate the absurdity of teaching the intelligent design hypothesis as a substitute for the scientific theory of evolution, as various conservative sectors claimed.

7 The benefits of seawater to treat cancer and many other diseases difficult to cure is defended by various authors: Cf. "[Beber agua de mar](#)".

scientific, a proposition must be able to be falsified, that is, it must be testable and falsifiable<sup>8</sup>. If it is not possible to submit the proposition to proof in a tangible and repeatable way, it does not enter into the domain of science but remains pseudoscience. However, frequently the distinction between science and pseudoscience is accompanied by the widely shared idea that all beliefs have the same truth value. It is thought that the belief in astrology or water having memory<sup>9</sup> would be as valid as a Buddhist or Christian or any other confession intensely reflected upon and weighed. All would move in a realm of post-truth and in the same territory as the pseudosciences. That is why some defenders of reason fight religion and seek to replace it with science, philosophy or art<sup>10</sup>.

Trying to question this inherent unity between post-truth and religion, I wonder if it is possible to establish, like Popper, a criterion of demarcation between rea-

8 In the philosophy of science there is a long and complex debate about the justification of Popper demarcation criteria that I cannot develop here. T. Kuhn, I. Lakatos, P. Feyerabend are some of its protagonists: Cf. A. F. Chalmers, "*What Is That Thing Called Science?*" Siglo XXI, Madrid, 2015. For the purposes of this article, what interests me is the possibility of establishing and discussing the demarcations between knowledge.

9 The memory of water is a supposed property of water, not demonstrated, according to which water molecules store the healing properties of a homeopathic compound subjected to serial dilutions during its preparation. This conjecture was proposed by J. Benveniste to explain the healing properties that homeopathy attributes to its preparations, even when there is not a single molecule of active principle.

10 R. Dawkins, C. Hitchens, D. Dennet, G. Miller et. al. etc.

sonable beliefs and false beliefs, between spiritualities and pseudospiritualities, or religions and pseudo-religions. But to pose and answer these problems clearly, I am forced to embark on a long journey. The first obstacle we have to face is finding some aspect of reason that has been safe from the whirlwind of criticism, because without reason, no kind of distinction is possible and even Popper's criterion of demarcation would be arbitrary. At night, all cats are gray.

### 1. Sentient reason

In his incisive psychological criticism of reason Nietzsche warns that reason is precisely the "gadget" by which reality is moralized and idealized. Reason is used to build a true and permanent world faced with the world of deception, appearances and constant changes. Basically, he asserts, with logic and rational argument we seek to adjust reality to our deepest desires, find security and certainty, and escape from pain, fragility and life.

Faced with this conception of reason, a postmodern vision has been popularized, which considers that reason only constructs "narratives" that are all equally valid. An "open mentality" in the culture of post-truth accepts that everyone has their truth and that we should not try to argue about it. Implicitly in saying this the truth has already been reduced to "post-truth". The position, as it is frequently said, is that "it works for me" and "it is good for me",

not if it is true or false. If so-and-so does homeopathy and believes that water has memory, and despite this, I think to question these practices and ideas, the most likely comment I will receive is that "I have not yet opened my mind." What lies behind this reproach is a postmodern reason that blurs any distinction between fact and fiction, knowledge and opinion, truth and post-truth. The culture of the post-truth negates all possibility of reason reaching some basic truth, however tenuous it may be. And this is the situation which all types of power love the most and in which the powerful thrive. To create and live from post-truths is their way.

However, there is a third conception of reason that was glimpsed by Nietzsche<sup>11</sup> and elaborated on by X. Zubiri<sup>12</sup>: It is that of an experiential reason that is not detached from the body. This vision, I think, much better describes the rational human capacity than the previous two. Following Nietzsche's criticism does not completely prevent reason from finding some shred of truth and escaping the culture of post-truth.

For humans, living is feeling alive. We are

11 F Nietzsche's criticism of modern reason was not total. Reason was for F. Nietzsche reason of the body, a corporal reason at the service of life. Cf. J. Conill, "Our Situation: Hermeneutics And Practical Philosophy" *Agora Philosophica*, Marplatense Magazine of Philosophy, Year II, Number 4, December 2001

12 X. Zubiri: *Inteligencia y realidad*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1980; *Inteligencia y logos*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1982; *Inteligencia y razón*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1983. There are translations in lines of the three books. Cf. X. Zubiri, [Sentient intelligence](#). Translated by Tomas B. Fowler.



Joan Fontcuberta, [Sèrie Miracles & CO](#)

always in a kind of primary and immediate reflection: besides having a cup of coffee, going by train or being happy or sad; we *feel* that we are drinking coffee, that we are going by train, or that we feel happy or sad. And because we feel things and feel ourselves feeling them inextricably we say that there is already a seed of reason in our senses (olfactory, auditory, kinesthetic, visual, etc.) It is on them that already starts a march (a progression<sup>13</sup>). This march goes from sensing the caress of the sun on my skin, for instance, to what things could be beyond the “given” (A stream of photons impacting the epidermis, let’s say). Therefore, it is not that we have feelings or senses that have to be completed separately with our intelligence, but that these feelings are already intelligent. We are “sentient intelligent beings” and this has very little to do with “artificial intelligence”. The technological ad-

vances in this field are spectacular, but, at least for the moment, they have nothing to do with a sentient reason. Technology can multiply exponentially the operations done in very short times, but artificial intelligence cannot feel alive, affected or depressed by the nonsense of life, it can only simulate feelings<sup>14</sup>.

The things we perceive with this immediate reflexivity: a sound, an image, a rough surface, a forehead with a high temperature, force us to think, to look for what things could be beyond what is noticed<sup>15</sup>. In our culture, if we feel a high temperature in our foreheads, we say that we have a fever, and this makes us think: we can surmise that we have an infection or that it is a consequence of sleeping little. This questioning of what is causing the fever is the exercise of reason.

When our intelligent senses take note of the world in all its singularity, openness, variety and richness we immediately use all the tapestry of ideas and concepts of our culture to understand this multiple reality of colors, sensations, images and sounds that we capture. This tapestry, with which we organize the world in which we move, changes according to our different cultures and historical epochs. Reason always makes its way from these tapestries. If I want to explain current poverty, I may

13 Translators note: that’s the technical word used in the English translation of *Sentient Reason* to denote the movement of reason from what is apprehended sentiently to what apprehended things might really be. Its a progression [*marcha*] toward the unknown and perhaps even toward meaninglessness or nothingness.

14 J. M. Esquirol, *Assaig sobre la vida humana*, Quaderns Crema, Barcelona, 2018. p. 15

15 X. Zubiri, *Inteligencia y razón*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1983, p 36. Cf., X. Zubiri, [Intelligence and reason](#), translated by Thomas Fowler. The Spanish corresponding pages are indicated in Fowler’s translation.

be able to create a new theory, but I will have to use my tapestry: the economic, sociological, physical, mathematical and theological knowledge that is available to me, in my culture, in my language and at the height of the times in which we live.

Each of these tapestries is in turn diversified by a set of ethnic, psychological, sociological conditions, and by a certain socio-cultural mentality. A Western mentality and a Hindu mentality are not the same<sup>16</sup>. In each culture, in addition to a general mentality, there are certain mental habits<sup>17</sup> that mark the direction that reason moves through understanding towards the unknown. In Western culture, a religious mentality, a philosophical mentality and a scientific mentality are not the same, although the same person can combine different mentalities. And even in the same mentality, different ways (methods) are opened to try to get to the bottom of things. Let's look only at the scientific mentality. The mental habits of the economist, of the sociologist, the mathematician, or the physicist are not exactly alike<sup>18</sup> although they may all be considered scientific.

Among all these types of mental habits or rational ways there is none that is norma-

tive, superior or exemplary for the rest, nor does it preclude that new avenues with their corresponding mental habits cannot appear. The scientific method continues to be a very recent mental habit as well as a way to understand things. What happened is that different cultures and different times have overvalued some specific types of rationality and have depreciated others. Certain ways may be more useful than others depending on our interests. If we want to be cured of a serious infection, probably the scientific way will help us more than a religious or poetic way.

However, whatever the diversity of mentalities, historical moments and pathways taken to account for things, reason always has the same structure consisting of a reference system where the process of reason starts, an outline, or sketch of what things could be in their ultimate reality, and the experience or testing that the sketched gives more or less account of the thing we want to explain<sup>19</sup>.

The reference system, which I have previously called "tapestry," is the set of ideas, theories, presuppositions, and ideologies that we find in each culture and historical moment. Thus, in the current Western culture we conceive that the universe began to expand 15 billion years ago after the big bang, or that parliamentary democracy is a

16 "There are truths that are true in different mentalities; and that because they are, the figure they print on the mind is completely different." Cf. X. Zubiri, *El Hombre Y La Verdad*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1999, pp. 152-153.

17 X. Zubiri, *Inteligencia y razón*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1983, p. 150. Cf., X. Zubiri, [Intelligence and reason](#), translated by Thomas Fowler. The Spanish corresponding pages are indicated in Fowler's translation.

18 X. Zubiri, *El hombre y la verdad*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1999, p. 76

19 X. Zubiri, *Inteligencia y razón*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1983, pp. 217-222. Cf., X. Zubiri, [Intelligence and reason](#), translated by Thomas Fowler. The Spanish corresponding pages are indicated in Fowler's translation.

good way to organize society. However, by virtue of our sentient reason, there is always the possibility of critically transcending all these ideas, seeking more convincing or useful explanations. When we exercise reason, we create new sketches, always starting from our culture, of what things could be in their ultimate reality. In this way, we can consider whether string theory can better explain the expansion of the universe or, at the political level, outline a global democracy beyond the current national democracies. But all these sketches must be “experienced” either through experimentation, verification, conformation (self-appropriation<sup>20</sup>), compenetration, or some other form of testing<sup>21</sup>.

Sciences such as physics or biology use “experimentation” to probe deep reality, forcing it to show us in a controlled way whether outcomes coincide more or less with the hypothesis or elaborated outline. Mathematics uses “verification”. It is verified that the outline (formula, theorem or postulate) is coherent and holds. Although we do not feel the content of mathematics (it is not touchable), its proofs are carried out in reality in the same way that in many novels it is verified that the character outlined is

credible<sup>22</sup>. When it comes to getting to know ourselves, we go through a conformation (“self-appropriation”) experience: we try different possibilities and ways of life in our own reality<sup>23</sup>. We can also experience the depths of another human person and other cultural, social and historical experiences, however diverse they may be from ours: this is what we call “compenetration”<sup>24</sup>.

22 According to Zubiri, verification is the type of experience that corresponds to the postulated realities. It is both the method of mathematics and fiction literature: “Certainly there are postulated realities that are not mathematics: they constitute the realm of fiction reality, but I do not need to insist on them because they clearly have the two moments of coherence internal of the feigned and of apprehension of its reality in fiction. They are in this sense a term of verification.” Cf., X. Zubiri, [Intelligence and reason](#), on line, translated by Thomas Fowler, p. 333 of english translation.

23 “Self-appropriating is the radical mode of experience of oneself, the radical physical probing of my own reality. To know oneself is to probe oneself in self-appropriation. There is no abstract “know thyself”; I can only know myself along the lines of this or that sketch of my own possibilities. Only the sketch of what I “might be” inserted into me as self-appropriation, only this constitutes the form of knowing oneself. Clearly, it is a appropriation in the order of actualization of my own reality. This discernment of oneself is a difficult operation; it is discernment in probing and self-appropriation.” Cf., X. Zubiri, [Intelligence and reason](#), on line, translated by Thomas Fowler, p. 334 of english translation.

24 “There is another mode of experience which consists, not in making a thing show us its own nature by some provocation of ours, but in the attempt to be present, so to speak, at the vision of the real achieved based on its own interiority. it is what I call compenetration. Life in general, and above all human life, is subject to the physical testing of reality, not just as an experimental fact, but as reality in compenetration. Naturally we are not dealing with some physical penetration, but of being compenetrated with what makes one experience. It is what is expressed upon saying, for example, that someone sees through the eyes of another. Compenetration is a rigorous mode of experience.” Cf., X. Zubiri, [Intelligence and reason](#), on line, translated by Thomas Fowler, p. 331 of english translation.

20 That's the Fowler's translation of *conformación*.

21 *Ibíd*, p. 257

Likewise, through a novel<sup>25</sup>, a poem or psychological therapy, you can be joined to this type of experience, because literary fiction and psychological “transfer” are a way of living other lives.

In these multiple rational experiences, testing and truth are always something dynamic and open. It is a “checking” exercise that always has a free, provisional, historical and open character. It is free because the ways of reason, are not imposed. The only thing imposed is the structure of reason that all human beings have, but it is a capacity that we can exercise in many ways and also in the end, decline to exercise<sup>26</sup>. The checking exercise is provisional because, by the very openness of reason, all truth of reason is always partial and never eternal and definitive. It is historical because every questioning and attempt to improve the received cultural tapestry is made from the language, methods and concepts that our culture provides us. Finally, it is open because, however much we find new explanations and foundations, new problems and questions are always opened up, preventing us ever being able to construct a final, complete and consistent theory of the reality of the

world and oneself<sup>27</sup>. And still, because the truth reached by one way, far from being absolute, can be complemented with the truth reached by other ways (to understand the behavior of a criminal, as an illustration, you can look for explanations in biological, sociological, psychological terms, economic, religious, etc.). Multiple approaches still will not lead us to a total truth.

Rational truth overflows all the avenues of approximation and their sum. In fact, the opposite of reason is the effort to close its openness. The effort to repress the march of reason is what we can call irrational activity. Rational truths, therefore, have nothing to do with the fixed, immobile and eternal world that according to Nietzsche was revealed by traditional philosophical reason. On the contrary, rational truth is always deepening in the otherness or alterity of things, of others and of oneself; unveiling, never definitively, what things can be beyond our feelings, common sense and inherited cultural ideas. With all its limitations and fragilities, the shards of truth that reason offers us are essential for each of us and even for our survival as a species. There is no guarantee that sentient reason can successfully confront political, psychological, scientific,

25 “Verification” and “compenetration” can go hand in hand.

26 “The essence of reason is freedom.” Cf. X. Zubiri, *Inteligencia y razón*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1983, p. 107. Cf., X. Zubiri, [Intelligence and reason](#), translated by Thomas Fowler. The Spanish corresponding pages are indicated in Fowler’s translation.

27 “Unlike Leibniz and Kant, it must be said that reason is neither total not totalizing but is constitutively open. And this is not because of the internal limits of reason but because of the very nature of the real, impressively felt.” Cf., X. Zubiri, [Intelligence and reason](#), translated by Thomas Fowler. The Spanish corresponding pages are indicated in Fowler’s translation.



Joan Fontcuberta, [Sèrie Miracles & CO](#)

personal or any other problems, but if we renounce it, chaos, violence, death and that darkness in which “life begins to lose the edge that allows it to be described as human”<sup>28</sup>, is guaranteed.

## 2. Science and pseudoscience

After having briefly described human reason we can reflect on the idea of falsification from modern science<sup>29</sup> to see if it is possible to emulate in some way in the religious field the differentiation between sciences and pseudosciences. As we have already said, the most distinctive and essential aspect of the rational path of modern science is the experimental method. The fact that the

hypotheses can be tested experimentally makes the truth that the scientific way gives us independent of “subjective” opinions and personal inclinations since it can be checked by any researcher willing to repeat the same experiment, or it can be rejected designing new experiments in which the thesis in question is refuted. From this experimental route Karl Popper established a demarcation criterion between what can be considered scientific knowledge and what cannot: the criterion of “falsification”<sup>30</sup>. Only those who make a hypothesis that can be refuted in an experiment or any other well established observation are doing science. Note that this implies that the scientific truth is always provisional as we have said before and that they were all truths reachable by reason.

Given the prestige of science and its aura of “true knowledge”, some disciplines, such as the so-called “alternative medicine” or what I call “liquid religions”, usually claim that they are “scientific” and use a certain scientific jargon to give rigor to their theories. However, as soon as we look at their statements, we will see that they do not meet the criterion of falsification<sup>31</sup>, that they abuse the principle of authority

28 A. Pintor-Ramos, “Zubiri: tipos de racionalidad” *Cuadernos salmantinos de filosofía*, n. 39, 2012, p. 255

29 K. R. Popper, will say that “science can be described as the art of systematic oversimplification, as the art of discerning what can be omitted with advantage.” Cf. K. R. Popper, *El universo abierto: un argumento en favor del indeterminismo*, Tecnos, Madrid, 1986.

30 A. Pintor-Ramos, “Zubiri: tipos de racionalidad” *Cuadernos salmantinos de filosofía*, n. 39, 2012, p. 255

31 They use propositions of the type “it is possible that you will have luck in the lottery tomorrow” or “your health depends on your harmony with the cosmos” that are not falsifiable. Instead, a scientific proposition of the type “all planets revolve in an orbit” is refutable.

(“such a famous doctor, such a brilliant person, says it”) and that they do not self-correct over time. Homeopathy, for instance, is the same now as in the eighteenth century when it was invented. In addition, they persist in their affirmations even when they have been refuted experimentally<sup>32</sup> and tend to fall into the *post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy* (if it is after this then it is a consequence of this)<sup>33</sup>.

We call the knowledge and practices that are incorrectly presented as science, pseudosciences. If the pseudosciences constitute a form of post-truth it is also true that the scientific method, when it claims to be the only rational way, the only valid knowledge, or be the model for all other rational ways, becomes itself, paradoxically “post-truth” and itself pseudoscience. It is what is known as scientism. Scientists make science mutate into a form of superstition, because they force it to make pronouncements about issues that do not concern it: giving interpre-

tations of meaning, pronouncing about values, talking about theological issues. Above all, it is because they betray the proper method of science by assuming theses that cannot be tested empirically<sup>34</sup>.

It is important to fully understand the cognitive limits of science to avoid moving, even unintentionally into a realm of post-truth. In the first place, science does not exhaust rational paths. Science is undoubtedly rational, but not all rationality is always scientific. Many peoples of the world have not developed their own scientific activity and many people have little or no scientific knowledge though this does not mean that they are irrational.

Second, the scientific claim that one day it will be possible to answer all questions not only contradicts the openness of reason that we have described before, but has a counterexample in Leibniz’s famous question: “Why is there something and no more nothing?” It is clear that it is impossible to answer that question scientifically because science is always based on the previous existence of the world, as an implicitly accepted hypothesis. “Even current attempts to make the universe the creator of itself, arising from nothing, would not respond to that question either, because they use a nothing that cannot be as such because it is

32 K. R. Popper, will say that “science can be described as the art of systematic oversimplification, as the art of discerning what can be omitted with advantage.” Cf. KR Popper, *The Open Universe: An Argument in Favor of Indeterminism*, Tecnos, Madrid, 1986.

33 Thus, if someone has a high fever, takes homeopathic arsenic and recovers quickly it is concluded that homeopathic arsenic has cured him. Although it is true that the effect always follows a cause, this is a necessary condition to establish a cause, but not sufficient. The patient resorts to an alternative treatment and then improves, concluding that the improvement was caused by the treatment. When the patient does not improve, rationalization is used: at least it did not get worse, and if he dies, it can be argued that treatment was not started on time.

34 J. Corominas, “Crítica A La Religión Tecnocientífica”. *Revista Periferia*, 2017. In this article I tried to show the ideological use of science.

endowed with creative potentialities that must be presupposed”<sup>35</sup>.

In addition, Gödel's theorem shows the impossibility of reaching a final and complete scientific theory of the world. According to this theorem, every formal system of axioms and rules of procedure necessarily includes statements that cannot be proved or refuted from within the system. The philosopher Karl Popper puts it this way: “Every explanation can be further explained by a theory or conjecture of a greater degree of universality. There can be no explanation that does not need a further explanation<sup>36</sup>”. Therefore, as absolute science would have to be infinite, it is necessarily unattainable and impossible for limited beings such as human beings.

And finally, any assignment of value necessarily exceeds the scientific knowledge of reality and, therefore, jumps to the philosophical or religious terrain. The part of “responsibility” that the scientific post-truth may have in the promotion of what I call liquid religion must not be ignored, especially because scientism, by promoting as “scientific” a materialist, positivist conception and mechanistic knowledge as the only rational and valid explanation of reality, makes many people identify reason with a calculating

and cold scientific way, justifying their abandonment of any rational way.

### 3. Philosophy and religion

Does the above mean that a scientist cannot be materialistic and positivist? Not at all. The scientist may find these philosophical theories more reasonable than others, but he cannot defend them “scientifically”. Materialism or atheism cannot be a scientific conclusion, although it is a philosophical option of the scientist, or of anyone. Disputes at the level of philosophy cannot be resolved scientifically. To begin with, this is because science cannot account “scientifically” for its own activity. When we deal with the essential characteristics of science, we are no longer doing science, but “philosophy” of science. When the scientist reflects on his own task and asks questions of the type What is science? What is your method? What is its truth value? One stops being a scientist to become a philosopher for the simple reason that these questions cannot be answered scientifically. Even the fundamental affirmation of positivism: the only valid knowledge is scientific knowledge, is not, paradoxically, a scientific thesis.

Philosophical questions do not have limits imposed by the experimental method and the scientific mentality. A physicist is interested in the laws that govern the physical world. But philosophy can go further and ask what is a law: Are the laws outside our mind? Are they a pure

<sup>35</sup> A. Fernández-Rañada, *Los científicos y Dios*, Ed. Trotta, Madrid, 2009, p. 246

<sup>36</sup> Cf. K. Popper, *Conocimiento objetivo: un enfoque evolucionista*, Tecnos, Madrid, 1988, pp. 180-191 y 313-321.

construct or a “discovery”? Are there logical laws independent of the concrete biological constitution of our brain so that they would also apply to hypothetical extraterrestrial beings with an intelligence different from ours? These are questions that positive sciences can no longer answer. Philosophy will try to articulate a rational response.

In addition, philosophy has an inherently critical nature that can free scientific research from many prejudices such as the belief that there is a world, outside our perception, that can be studied. It is what in philosophy we call naive realism<sup>37</sup>. Ethical questions also go beyond scientific knowledge: What do we do with science? Is scientific research really neutral and disinterested? Philosophy is a rational path that, on the one hand, informs us about what is the truth we can expect from each of the different modes of knowledge and its limits (a knowledge about knowledge) and, on the other hand, elaborates theories about knowledge and reality.

If the distinction between science and philosophy is sometimes very slim the same happens with the distinction between religion and philosophy. General-

ly, we hold that science tells us what the world is like, and philosophy is a critical, reflective and rational discipline of all knowledge and belief systems that in turn elaborates rational theories about reality (metaphysics), about the knowledge of it (epistemology) and on how to behave (ethics). Religion is concerned above all with the meaning of life in terms of its search in this unknown and always unknowable reality to which reason is directed. Religion has to do with mystery<sup>38</sup> and consists of a positive experience of it, of the ultimate as a foundation from which one tries to configure one's own life<sup>39</sup>.

While that enigma or problem is what we have before us, the mystery in turn envelops us and involves us, we are a part of the mystery. The life that we humans live, feeling alive, is openness to the other, to a non-closing, mysterious and indecipherable otherness or infinity and no matter how much we try to close this opening with the categories that serve us to describe things and with forms of life that overshadow the mystery, slits appear again and again that prevent it. What is this about feeling alive? What are we doing here? Where does all this movement of the universe of millions and millions of years in which I appear

37 X. Zubiri, *Inteligencia y realidad*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1984, p. 178. Notice that we have no way of obtaining information from the world other than through our observations. There is no independent platform from which to look at the world and decide if our ideas about the world coincide with “reality”. Cf., X. Zubiri, *Intelligence and reality*, translated by Thomas Fowler. The Spanish corresponding pages are indicated in Fowler's translation.

38 *Atlas W. Benjamín*, Círculo de Bellas artes: [Misterio, Enigma](#).

39 In another place I have problematized the definition of religion and in what sense it can be said that Christianity is not a religion or that there is at least a discontinuity between Christianity and other religions. Cf. Jordi Corominas, “¿Qué es Religión? De la Religión a la Desligación”, *Cuadernos Salmantinos de Filosofía*, Vol. 40, 2013, pp. 579-594

and disappear in a brief moment, end? The mystery is not about God, who is already an elaboration of the mystery, but something so simple and so close, so immediate, that it is difficult to perceive in a culture like ours, which is disconnected from the simple. These verses by Pessoa or J. Maragall reflect well what I mean:

“Other times I hear the wind go by

and I think that just to hear the wind pass  
is worth having been born”<sup>40</sup>

“Well lying on the ground, how I am  
pleased to see before

me a soft very green meadow beneath  
the blue sky”<sup>41</sup>

“The simple,” Heidegger describes, “preserves the enigma of the perennial and the great without intermediaries and suddenly penetrates into man, and requires, however, a long maturation”<sup>42</sup>. The simple as that which is close to us: linden trees, hills, the desert, a friendly voice, the rage about those who do not love us, the person who looks at us as a supplicant prey to pain, our feelings of desolation or happiness, and the primordial access to things, is at the same

---

40 Poems by X. Fernando Pessoa, *Poemas inconjuntos*, 2015, citat per J. M. Esquirol, *op. cit.*, p. 15

41 “Ben ajegut a terra, com me plau  
de veure davant meu on costa suau  
a prat ben verd sota d'un cel ben blau!”  
J. Maragall, *Pirinenques*, 1876.

42 M. Heidegger, *El camino del campo*, Herder, Barcelona, 2015



Joan Fontcuberta, [Sèrie Miracles & CO](#)

time the deepest thing<sup>43</sup>. The mystery opens up in this complete proximity and the daily life of oneself. The spiritual person is the one who is somehow affected and seduced by this openness and through religious reason penetrates it, trying to build structures of meaning or simply floundering.

It could be argued that this construction of meaning is also a matter of philosophy, and, certainly, it is not easy in some cases to differentiate a philosophy from a religion. I understand that what is inherent in religion is to think with a

---

43 “The culture that reduces everything to facts and data is a myopic culture, and for that reason decadent. Because the decline of a culture is not due to its inability in dealing with the difficult issues and the most flawed affairs, but rather to its disconnection from the simple one.” Cf. J. M. Esquirol, *op. cit.*, p. 16

certain positivity of the ultimate reality. Even religions without gods maintain this positivity. The doctrine of nirvana, say, does not involve a nihilism, but alludes to a mental state full of meaning. Nor is the Nothingness of the mystics literally equivalent to nothing<sup>44</sup>. On the other hand, philosophical thought may not conceive the ultimate as something positive that can guide us. You can think that it is absolutely unknowable or that it is a pure chaos to which we try to put a bit of order with our narratives or can defend with good arguments that it is not worth being born or to continue living.

However, when atheism defends a spirituality without God, I believe that in it, philosophical reason and religious reason overlap or at least touch. This is the case, among others, of André Comte-Spontville, confessed atheist, who understands spirituality precisely as I have defined it before, as an experience of the mystery or the infinite to which we are open. Comte-Spontville considers that this experience is deeply positive and even restorative<sup>45</sup>. And it is exactly this "positivity" that is, for me, the hinge of philosophy and religion.

44 Cf. S. Bachelor, *El budista agnóstico*, *Revista Periferia*, 2015.

45 Comte-Spontville tells during an evening walk through the woods: "And suddenly ... what? Nothing. All! No speech No sense. No question. Just a surprise A peace that seemed eternal. The starry sky above me, immense, unfathomable, luminous, and nothing else in me than this sky, of which I was a part, nothing else in me than silence, that light, like a happy vibration, like a joy without subject". A. Comte-Spontville, *El alma del ateísmo. Introducción a una espiritualidad sin Dios*, Barcelona 2006, p. 183

Religion is a rational way<sup>46</sup>, among many others, towards the ultimate foundation of things. It is different from the philosophical way, although in many cases they can coincide, because what is sought, the fact that the foundation of reality has a certain positivity that can guide us, is only a possibility, and the religious path necessarily assumes this possibility. The philosopher, strictly speaking, can only point to the abeyance of the otherness of the things of this world towards the wholly other, towards the mystery, the abyss, the infinite, the being or whatever he wants it to be called, but any attempt to determine which ones are the characters of that "wholly other" aspect moves into the orb of religion<sup>47</sup>.

A religious person, based on the cultural heritage in which he finds himself (reference system), creates new sketches, -modifications, refinements, or new ideas of God or of a final foundation that he is testing in his own existence and that is

46 E. Solari, "La razón religiosa según Zubiri", *Teología y Vida*, Vol. LI (2010), Chile, pp. 105-159

47 A. González locates very well the parity in which we find ourselves believers and non-believers before the mystery: "The non-believer can only point to the remission of the otherness of all things in this world towards the totally other. But any attempt to determine what the characters of that totally other one necessarily falls into arbitrariness. This can also be said of any attempt to demonstrate its nonexistence, given that any demonstration of it has to encompass it conceptually, denying its total otherness and making it one more thing among the things of the world." Cf. A. González, *Teología de la praxis evangélica*, 1999, Sal Terrae, Santander, p. 443

guiding his life<sup>48</sup>. They postulate, roughly polytheistic, pantheistic and monotheistic sketches. In polytheism, God identifies with multiple realities. In pantheism, divinity is identified, in some sense, with the entire universe or with the very law of the cosmos. In some of the monotheistic sketches a God is outlined as beyond being, a wholly other God that is beyond the very depths of reality to which the opening of reason would point.

The experience of God involves trusting in a postulated divinity to determine and guide one's life. It is tested by conformation (self-appropriation), in a gigantic and endless trial, trying to configure life according to the reality sketched out. It is what we call choice, faith, a gamble or religious belief. For example, in a Christian experience of God, gratuitousness (grace) rather than merit and retribution will be emphasized. It is held we must love God for nothing and even faith will not be considered a merit of its own<sup>49</sup>. Of course, the atheist or the agnostic also

requires options and faith<sup>50</sup>. There is religious faith and non-religious faith. Both the one and the other, regardless of the sociological extension that we assign them, are beliefs in which we already find ourselves, that we can change from our personal experience, and that shapes our life more or less explicitly.

However, as much as religion is also a rational way, it may be a false or illusory experience, as can be the experience of non-religious people (atheists, agnostics or insensitive to this unknown background). In many cases the atheist movements that have sought to eradicate religion have dethroned gods to enthrone Reason, Progress, the Nation, or Technoscience<sup>51</sup>.

The awareness that we have acquired in these 21st century principles of the permanence of religion, despite the great efforts expended to achieve a secular society where religion was tolerated as an irrational and private waste, has led various intellectuals<sup>52</sup> to pose the ideal of a post-secular society that, beyond tol-

48 "This testing is being exercised by all the individual, social and historical routes, from this point of view, all diversity of individuals in the course of life, their social constitutives and their historical unfolding to the height of time, they are a fabulous, a gigantic experience of the power of the real " Cf. X. Zubiri, *Hombre y Dios*, A. Editorial, Madrid, 2012, p. 96. Cf. X. Zubiri, *Man and God*, Joaquin Redondo Translation, UPA, USA, 2009.

49 P. Ricoeur, *El mal, un desafío a la filosofía y a la teología*, Amorrortu editores, Madrid, 2006

50 The fundamental objection of Zubiri to atheism is not to be an atheist, but sometimes atheism, as has historically happened with believers, is not intellectually honest enough to be considered as the primary attitude against which the justifications should be justified. other options: agnosticism, belief, indifference. The power of the real is enigmatic for everyone and what the atheist poses is a possible answer to this enigma that surrounds the totality of life. Cf. X. Zubiri, *Hombre y Dios*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2012, pp. 280-285 pp. 280-285 and also note 40 of this article.

51 J. Corominas, "[Crítica a la religión tecnocientífica](#)", *Revista Periferia*, 2017.

52 J. Habermas, Ch. Taylor, J. Butler, C. West, *op., cit.*

erating religions, accepts that religions can be rational, that they have a potential for truth, and that we can learn good things from them<sup>53</sup>. The *raison d'être* of true state neutrality would be to avoid favoring or harming not only religious positions, but any basic position or belief in life, whether religious or not. The state cannot favor religious faith in the face of religious unbelief and not vice versa.

Nonetheless, prejudice persists among some of the defenders of the post-secular state that religious thought is in some way less rational than the secular one and that religious arguments should be translated into a secular reason that everyone is supposed to have access to. But, as Charles Taylor points out, "What reason is there to think that secular reason offers a kind of ideological Esperanto? Were the secular citizens of M. Luther King unable to understand what he advocated when he advocated equality in biblical terms? Would more people have understood him if he had invoked Kant? And also, how does one distinguish the secular language of the religious? Is the golden rule more clearly in one or the other?"<sup>54</sup>. The translation should not only be a burden that falls on believing citizens, but also an ethical obligation for non-believers, who should try to understand religious claims and acquire sensitivity to religious language.

53 J. Conill, "Racionalización religiosa y ciudadanía postsecular en Habermas", *Pensamiento*, vol. 63, n. 238, 2007, p. 579

54 J. Habermas, Ch. Taylor, J Butler, C. West, *op. cit.*, p. 55

#### 4. Liquid religion

As I stated at the beginning, I start from the consideration that religion is spreading, that our century is more religious than the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is enough to examine the exponential growth in bookstores on the shelves dedicated to spirituality, coaching<sup>55</sup>, self-help and esotericism<sup>56</sup>. Traditional religions are transmuted into a great

55 D. Lyon, *Jesús en Disneylandia. La religión en la postmodernidad*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2002, p.14

56 Coaching and coaches seek to change people through positive individual motivation and rejection of criticism and negative opinions of those around us. You must be positive and happy almost by obligation. A book frequently recommended by coaches is *The Secret* of Rhonda Byrne. Basically it is a supposed law of attraction for which if I think



Joan Fontcuberta, [Sèrie Miracles & CO](#)

good or bad things I will attract them and if I think critical things, I will attract bad things too. Cf. [The Secret](#)

syncretistic structure, with an extraordinarily flexible institutional relevance, which allows for the sharing of very different interests, links and levels of commitment. It is not a defined movement, but rather a kind of ecumenism of practices and ideas in the process of permanent bricolage or tinkering. There is no concern to form a coherent system. Very diverse elements are incorporated depending on a certain family resemblance. This new religiosity penetrates everywhere, permeating large sections of the population of all social classes and all religious attachment and even those who confess to being atheists, agnostics or indifferent<sup>57</sup>.

There is talk of a “new gnosis”<sup>58</sup>, of “New era”<sup>59</sup>, of “mystic-esoteric neb-

ula”<sup>60</sup>, of “fluctuating religion”<sup>61</sup>, of “holistic movement”<sup>62</sup>, of “pseudoreligions” or of “diffuse religions”, to group very different phenomena, but I think they have common characteristics, a greater unity than it seems at first sight. The term that I propose of “liquid religion”, from the essays of Z. Bauman on “liquid modernity”, has the advantage of being a very popular image that links it immediately with all the other liquidity phenomena studied by Bauman (life, loves, fears, etc.,) and that, in addition, immediately refers us to three basic characteristics of current religiosity: its changeable and fickle character, its expansiveness (it gets everywhere like water), and its transparency (it is not seen to be religion).

57 It is not only a matter of the gradual reduction of the traditional philosophical and theological literature but also of the progressive substitution of the bookstores dedicated to religious books (usually of Catholic or Protestant origin) by new bookstores specializing in esotericism, self-help, coaching, alternative medicines and “spirituality”.

58 “At first glance it is surprising, in areas considered secular and immune to religion, that frequently there have emerged as from an unknown ocean floor, numerous functional equivalents, some of them frankly disturbing, of the ancient articulations of the religious, that they were considered definitively suppressed, but that, in fact, they had only been repressed. Our past history points out with diaphanous clarity that in all areas of human existence the return of the repressed that was given by suppressed causes in the human tissue the most lamentable and dangerous psychological dysfunctions “. L. Duch, *L'exili de Déu*, op. cit., pp. 44-45

59 Lluís Duch strongly supports this return of gnosis, a kind of religious archetype that, as in the end of Hellenism, breaks out in times of crisis and now encompasses the movements related to the New Age. Cf. Lluís Duch, *Un extraño en nuestra casa*, Herder, Barcelona, 2006; *L'exili de Déu*, op. Cit., Cf. Lluís Duch, *Un extraño en nuestra casa*, Herder, Barcelona, 2006; *L'exili de Déu*, op. Cit.,

60 Liquid religion could correspond to what O. Hammer calls New Age in the broad sense. That is, not mentioning with it a specific movement that awaits the coming of a New Age, the age of Aquarius, but a wide range of ideas and practices that have a family air and a certain historical link with what was the New Age strictly speaking. The problem is that at this stage of the 21st century this broad sense is so extensive, because we are talking about a religious phenomenon that has penetrated all levels and that has become one of the main currents of contemporary culture, so perhaps would be better to name it in another way. On the other hand, the New Age movement has practically vanished and fewer and fewer people identify as members of the New Age even though their doctrines and rituals remain in other fields and mixtures. Cf. O. Hammer, “*New Age Movement*”, *Dictionary of Gnosis And Western Esotericism*, Brill Academic Pub, Neederland, 2006, pp. 855-861

61 W. Hanegraaff, *New age religión and western culture. Esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*, State University of New York Press, 1998.

62 F. Champion, “La nébuleuse New Age”, *Études*, n. 14, 1995, pp. 233-242; “Religieux flottant, éclecticisme et syncrétismes”, *Le fait religieux*, Fayard, Paris, 1993.

In fact, most followers of liquid religion affirm that they are not religious believers, but spiritual people. Why this resistance to being qualified as “religious” when it is obvious to any scholar of religion that they are even more so than many believers of “solid” religions? Probably because for them the term religion evokes some kind of authoritarianism, hierarchy, institutionalization, systematization of repetitive doctrines and rituals devoid of meaning, while the term “spiritual” evokes the fluidity of the statements that do not need to be coherent with each other, the absence of authority, the absence of long formulas<sup>63</sup> and a type of very changing and non-fixed rites like those of solid religion. But, of course, just because you do not see the authority, nor be aware of the rites that are practiced, does not mean that they do not exist. On the contrary, it shows a very effective authority where ‘the effect is achieved without the care being noticed’.<sup>64</sup>

63 M. York suggests that present religiosity consists of a holistic movement that would include the New Age, neopaganism, certain ecological movements, mystic-religious groups orientals and the whole movement of self-help and personal transformation. Cf. M. York, *The emerging network: a sociology of the New Age and neo-pagan movements*, Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland, 1995.

64 Traductor's note. The expression is very well known in Catalonia. It was used in 1716 by the head (*fiscal general*) of the council of Castile in sending secret instructions to his political appointees (*corregidores*) in the newly occupied Catalonia: “Nature seems to have granted each nation its specific language and one has to be very artful to overcome this, considerable time being necessary, and specially so when a character of a nation such as that of the Catalans is stubborn and haughty and cherishes the traits of this country, and for this reason, it seems convenient to give very low-key and discreet instructions and counsel, so that *the effect is achieved without the care being noticed.*”

In spite of the great variety of forms, combinations and intensities that liquid religion can acquire<sup>65</sup> I believe that to a greater or lesser degree we always find three essential ingredients: a Gnostic vision of the world, a personal transformation through psycho-corporeal techniques, and an individualistic and emotional conception of the person.

#### 4.1 Gnostic and esoteric vision of the world<sup>66</sup>

God is understood as an impersonal deity, a cosmic force or energy that embraces us and that animates the unique organism of the universe. It takes advantage of the transition from the mechanistic model of classical physics to the “holistic” of modern atomic and subatomic physics, based on the conception of matter as waves or quanta of energy instead of particles, to affirm that the divinity is a unique immense vibration of energy. Gnosticism is a religious movement that gained strength in the first and second centuries AD. But some authors

65 Priests of different denominations, for example, often spend many years studying, which gives them a certain familiarity with the history of their faith and the adjacent problems. The practitioners, coaches, fortune-tellers, guides, etc., of the liquid religion, usually do not have other training in this field than that of some short private courses.

66 I have only found one author who speaks of liquid religion, the theologian C. N. de Groot in his article “Three Types of Liquid Religion” published in *Implicit Religion*, 2008, vol. 11, pp. 277-296. But he uses the notion not to qualify a new religion, but to point out the transformation and blurring of the once “solid” Christian identities and institutions.

such as Quispel and L. Duch<sup>67</sup>. consider that in the 21st century, Gnosticism has managed to impose itself as the great world religion<sup>68</sup>. Undoubtedly, liquid religion incorporates, with variations, some of its central doctrines: soul-body dualism, the fall in a world of darkness, the importance of “spiritual” (intuitive, suprarational) knowledge, and asceticism, so that our soul or divine spark can return to the light which is its original place before the fall. Because of the divine nature of the soul, the human psyche always has a divine spiritual potential that can be discovered, awakened and saved from what is simply material. Nonetheless, I believe that liquid religion goes beyond Gnosticism. A series of doctrines from Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism are adopted and combined with Gnosticism in a Western package. And these doctrines acquire a very different significance when removed from their original systems. Without going any further, the idea of reincarnation appropriated by

liquid religion has very little to do with the Hindu conception of reincarnation<sup>69</sup>. Liquid religions reinterpret it as a necessary element for spiritual growth, as a stage of progressive spiritual evolution that began before we were born and will continue after we die.

## 4.2 Personal transformation

The knowledge and healing practices of the body and mind are aimed at integrating the self into “the flow of cosmic energy”<sup>70</sup>, to eliminate “negative energy”, to “increase good vibrations”, and to return to the light. Your center and yardstick for measuring is “feeling good”. We could divide all these personal transformation practices into three major groups: the spiritual and psychological, nutritional, and medical.

It usually starts from a personal crisis with which one enters into an experience of psycho-spiritual transformation

67 “The qualification of esotericism emphasizes doctrines that use symbols that are difficult to access and that are transmitted only to a select minority of initiates. The gnosis are religious forms developed between the first and second centuries after Christ that in a moment of crisis and existential disorientation coincide in finding divinity through inner and individual knowledge and disregarding politics and any pretension to transform history. In the case of liquid religion, they are practically synonymous terms: they tend to appear especially in times of uncertainty and social disarticulation, and esotericism generally entails an entrance in itself that happens to be a gnosis, a knowledge, to achieve a form of enlightenment and individual salvation”.

68 L. Duch, *L'exili de Déu*, op. cit.. L. Duch suggests that gnosis is a kind of religious archetype always latent, almost a “natural religion” fruit of a certain religious common sense, which always strongly reappears in times of social crisis.

69 Reincarnation means in the Indian religion that all our bad actions will be punished without remedy in the next life. And in addition “it operates a fabulous legitimization of the social order. Those who belong to the lower castes are paying for the crimes they committed in previous lives, while those in the higher classes are being rewarded for the good they have done in their previous lives. It is not surprising that India perceived the eternal circle of reincarnations as an infernal wheel, in the framework of which all human life is nothing but pain.” Cf. A. González, *Teología de la praxis evangélica*, Sal Terrae, Santander, 1999, p. 148.

70 The asceticism (purification of the spirit) of traditional religions is converted into practices such as Zen, yoga, transcendental meditation, bioenergetics, gong bath, sound therapy, mindfulness, diets, alternative medicine, etc. These practices are usually accompanied by various objects: stones, talismans, bracelets, cacti, pendulums, etc.

through different courses, retreats and psychotherapies such as family constellations<sup>71</sup>, “a course in miracles”<sup>72</sup>, or personality enneagrams<sup>73</sup>. It is about discovering the spark of light that is confused in the depths of our own being to connect it with the force, universal energy or divine cosmic mind; in order to reach a cosmic consciousness, a feeling of harmony with the whole and an

inner balance; and to get closer to our original place before the fall, to which our spirit belongs. For this it is essential to get rid of the material, historical and misleading world of senses. “Let flow”, “stop clinging and suffering for others”, “let life and the universe follow its course freely”, are central commandments.

These psychospiritual practices tend to go hand in hand with various types of diets that recall the “purification rites” typical of many religions (alkaline diets to protect against cancer, raw vegan diets, macrobiotic diets, etc., <sup>74</sup>), and also with a broad spectrum of “alternative medicines” <sup>75</sup>. The conception of health usually implies a high level of physical and mental functioning that includes the entire spectrum of existential and social problems. Any lack of vitality or creativity, even the “falling” into normality and the “monotony” of day to day, can be understood as a lack of health and the need for some type of treatment. It is considered that illness and suffering come from the confusion of our divine spark with the muddle of the bodies and the emotional conflicts that they bring. The secret of health consists in disconnecting the soul from

---

71 Family constellations is a method developed by B. Hellinger. The basic idea is that the unresolved conflicts of our ancestors are transmitted from generation to generation, causing disorders and diseases in the present, as families are formed by “energy” that connects the members of the group. The “family constellations” therapy aims to reinstate the excluded members in the energy network and restore the “natural order”. Remember very much the idea of retribution of the karmic law or the “I will punish the sins of the parents in the children” of the book of Exodus. Some of the controversies raised by Hellinger, especially for his views on Hitler, the holocaust, incest, child abuse and homosexuality, can be followed in Wikipedia. Cf. [Family constellations](#)

72 In October 1965, the American psychologist Helen Schucman heard an inner voice, that of Jesus, saying: “This is a course of miracles, take notes please.” As a result, the book *A Course in Miracles* was published. The course consists of three parts: the “text”, the “student workbook” and the “teacher’s manual”. Its sole purpose is to help readers awaken spiritually. One of the central principles of the course is that there is no world outside of us. It is only a projection of what is in us, in our mind. This means that our problems, physical, financial and social, are never caused by what happens outside of us in the world. The problem is always what is inside our mind. And since the problem is there, it is also where the answer should be. The answer is the miracle. And the miracle occurs through forgiveness, which is the recognition of the Truth that replaces the illusions. Cf. [A course in miracles](#)

73 The Enneagram is a system for classifying personalities based on two fundamental factors: their relationship with other people and their internal mental sensation. The “enlightenment” and full development are pursued with them. Enneagram courses have been promoted and sold in the “business management” by large American and European companies, to structure the company, select personnel and improve teamwork. Cf. [Enneagram of personality](#)

---

74 The belief that all diseases stem from inadequate eating habits (such as eating meats, products that are not organic, or other strict normative codes) is widespread.

75 Acupuncture, homeopathy, polarity massage, therapeutic touch, raikí, bach flowers; feng shui to clean the house of negative energies and find harmony and “high vibrations”; therapy with pendulums, chacras therapy; crystal healing (crystal therapy), colors (chromotherapy) or sea water. Cf. [Energy medicine](#)

these entanglements and reconnecting it with the divinity.

#### 4.3 Individuality

In liquid religion, change is always individual. The difficulties of life are explained by the failure to realize the “spiritual” potential of each person. There is a sharp lack of appetite for the political and social world. As expressed by L. Duch, his maxim could be: “go down to your interior, descend to the deepest recesses of yourself and do not worry about anything else”<sup>76</sup>. His vision of the individual is pre-critical, pre-modern: the debate on the socio-political and historical construction of internal experience is avoided and the “spiritual” experience is taken as a faithful description of the ultimate reality. Life is not a gift, on the contrary, we come to this life to get rid of the “karma” (energy generated by our actions) in another life. Karma is the expression of the cosmic law of retribution: everyone finds in life what he deserves, including suffering and illnesses. Hence, we cannot condemn anyone, and no one needs forgiveness either. If there is something alien to liquid religion it's gratuitousness, the contrary of deserving. This belief

<sup>76</sup> “It is religion that has a single faithful and a single cult:” this “man,” this woman “and who usually possesses only one purpose, which is the answer to the narcissistic question par excellence: How do I find myself?” L. Duch, *L'exili de Déu*, op. cit., p. 36. It is already seen with this type of beliefs that there are very interesting political implications for those who hold power.

in an evolving individual spiritual plan goes hand in hand with a large number of divinatory techniques and with people gifted with a vision of the plan, and capable of “spiritual channeling”.

#### 5. Placebo effect

In liquid religion, when placing great emphasis on the healing of the body, soul and mind, the so-called placebo effect plays a decisive role<sup>77</sup>. Placebo is the name given to any form of medical treatment that the patient believes is effective, but that, in fact, does not have any chemical property that justifies the patient's improvement. Where the placebo effect is most statistically effective is in the most characteristically psychosomatic diseases: neuropathic pain, fibromyalgia, restless legs syndrome, insomnia, nausea, hot flushes. Also in the psychiatric field it appears that the placebo effect is considerable in neurotic disorders, anxiety, panic,

<sup>77</sup> It is difficult to find someone in our society who has not tried any of the multiple therapies that I encompass within the liquid religion. Homeopathy is undoubtedly the most popular and lucrative one. Recall that the active principle of homeopathic remedies is diluted to such an extent that it ends up having the same concentration of any active ingredient that tap water can have. The success of homeopathic medicines would be explained by the placebo effect. The systematic reviews published to date do not show that homeopathy is more effective than a placebo. See, for example, the continuing reviews of the NHS Center for Reviews and Dissemination of alternative therapies, the systematic reviews published in the Cochrane Library or the following exhaustive research whose conclusion is that “There is no reliable evidence that homeopathy is effective.” Cf. “Evidence on the effectiveness of homeopathy for treating health conditions”, National Health and Medical Research Council, Australia, 2015, p. 27

mild depression, and not trivial in psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia or unipolar depression<sup>78</sup>.

Virtually all diseases have psychosomatic components (psychological factors that can affect their appearance, their course and their response to treatment) and somatopsychic components (the presence of diseases can affect the mental state of the patient). In some diseases, such as gastrointestinal illnesses or obesity, the presence of both aspects is very evident. While placebos may provide relief, evidence to date suggests that the therapeutic benefits associated with placebo effects do not alter the pathology of diseases beyond their symptomatic manifestations. However, whatever the scope of the placebo effect on our health, it is not completely trivial.

Existing research on the placebo effect usually highlights that it involves organic, psychological, neurological, cultural and socio-environmental factors. Among the psychological variables that would explain the placebo effect is the patient's expectation. The greater this is, the greater the possibility of the placebo



Joan Fontcuberta, [Sèrie Miracles & CO](#)

effect (or nocebo<sup>79</sup>). Anything can have a placebo effect if the patient thinks it heals: a sugar pill, an injection that only contains water, an ointment that does not contain any medication, a bracelet made of some inert material.

In fact, anyone who studies “marketing” knows that the consumption experiences of individuals sometimes depend more on the expectations formed on the products than on the product itself. If a consumer expects a product to satisfy him, then he will most likely be satisfied, regardless of whether the product actually offers what that person is looking for. In our culture, accustomed to taking pills

---

<sup>78</sup> Patients suffering from anxiety attacks, for example, often carry an anxiolytic “just in case” in their pockets. If it turns out that they begin to have symptoms, they take it and the anxiety begins to cease, when it has not even given time for the drug to assimilate and metabolize, regardless of whether the anxiolytic effect is never immediate.

---

<sup>79</sup> It is called nocebo effect in contrast to the placebo effect: the experience of unpleasant symptoms with inane products favored by adverse expectations.

for diseases, the placebo effect seems to have much to do with the presentation of these pills, with the “marketing”<sup>80</sup>: A colorful placebo pill with a raised logo works better than a pill smooth placebo and all white. A good presentation of the container of the placebo makes it more effective than if it comes in a plastic bag. If the placebo tablet costs 50 euros it has more effect than if it only costs one euro. In turn, a placebo injection is more effective than a pill.

Several psychoanalysts propose to renounce the notion of placebo effect<sup>81</sup>, since they argue that it diverts attention from the true nature of the phenomenon, which would be communicative. The patients would not respond to any inane therapeutic product, but to the explanations of the therapist, to the words that are involved in their delivery and that gives meaning to their suffering or illness. It is the same as the psychoanalyst consciously trying to access the sense of psychic suffering and enter into a relationship with the one who express-

es it to try to give it a meaning and thereby diminish or free them from this suffering. The decisive thing would not be the specific techniques of each therapy, but the relationship with the therapist<sup>82</sup>. In particular, the decisive factor would be the patient's trust in the therapist's competence and in the justification (or mythology) offered by the therapist to explain the patient's difficulties.

According to several neurobiological studies there would also be a neurochemical basis of the “placebo effect”: Expectations (which are a psychological mechanism) produce chemical changes in the body through the hormonal secretion of oxytocin, endorphins and dopamine that cause us to feel better. Then we attribute that feeling of improvement and well-being to the stimulus, when it has been generated autonomously by the individual<sup>83</sup>.

On the other hand, doing nothing and letting the disease run its course explains a good part of the placebo effect, since it is often better to do nothing than do something. A good illustration is what happened in England in the nineteenth century. The mortality rates due to the cholera epidemic in the homeopathic hospital in London were three times

80 Research by Wright, da Costa, Sundar, Dinsmore & Kardes “If it tastes bad it must be good: Consumer naïve theories and the marketing placebo effect”, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, vol. 30 Issue 2, June 2013, pp. 197-198, find this effect in energy drinks, showing in the participants changes in their experience with these products, both at the physiological level (blood pressure, reflexes, mental alertness, perceived activation), and psychological-behavioral (expectation on the effect produced, solving tasks that involved mental effort). The placebo effect was aroused simply by manipulating marketing variables such as price, taste, packaging, amount of information provided or product availability.

81 P-H. Keller, [“Placebo et transfert: l'hypothèse de l'inconscient à l'épreuve de la recherche clinique”](#), *Psychiatrie Psychoanalyse et Sociétés*, 2014.

82 J. Frank, B. Julia, *Persuasion and Healing: A Comparative Study of Psychotherapy*, JHU Press, USA, 1993.

83 Enck & Klosterhalfen, “The story of O. Is oxytocin the mediator of the placebo response?”, *Neurogastroenterol motil*, 2009, p. 347-350. They argue that oxytocin is a mediator of the placebo response. Being released makes us feel better, reduces pain and increases the feeling of happiness.

lower than in the Middlesex Hospital. The reason is that medical treatments that were made to treat cholera, such as bloodletting, were actively harmful while homeopathic treatments did not cause any harm. Nowadays, similarly, there are often situations in which people want treatment, but where medicine has little to offer, and if it offers something it is worse than not offering anything. The obvious fact is that many diseases or ailments such as colds simply improve on their own over time<sup>84</sup>. Back pain or a mood goes up and down for a week, a month, or a year. If you take a sugar pill at the time of more pain you will almost certainly notice an improvement due to the natural evolution of the disease.

In any case, seeing that the placebo effect can be beneficial, we can ask ourselves to what extent it is acceptable to prescribe placebos knowing that their administration is associated with deception. Some doctors prescribe them to calm patients with multiple nonspecific complaints and poorly described diseases who ask for medications all the time, or not to lose patients who believes that if they are not prescribed something they will not be cured. On the other hand, the patient cares about healing. It does not matter to the patient if the cure is the result of deceit or his belief in liquid religion. It could even be argued that if this kind of post-truth that involves some of the practices of liquid

religion is for the benefit of the patient<sup>85</sup> then post-truth is welcome.

Nevertheless, when a health professional prescribes a pill that they know very well is not more effective than a placebo, without revealing that fact to their patient, it tramples on some of the basic principles of bioethics, such as the informed consent of their patient and respect for their autonomy. In addition, it is a return to paternalistic medicine that great efforts have been made to eliminate, and threatens the trust and honesty that is central to clinical practice. The primacy of beneficence over the autonomy of the patient always entails a subjugation to authority. It is the justification of all dictatorships that claim to know what really suits their subjects better than the subjects know themselves.

We know that good clinical attention and patient-doctor interaction and an improvement of the psychosocial context that surrounds the patient improves the patient's health, reduces their stress and gives them hope. For this, it is not necessary to deceive him. On the contrary, deeply human relationships are, I am convinced, much more curative than any placebo effect. And here, undoubtedly, experimental medicine has a large field in which to move forward to alleviate unnecessary suffering in a manner

<sup>84</sup> F. Benedetti, *Placebo Effects: Understanding the Mechanisms in Health and Disease*, OUP, Oxford, 2009

<sup>85</sup> Here we are talking about the best of possibilities. Most post-truths clearly harm patients. Consider, for example, how many homeopaths denigrate conventional medicine or recommend homeopathic pills to protect against malaria by discouraging prophylactics that are effective.

consistent with trust and transparency without the need to play along with liquid religions.

## 6. Criterion of demarcation between religion and pseudo-religion

The placebo effect and our psychosomatic condition (in us everything psychological is organic and everything organic is psychological<sup>86</sup>) explains in part the success of these healings, a remnant of ancient magical and ritual practices, which is currently incorporated into liquid religion. So as not to fall under the healers' power in this field we have the principle of falsification and the distinction between science and pseudoscience. For many years, as an example, doctors used leeches and scalpels to free patients of their supposedly diseased blood. They were convinced that this was doing good. The patients were also convinced that when they had a fever and the doctor used bloodletting, they improved. Everyone knew a friend or family member who had been at the gates of death until the bloodletting healed him. Doctors counted successes by thousands. Today we know they were wrong. Experimental medicine shows that bloodletting did much more harm than good. The patients who recovered had recovered despite the bloodletting, not because of it.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. X. Zubiri, *Hombre y Dios*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2012, p. 53. Cf. X. Zubiri, *Nature, History, God*, T. Fowler translation, University Press of America, USA, 1983.

But in the case of religious beliefs we cannot apply the criterion of falsification because beliefs move unfailingly in an area where there is no room for scientific experiments. Can we appeal to any other criterion that allows us to distinguish between the theological reflections of B. Pascal or P. Ricoeur and the speculations of M. Emoto<sup>87</sup>? Or are we forced to concede that basically all religious beliefs are reduced to the same, to more or less elaborate, post-truths?

I believe that the march of reason itself offers us a guide to differentiate reasonable forms from foolish forms of religion. The criterion of demarcation between religions and pseudo-religions, admitting that any religion can become a pseudo-religion, is whether religious reason is exercised or not. It is based on a criterion of "reasonableness" – of good judgement and fairness. We can consider pseudo-religion any knowledge about ultimate truth based on credulity. Credulity is a childish way of believing, a kind of blind trust, that accepts what is said without critical judgment, without thinking for oneself. Credulity is just the opposite of the exercise of religious reason and "reasonableness".

There is no doubt that in our societies there are enormous doses of creduli-

<sup>87</sup> Masaru Emoto defends that water has memory, which records the intentions of each one and returns them and records the vibrations of any substance dissolved in it, even if the solution is infinitesimal and we do not detect in that water a single molecule of said substance. Cf. [Masaru Emoto](#)

ty. The culture of post-truth cultivates it and needs it. It is accepted without the slightest criticism what the new gurus, advisers, coaches and therapists of liquid religion say. We surf the internet in a bubble, encouraged by the algorithms themselves, which confirm our desires and beliefs, and which prevent us from contrasting our thoughts. Also, thinking is very uncomfortable. It requires seeing things from other perspectives, being humble, contrasting arguments and being “with others” outside our circle.

To exercise “religious reason” is to admit that we can be wrong about what we believe is the ultimate reality. One cannot be rational without deliberating and introduce at least a certain percentage of doubt and self-criticism about one’s beliefs. It is doubt that protects one’s faith by resting on a belief system and allowing one to review it, rethink it, and even, if necessary, replace it with another. Doubt and faith go hand in hand. We have already argued that to exercise reason is to open up to different possibilities, that reason is fundamentally open to discussion and change. That is why religious pluralism is inherent in the exercise of reason. We can never be sure that our God or our ultimate beliefs are true. In this way, if we believe for example that God is love, we can always suspect that this is a human projection of our desires. All experience of God (whatever it is) is always just a belief that it is an experience of God.



Joan Fontcuberta, [Sèrie Miracles & CO](#)

The march of religious reason requires time because it places our life in the center and we have never had so little time to focus on it. As the founder of Ikea said: “I’m very sorry, but I do not have time to die”<sup>88</sup>. We continually go faster to flee from ourselves, to make life flow superficially<sup>89</sup>. What hides behind this absurd frenzy? Probably the fear of emptiness and the fear of the truth of a life doomed to death. This is what Nietzsche described as “the inactivity of the active”: They do not know the reason why they work. They lose, without meaning, their life: they lack superior activity, individuality, they think as officials,

<sup>88</sup> Ingvar Kamprad: “I’m too busy to die”. *The Telegraph*, 7 octubre, 2012.

<sup>89</sup> X. Zubiri, “Nuestra situación intelectual”, *Naturaleza. Historia. Dios*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid 1987, p. 31. Cf. X. Zubiri, *Nature, History, God*, T. Fowler translation, University Press of America, USA, 1983.

as merchants, but they are inactive as unique human beings <sup>90</sup>. Exercising religious reason means slowing down, trying to conquer a vital moment, taking ownership of our own time, “a sense of calm”, to get out of the confusion and hubbub of the rat race in which we live<sup>91</sup>.

Religious reason makes its way to exteriority and otherness and recognizes that, however much we trust a certain God or gods, we always live in the open, open to anguish, despair, sadness, and the meaninglessness of life. Life, in itself, is not a disease, as it seems to imply the pathological look that alternative medicines and liquid religion often extend over it, nor, lately, something that some medicine or therapy can cure. What life requires is the shelter of the empathy of others, which is, let's not forget, one of the possible rational experiences (compenetration): “Wrap it with the words of your voice as others seal their wounds”<sup>92</sup>.

This criterion of reasonableness is that which allows us not to consider any form of religion as good, nor to give them all as equivalents, nor to equalize the different religious experiences of people within the same religion. There may be reasonable forms of liquid religion, such as Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or other religions, and conversely, there may be

Christian or Muslim forms of religion, to name a few, more ridiculous than certain liquid forms of religion.

I suppose that for more than one reader who has come this far, the argument will have crossed his mind that inevitably appears when I discuss this question of pseudoscience and pseudo-religion: “Well, all these reflections are very good. You may even be right, but if those who practice alternative therapy or follow some liquid religiosity are OK with it and feel good about it, why worry? “ We could counter that an Islamic fundamentalist or someone who defends a dictatorship can also feel good about what they believe and that life is good. Our interlocutor could reformulate the argument and say “if those who profess some pseudoscience or pseudo-religion feel good and do not harm anyone, why worry?” Of course, it is a great step to accept the exercise of ethical reasoning<sup>93</sup>, since pseudoscience and pseudoreligions often have disastrous consequences for others. But even if they do not harm anyone, the question of the truth remains.

We have stated that in the case of different practices of personal transformation (medicine alternative, homeopathy, etc.) we have the criterion of falsifiability. However, in the case of the religious beliefs, the testing of what we postulate as the ultimate reality, could also be precisely

90 F. Nietzsche, *Aforismos*, Edhasa, Barcelona, 1994, p. 44

91 X. Zubiri, “Las fuentes espirituales de la angustia y la esperanza”, *Sobre el sentimiento y la volición*, Alianza Editorial, 1992, pp. 403-404

92 J. M. Esquirol, *op. cit.*, p. 85

93 J. Corominas, *Ética primera. Aportación de Zubiri al diálogo ético contemporáneo*. Desclée de Brouwer, Bilbao, 2000.

confirmed by the “I feel good” criteria. Because in religious reasoning, “experience” is always a test of conformation (“self-appropriation”), a test to conform our life in accordance with what has been postulated. However, the ‘I feel good’ measure does not satisfy the criterion of reasonableness. On the contrary, the credulous believer hides behind both ‘I feel good’ and the appeal to authority to avoid the exercise of religious reason with its characteristics of a long march through trial, doubt, ‘taking ownership of our own time’, and exteriority. And without exercising reason there is no approximation to a certain religious truth or, equally, they are all the same. Credulity is one of the central pillars of the culture of post-truth.

In conclusion, I believe that “credulity” also affects atheist beliefs and questions the division between believers and non-believers, between the religious and atheists. A Christian, to cite a case, may be closer to the atheists who fight tenaciously against all idolatry (gods that enslave the human being) than the religious and vice versa<sup>94</sup>. Nothing is better than the text of Nietzsche about the madman who seeks God to illustrate the proximity and distance between believers and non-believers that establishes the criterion of demarcation outlined here:

94 “The human being always, because of his desire - always unsatisfied and impossible to perfect - of absolute plenitude and fulfillment, never fails to possess strong idolatrous and, especially, self-idolatrous tendencies.” L. Duch, *L'exili de Déu*, op. cit., p.45

“Have you not heard of that madman who, one bright morning, lit a lantern, ran to the market and began to shout incessantly: I seek God! I seek God! Right there, many of those who did not believe in God had gathered, so they laughed loudly. It has been related further that the same day the madman got involved in different churches and that in them he sang his *requiem Aeternam Deo*. Carried away and questioned, it is said that he only replied: “Well, what else are these churches but graves and funerary steles of God?”<sup>95</sup>.

The madman is actually very lucid, a “yurodivi” (fool-for-Christ), one of these common saints in the Christian East who used madness to whip up good sense and the pharisaical morality of the “righteous”, who questioned the powerful and that even dared to humiliate the Czar<sup>96</sup> himself. The madman of Nietzsche is primarily aimed at those who do not believe in God to get them out of an accepted atheism that they take for granted and that doesn't cause them a problem. ‘They feel good.’ Only at the end of the story does it also provoke the believers to point out that they have not realized that their churches are no more than sepulchres. Why does Nietzsche shake both believers and non-believers? In a certain sense, because both of them do not think, they

95 F. Nietzsche, *Así habló Zaratustra*, Madrid, Editorial Alliance, 1983, book III, §125. I only quote a small fragment of the beginning and end of the text although it would be convenient to read everything.

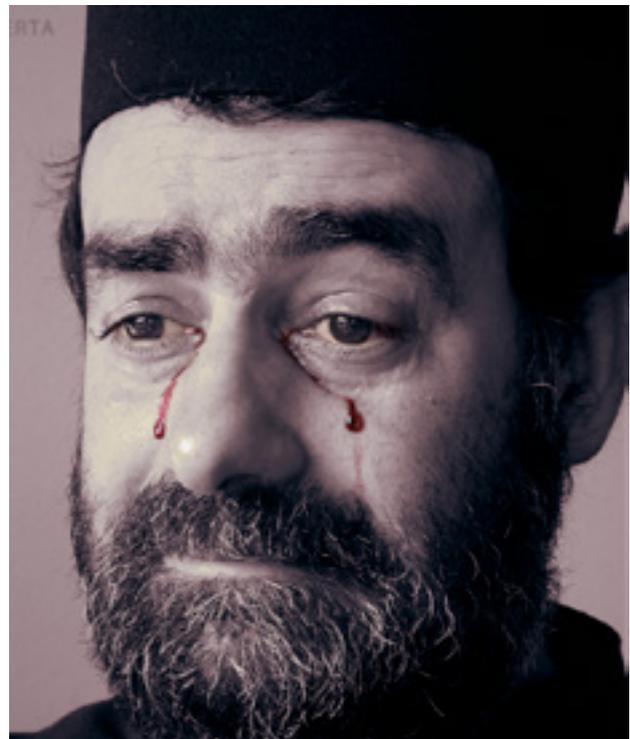
96 A. Grün, T. Halík, *¿Deshacerse de Dios?* Sal Terrae, Santander, 2017, p. 19 ss.

do not exercise reason. Unbelievers are gullible believers comfortably accepting their atheism as are credulous believers. Neither group wants to waste time with the madman's questions.

The main division that establishes the criterion of reasonableness is not between believers and non-believers, since the very exercise of religious reason transcends the religious sphere (exercising it a believer can become an atheist and vice versa), but among those who Charles Taylor and other contemporary sociologists call seekers and dwellers<sup>97</sup>. Among those who are dwellers, one can find believers seated comfortably in the traditional mental and institutional structures of a religion as well as atheists in a dogmatic and ossified atheism. And among the seekers both atheists and believers can be found who, exercising philosophical and religious reason, have a great kinship in the questioning and in the probing of reality. If God exists, he lives more in the doubt and in the search, in the opening of reason, than in the assurances that always end up trying to close it.

We have already seen that sentient reason is not sufficient by itself, that it does not reach eternal truths, and that it is weighed down by a great number of conditions. But this does not mean that through this poor, provisional and lazy reason we cannot elaborate new knowl-

edge, that we cannot create and test those meanings that contain some shard of truth and that we cannot go throwing out all the locks that hide the gigantic opening before which reason places us. Sentient reason is the only thing we have so as not to be at the mercy of power with its dictates of post-truths. Nothing more, but also nothing less.



Joan Fontcuberta, [Sèrie Miracles & CO](#)

---

<sup>97</sup> *Seekers and Dwellers: Plurality and Wholeness in a Time of Secularity*, edited by Philip J. Rossi. Washington, 2016, pp. 17-46