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Mending the So-Called Sacred/Secular Divide: Discovering and Strengthening a Shared Space of Dialogue Between the Religious and Non- Religious

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MENDING THE SO-CALLED SACRED/SECULAR DIVIDE:
DISCOVERING AND STRENGTHENING A SHARED SPACE OF DIALOGUE
BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of

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This thesis may be duplicated.

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This thesis is a theoretical and practical pursuit that integrates some of my deepest passions – religion, right relationships, and the pursuit of justice – with a growing need that I see developing in contemporary American society – positive dialogue opportunities between the religious and non-religious. It is my firm belief that justice, if truly a “justice-for-all,” must be a communal pursuit. This requires right relationships which can only happen when all parties are given the space and opportunity to both be authentic to themselves while remaining open to learning from and collaborating with others. Such mutual space must inevitably allow for religious *and* non-religious thought and expression. If the religious and non-religious are not in right relationship with each other, justice will not ultimately be possible – neither will either be truly free to *believe* as they do or *be* as they are. It is with these convictions that I began this thesis to discover and strengthen a shared space of dialogue between the religious and non-religious for the sake of building positive relationships, learning from each other, and pursuing the common good together.

The theoretical manifestation of this endeavor is what follows here and is an academic exploration that delves into popular culture and media, history, sociology and theology. Dr. Guillermo Hansen, associate professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, gave me invaluable insight into the connections between religion and secularization throughout history and how the sacred and secular intersect with each other

in society. Dr. Lois Malcolm, professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, equipped me with and guided me through the complex work of Paul Tillich, whose theological contributions simultaneously established my Christian frame-of-reference and affirmed my openness to the non-religious and non-Christian voice. Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, professor and president of the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE) in Chicago, provided me with much needed encouragement for the project, inspiring me to take my personal curiosity to the next level and think more seriously about how this exploration might equip the interfaith field, a community that is still trying to figure out how to include the non-religious voice. I thank all of them for their insight, guidance, expertise, patience and questions – all of which have informed and inspired the construction of this thesis.

The practical manifestation of this endeavor, a dialogue event between the religious and non-religious entitled “Ask Me Anything: Local Religious and Secular Folks Dialogue,” that I co-organized at Luther Seminary in the Spring of 2014, while not elaborated upon in this document, deserves important mention. This event, whose planning and implementation occurred during a significant portion of the research and writing of this thesis, played an essential role in the direction and conclusions of my writing. Not only did the dialogue event corroborate the desire that both the religious and non-religious have to engage in respectful conversations about meaning-making together, but also demonstrated to participants and organizers alike that such a dialogue is *possible* and *necessary*. The dialogue event provided the context for my writing while also giving me the opportunity to concretely create the type of shared space I advocate throughout the thesis. I have many people to thank for making this event possible. Justin Kader, the

dialogue event co-organizer and close personal friend, gifted the endeavor with his passion for dialogue, skilled articulation of questions and ideas, ability to empower the participation of others, and skill for creating a welcoming environment for all people. Dr. Mary Hess, professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary, not only equipped me with a plethora of resources from which to create the dialogue space, but also helped train table facilitators for the event and provided me with consistent personal and professional support throughout the event planning and thesis writing. Frank Burton, executive director of the Circle of Reason, was a dedicated advocate and sponsor of the event whose enthusiasm and skill for mobilization contributed significantly to its success. Carrie Carroll, Dean of Students at Luther Seminary, was also a committed advocate and sponsor of the event, without whom the event would not have been possible. Also to be thanked for their support and co-sponsorship of the event are Scott Lohman and Eric Snyder of the Humanists of MN, and August Berkshire and Heather Hegi of MN Atheists. For their willingness to be table facilitators and resource persons, I also would like to thank Jen Kader, Kim Olstad, Kelly France, Mary Beenken, and Judy Hedman. Finally, I must thank with deep gratitude my husband, Tyler LeClear Vachta, for his intense logistical help with the dialogue event, table facilitation, document formatting, and incredible patience and encouragement throughout the thesis writing process.

As all theses are, this endeavor has also been a deeply personal one. It was not just academic curiosity that inspired this pursuit, but a response to the many relationships I have formed throughout my life. It was easy to propose that shared space between the religious and non-religious is possible and important because so many people in my life had already demonstrated such a possibility to me. Thank you—you all know who you

are—for the meaningful conversations, late night talks, and willingness to both share of yourselves and embrace me for me. This thesis is dedicated to you. .

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my life I have been extremely blessed with the opportunity to build relationships with people of diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds. Some of my closest friends, family and colleagues are atheist, agnostic, or religious/spiritual folk who have left the church and self-identify as “non-religious.” These loved ones, contrary to the assumptions of many, are generally very supportive of my decision to go to seminary and open to discussing religious and philosophical themes. I have found it odd, therefore, that so many of my religious loved-ones and even fellow seminarians doubt the extent to which non-religious persons can articulate meaning in their lives. More shocking than this is the occasional remark that doubts the ethical grounding of non-religious persons and suggests that religious people (in this case, Christian people) are more capable and better prepared to “do good” than those without formal religious conviction. Even amidst interfaith circles, I often hear stated that we-religious-people have to come together to “fight against secularism” without much thought as to what the word “secular” actually means to those who identify as such, not to mention the irony that people of *faith* would “fight against” an entire segment of people because of what they *believe* and how they articulate meaning. Unfortunately, I have been equally disappointed with the exaggerations and misconceptions about religious persons purported by my non-religious loved ones, some of whom continue to hold onto negative and over-simplistic stereotypes of religion and religious persons, viewing me as an

admitted “exception to the rule.” They see overtly religious people as close-minded, oppressive, and themselves weak examples of those who “do good.”

As I listen to the stories of the religious and non-religious, however, I can appreciate the reasons they give for making the conclusions they do about “the other side” (indeed, I too hold strong opinions about the religious and non-religious extremism that they often mention). More often than not, their concerns are legitimate and should not be ignored for the sake of artificial “togetherness.” These apprehensions, however, mask the great potential that each group has to contribute to meaning-making and the pursuit of good. I am convinced that the religious and non-religious have more in common than they realize, even whilst maintaining significant differences, and could benefit greatly from both hearing each other out regarding each other’s perspectives on issues such as ethics, religion and spirituality and finding ways to collaborate, for their own sake and the sake of others and the pursuit of justice. This, I maintain, is made possible through intentional *dialogue*. It is with this conviction that I began my research, hoping to better understand the complex relationship between the religious and non-religious and how they could come together in positive ways. Unfortunately, I was not prepared for the contentious conversation between the religious and non-religious that was already at play.

While my own personal experience with dialogue between the religious and non-religious has generally been a positive one, my preliminary research into the topic surfaced a slew of examples that indicated that the opposite was the case for many others. The religious and non-religious, it seemed, were at intense odds with each other. News articles, broadcasts, and online blogs all confirmed this reality. Each “side” was angry,

full of accusations, and eager to prove a point. As my investigation continued, my view of the situation grew dim and I began to fear that *dialogue* was of no interest to those whose commentary filled my research. One can be easily deceived by public, popular media, however, and as I continued to follow what appeared to be a bleak pursuit, I discovered that there were indeed many religious and non-religious individuals and groups that did in fact want to be in dialogue. The problem was that those who promoted positive dialogue efforts did not usually dominate the most easily-viewed venues of conversation, i.e., online posts and televised debates.

Those that did promote affirmative dialogue experiences were behind the scenes, some actively seeking dialogue as a vocational pursuit and others taking a more cautious step towards dialogue, desiring the opportunity but feeling unqualified or unaware of how to participate in such a conversation. If these dialogue advocates did participate in online conversations, they were usually the minority and their reasoned, hopeful words of wisdom were often drowned out by the more dramatic, visceral commentary of loud naysayers. Many of those who wanted to engage in dialogue with friends, family or acquaintances felt unprepared and either avoided the conversation all together or found themselves having a *debate* rather than a *dialogue*. Even those attempting to partner with the most progressive dialogue circles, including proponents of interfaith dialogue, were met with hesitation by both the religious and non-religious alike who argued that those with no *faith* had no part to play in inter-*faith*. Despite these challenges, the religious and non-religious continue to have a deep desire to engage in productive, positive dialogue with each other, whether or not it is called “interfaith” or not. Some have made incredible strides towards this pursuit and have much to teach us. Many, however, continue to lack

the articulation, language, and methods needed to put their hope for constructive conversation into action.

Contributing to the obstacles that impede the implementation and promotion of dialogue between the religious and non-religious is the general cluelessness about the history and terminology that already surrounds the conversation. Quite often, it seems, those engaging in dialogue or debate do so with little knowledge of the intimate relationship that previously and currently exists between religious and non-religious worldviews, religion and secularization, and the sacred and the secular. These terms are spoken of as opposing, separate phenomena that compete with one another when they are in fact—as will later be demonstrate—deeply connected and dependent on one another. Religion, for example, has at many times been a secularizing force. The secular sphere, in turn, has created a space for unchained articulation of new religious expression. What one considers in one time to be sacred may at another time be deemed as belonging to the secular world. What was once defined in religious terms may in turn be defined in secular terms, while still maintaining a transcendental quality and retaining a religious meaning for some. This does not mean that the religious and non-religious are the same, or that their worldviews cannot be given individual and separate consideration—but it would be erroneous to say that they are not related, or in my own growing estimation, incredibly co-dependent.

To accept that the religious and non-religious are co-dependent may not be a necessary conclusion to make in order to enter into positive dialogue experiences—indeed such a prerequisite will be impossible for many and in some peoples' estimation, a dishonest affirmation—but I do believe it is at least necessary to recognize that we all, the

religious and non-religious alike, have mutual points of encounter in which we can meet and contributions to make to each other's understanding and search for meaning and pursuit of the common good. Even if we do not finally adopt or accept each other's contributions, we certainly cannot seek justice nor have true peace if we are constantly working against each other and attempting to destroy the very structures of meaning that motivate us to seek these things in the first place.

Theoretically, the religious and non-religious could very well go their separate ways, seek meaning and pursuing justice independently from each other. Many already do this, avoiding interaction with each other and steering clear of confrontation and conversations that are uncomfortable. Such an effort, however, only masks potential conflict for a short time—sooner or later, the dreaded subjects of religion, politics and ethics that have been avoided in order to “keep the peace” find their way into the spotlight and those that must deal with the conversation find themselves completely unprepared to do so. For better or worse, we occupy the same physical and intellectual space and cannot ultimately live or thrive apart. If we do ignore this fact and are not intentional about mending the so-called sacred/secular divide, the extreme religious and non-religious voices of our time will speak for us and make certain that we do become enemies. We must, therefore, neither avoid each other nor let others represent us in pithy battles of discontent. The alternative to this “fight or flight” syndrome is genuine *dialogue* and we must strive to succeed at it.

In this brief exploration into the so-called sacred/secular divide between the religious and non-religious, I will attempt to outline the considerations to be made by both the religious and non-religious seeking mutual understanding for the sake of the

common good. Being that I am personally situated in the Christian tradition, there will be an inevitable emphasis in speaking to the Christian in particular, from a Christian perspective. That being said, I will also seek as best as I can from my own Christian identity, to make a case to the diversely religious and non-religious alike. I believe the contents of what follows are a benefit to all readers.

The principal goal of this thesis is to discover and strengthen a shared space of dialogue between the religious and non-religious by 1) recognizing the contemporary efforts that already exist to bring together the religious and non-religious in dialogue even amidst a popular culture of confrontation, 2) identifying the many ways in which religion and secularization and the sacred and secular intersect in society and throughout history, and 3) making propositions for strengthening dialogue between the religious and non-religious utilizing the practical contributions of theologian Paul Tillich. It is from this common space of intentional interaction that the religious and non-religious can then establish positive relationships, learn from each other, and pursue justice together. In the first chapter, we will begin by looking at the current state of dialogue between the religious and non-religious in America, the hostility which has plagued the most easily-accessible spaces for conversation and possible reasons for this antagonism, and the less visible but no less significant attempts to advocate for positive dialogue opportunities. We will then take a step back in the second chapter and explore the complex relationship that has always existed between the religious and non-religious and the sacred and secular spheres that they inhabit as seen in the sociological and historical development of secularization and the diverse yet interconnected understandings of the sacred and the secular in the so-called secularizing process as experienced in the West. Finally, in the

third chapter, we will consider the work of theologian Paul Tillich, whose contributions will provide us with practical ways to reinforce the common space of dialogue between the religious and non-religious. Throughout the exploration, we will continue to maintain the principal motivation for exploring these different components which is to discover and strengthen a shared space of dialogue where the religious and non-religious can come together to build relationships, learn from each other, and pursue justice together.

CHAPTER 2
THE CURRENT STATE OF DIALOGUE BETWEEN
THE RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS

The Ugly Face of Public Discourse between the Religious and Non-religious

Religion has always been a touchy topic of conversation and can bring out the best and worst of people. Being that it also incorporates issues of identity, freedom of choice, meaning-making, personal belief, politics, ethics and so on, conversation surrounding religion has also proven to be highly volatile. One need not search history long to identify a plethora of sober examples: violent religious wars, highly-contentious theological debates, the persecution of religious minorities, etc. While such matters have historically dealt with fighting within or between religious groups themselves, debates dealing with religion now include the “non-religious” interlocutor. Non-religious persons—atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, the “unaffiliated,”¹ spiritual-but-not-religious persons, and some would even say the institutionally-unaffiliated religious “nones”—want and do have a place in discussions about identity, meaning and ethics. While not all religious or non-religious persons believe that dialogue with each other is a necessary or appropriate effort, the fact is that they already are in conversation about these topics, the topic of “religion” not excluded. Unfortunately, these

¹ “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012): 7, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

points of encounter in the public sphere are often more disheartening examples of interaction than they are encouraging. It seems, from a cursory glance, that the most obvious and easily-accessible sources of public discourse between the religious and non-religious demonstrate a conversation that is in a toxic state. One need not look any further than the online community to see evidence for this space of contention.

On January 14th, 2013 a Texas mom published an essay on CNN iReport titled “Why I Raise My Children Without God.” In her essay, she explains why it is she decided to stop “lying” to her kids about heaven and the “inconsistent and illogical legend of God.”² She lists and expounds on a number of reasons including the assertions that “God is a bad parent and role model . . . God is not fair. . . God does not protect the innocent. . . God is not present. . . God does not teach children to be good,”³ and so on. More telling than the content of the essay itself was and is the public response to it. In just two weeks the online post had received three-quarters of a million views and over nine thousand comments. Something about the content of the essay and its’ corresponding commentary attracted committed attention from both the religious and non-religious alike, and continues to generate comments to this day. These comments weave in and out in response to each other, creating a massive string of conversation. Some commentators play it safe and simply remark on the premise of the article, either agreeing with Texas mom and applauding her for her courage, or urging her to disassociate her bad experiences with religion from statements about the character of God. Cloud52 writes,

² “Why I Raise My Kids Without God,” *CNN iReport* (January 14, 2013), accessed January 10, 2014, <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-910282>.

³ Ibid.

I agree on so many points. This article really touched me deeply, and reflects a lot of my feelings, frustrations and disappointments about religion. I wish there was a God, but in my heart I cannot accept that a being who is built up to be so wonderfully awesome allows so many horrifying things to happen to his "children."⁴

47Donna responds,

I really like this story—and I am a Christian minister who raised her children with God. She appropriately names the God who doesn't exist but whom the punishmentalists throw at us all the time. I wish she could know a more gracious God. That being said, her issues about fairness are so important, even if you are a progressive Christian like me!⁵

Other posts are more candid, expressing a heightened level of emotion and engagement with the online discussion that has ensued. Springrobin observes,

Those commenting here that god is a "good role model" should READ the bible. Not pick out pleasant verses, but read the whole thing. I have . . .twice. There is more violence, bigotry and intolerance in that book than would be allowed on cable TV! Not to mention the subservient and violent treatment of women. No thank you. I will happily live my life without this nightmare of a god.⁶

Ellebee123 comments,

I don't believe in God the way half of the country does, but your argument isn't well thought out, well rounded or convincing. I totally support your decision not to raise your children believing in an all-powerful deity, I just think blaming God for child abuse is as daft as religious zealots blaming atheists for it.⁷

Soon, all civility goes out the door and the loudest, most frequent voices end up taking over the conversation, illustrating not dialogue, but demonstrations of anger, ridicule, and patronization. Shethatisme remarks,

⁴ Cloud 52, December 23, 2013, comment on "Why I Raise My Kids Without God."

⁵ 47Donna, August 12, 2013, comment on "Why I Raise My Kids Without God."

⁶ Springrobin, October 31, 2013, comment on "Why I Raise My Kids Without God."

⁷ Ellebee123, January 15, 2013, comment on "Why I Raise My Kids Without God."

. . . Don't feel bad for the non-believer, atheist, humanist, free-thinker... Your submission to an imaginary man in the sky, your intellectual bondage, and ignorant bigotry is something we're happy to live the rest of whatever eternity is—without . . .⁸

Crp0499 laments,

wow . . . I feel so sad for this woman and her children... [To] be so lost and so far afield . . . what a horrible way to live your life. I will pray for this family and others like her that God might lead them back to the truth and that she might find happiness and peace again. That poor, poor woman . . . so sad.⁹

With each click of the button, one discovers an ongoing barrage of increasingly combative conversation full of disregard, belittlement, and condescension.

Fast forward nearly a year later to the 2013 holiday season as FoxNews.com launched its “War on Christmas” site¹⁰, an extension of its televised commentary on the same theme. Individuals could both submit stories of how Christmas was “under attack” in their communities and could also comment on these stories. The stories themselves attempted to illustrate the various ways in which Christmas was being subverted by, for example, humanist groups trying to prevent schools from supporting religiously-affiliated Christmas charities¹¹, public school districts attempting to ban religious music from

⁸ Shethatisme, June 30, 2013, comment on “Why I Raise My Kids Without God.”

⁹ Crp0499, January 15, 2013, comment on “Why I Raise My Kids Without God.”

¹⁰ “War on Christmas,” *FoxNews.com*, accessed January 9, 2014, <http://nation.foxnews.com/2013/12/25/war-christmas>.

¹¹ Todd Starnes, “Kids, parents fight back after humanist group threatens another school over Christmas toy drive,” *FoxNews.com* (November 21, 2013), accessed January 9, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2013/11/21/kids-parents-fight-back-after-humanist-group-threatens-another-school-over/>.

holiday concerts,¹² and cities that choose to call their festive ferns “holiday” trees instead of “Christmas” trees.¹³ While these published anecdotes appeared to all support the opinion that the Christian holiday was under fire, those partaking in the online discussion in response to these stories represented an assortment of opinions from both the religious and non-religious alike. While some comments are more productive than others, a great majority of the perspectives published represent an antagonistic approach to conversation. With softer tones of criticism Ado4586 comments,

Another year of fake war on Christmas has come to pass. Hopefully the alarmists will smarten up for next year and we won't have to feed any unwarranted persecution complexes stoked by media manipulation. Hope everyone had an excellent Christmas . . .¹⁴

Steveinalaska also shares a lighter though more satirical critique,

I'm just about to share a Holiday Sleigh Ride with friends. My own personal battle in the War on Christmas. We'll sing Christmas carols and a little Queen (the kids like that the best). We'll take a few nips from the hot toddy in the thermos, then gather together to express our love for other. In other words, just like the Christians, but without the goofy Sky Fairy stuff.¹⁵

With greatly-reduced tact, not unlike other comments made, Agentm0m contends,

Liberals hate that we still celebrate Christmas (CHRIST MASS = Christmas), because they want us to worship the state and people like Obama, like the Soviets used to force their people. As long as people continue to have their faith, they won't believe in the state as their savior and liberals won't be able to force a

¹² Todd Starnes, “Wisconsin School Cracks Down on Religious Christmas Music,” *FoxNews.com* (October 8, 2013), accessed January 9, 2014, <http://nation.foxnews.com/2013/10/08/starnes-wisconsin-school-cracks-down-religious-christmas-music>.

¹³ Joe Harrington, “Holiday Tree or Christmas Tree?,” *KOLO-TV* (November 26, 2013) on *FoxNews.com*, accessed January 9, 2014, <http://nation.foxnews.com/2013/11/26/reno-goodbye-christmas-tree-hello-holiday-tree>.

¹⁴ Ado 4586, December 26, 2013 comment posted on “War on Christmas.”

¹⁵ Steveinalaska, December 23, 2013 comment posted on “War on Christmas.”

Soviet Style government on us. That is why they hate Christmas and Christ. Have fun this Christmas by irritating a liberal. Keep the CHRIST in CHRISTmas!¹⁶

Finally, Gosarah12345 contributes a seemingly unrelated and yet familiar and prevalent attitude to the mix: “ every day I let the dog outside and he squats and then deposits on the lawn something that perfectly represents godless secular progressive thought...”¹⁷

Unfortunately, the discussion provoked by the “War on Christmas” site continues in this same stream, inspiring not genuine *dialogue*, but an embarrassing indication of our capacity to default to uncritical, immature name-calling when discussing serious issues.

While commentary on both of the above posts varied, most of the written responses articulated by the religious and non-religious alike were heated and reactive. Commentators threw around scripture verses, scientific arguments, stereotypes, “cheap shots” and more, all of which created a toxic game of “us vs. them” between the religious and non-religious. This is not to say that all participants in these online forums are exclusively hardheaded and combative. Indeed, there is at times a modest indication of patience, listening, and genuine dialogue between diverse perspectives. Overall, however, there are few who really ask sincere questions, speak solely for themselves, avoid antagonistic language, or resist the urge to demean those with conflicting perspectives. What does this grim reality found online tell us about the current state of dialogue between the religious and non-religious in general? It must be said that online venues like the examples given are not always representative of the conversation that is actually happening between the religious and non-religious behind the online scene. They do,

¹⁶ Agentm0m, December 23, 2013 comment posted on “War on Christmas.”

¹⁷ Gosarah12345, December 24, 2013 comment posted on “War on Christmas.”

however, point to an attitude that is in fact realized offline as well—an attitude of active animosity. While there are many religious and non-religious folks who take a different, dramatically more positive attitude towards dialogue—a fact that we will explore soon—it is important that we first take seriously the conflict that does exist and attempt to explain *why* there is all this ugly tension.

Recognizing the Marginalization of Non-believers and the Rise of Anti-Religious Sentiment

To adequately explain all the reasons for *why* there is conflict between the religious and non-religious would require a whole other exploration all-together—which we do not have time for here—though it is easy to identify various reasons from a superficial level: talking about divisive issues obviously risks divisiveness between interlocutors; it’s a natural human tendency to default to the “fight or flight” response when faced with conflict; it’s just easier and more enjoyable to ridicule and poke fun at the other; etc. These are all fairly simplistic explanations, however, and do not adequately explain the violent, linguistic passion with which the religious and non-religious often struggle. There is something else, deeply rooted in the relationship between the two communities itself. There is a *hurt* and *brokenness* present in the conflict that appears to be much less a fight between strangers than it is between estranged friends. There is a history and context that we don’t always recognize underlining the unstable situation at hand. While we will explore the history later on, it would be beneficial at this moment to consider the current American context in which the religious and non-religious find themselves: both in positions of self-defense fighting *for* the right to self-expression and

against absolutism on the “other side.” We will begin by considering the position from which the non-religious struggle, a position of marginalized, minority status.

To say that the non-religious are a marginalized minority may seem like a sensational, sweeping statement that can in no way be equated with the reality of others who are normally identified as such. Certainly the non-religious as a whole do not suffer the discrimination, economic hardship, and physical harassment that other marginalized persons in the United States do? Also, is it not the recent proposition that the non-religious identity is on the rise and growing every year? How then can we speak of them as a minority? While it is true that the non-religious are growing in number, they are still a minority in the arena of worldviews. Statistically-speaking, the non-religious are still a minority group¹⁸ who do indeed deal with discrimination and suffer a negative reputation associated with their non-religious identity—atheists especially. According to a study published by the University of Minnesota in 2006, atheists are one of the most mistrusted and disliked minorities in the United States. Using data from various national surveys, the U of M researchers discovered that “atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups.”¹⁹ When compared to other minority groups (i.e., Muslims, gays and lesbians, recent immigrants, Catholics, Conservative Christians, Jews, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, etc.), survey respondents named atheists as the least likely to agree

¹⁸ From “‘Nones’ on the Rise...,” 13. According to a 2012 Pew Report, the religiously unaffiliated comprise 19.6% of Americans versus 73% who are Christian complimented by an additional 6% who are of another religious group. Within the “unaffiliated” category, we find that only 2.4% of Americans are atheist and only 3.3% are agnostic. The other 13.9% claim to be “nothing in particular” and may still hold religious beliefs.

¹⁹ Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann, “Atheists As ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (April 2006): 211, accessed January 31, 2013, <http://www.soc.umn.edu/~hartmann/files/atheist%20as%20the%20other.pdf>.

with their vision of American society, the group they would least likely let their children marry,²⁰ and the group they would least likely vote for as president.²¹

These attitudes towards atheists are not just theoretical, but are materialized in real-life stories of discrimination which occur most often in contexts characterized by the presence of a religious majority and efforts to maintain the religious perspective as the absolute norm. As a minority in the religious arena, many atheists feel that their convictions and ethical frameworks are regarded with suspicion, or disregarded completely. Students at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN have been attempting to form a secular student organization since 2009 when they were told that the group was “not in compliance with ELCA and the College standards.”²² Three years later, after making compelling arguments for the recognition of a secular group as part of the campus’ commitment to interfaith dialogue, the college had yet to give its official approval.²³ It was only in April of 2013 that the Secular Student Community was finally given official student organization status.²⁴ Sometimes, atheists are harassed or threatened because of their beliefs. Jessica Ahlquist, a high school atheist from Rhode Island, received online threats, had to have a police escort to school, and was publicly

²⁰ Ibid, 218.

²¹ Ibid, 215.

²² Marisa Paulson, “Secular Group Applies for College Recognition Again,” *The Concordian* (March 7, 2011), accessed January 31, 2013, <http://theconcordian.org/2011/03/07/secular-group-applies-for-college-recognition-again>.

²³ Jacob Amos, “Embracing True Faith,” *The Concordian* (December 6, 2012), accessed January 31, 2013, <http://theconcordian.org/2012/12/06/embracing-true-interfaith>.

²⁴ Amber Morgan, “Secular Club Approved: After Multiple Proposals, College Recognizes New Group,” *The Concordian* (April 25, 2013), accessed January 21, 2014, <http://theconcordian.org/2013/04/25/secular-club-approved-after-multiple-proposals-college-recognizes-new-group>.

called “an evil little thing” by State Representative Peter Palumbo after she fought to have a prayer banner removed from her school.²⁵ Quite often, discrimination of atheists comes in the form of various laws and policies that blocks their full inclusion in society. In a report published by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) in 2012, it was found that seven states “have in place constitutional provisions that bar atheists from holding public office.”²⁶ While these laws were deemed unconstitutional in 1961, they still remain in existence to this day. The report also found that while there are legal ramifications for discrimination against atheists, cases of such discrimination can go unchallenged, especially “in situations where it is personally disadvantageous or even hazardous to take a stand against authority, for example in prisons, the military, and even some administrative contexts.”²⁷

As can be seen, atheists are a marginalized group in the United States that experience discrimination and harassment because of their non-religious beliefs. It is no wonder, therefore, that such a backlash exists from many in the non-religious community who feel that they must assert themselves against a system that is uncomfortable with non-belief and weary of non-believers. In an attempt to struggle against religious absolutism, however, the non-religious have intentionally or unintentionally earned an absolutist title themselves from their religious competitors who claim that the anti-

²⁵ Abby Goodnough, “Student Faces Town’s Wrath in Protest Against a Prayer,” *The New York Times* (January 26, 2012), accessed January 31, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/27/us/rhode-island-city-enraged-over-school-prayer-lawsuit.html?_r=0.

²⁶ “Freedom of Thought 2012: A Global Report on Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Nonreligious,” *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (2012): 51, accessed January 31, 2013, <http://www.louisvilleatheists.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/IHEU-Freedom-of-Thought-2012.pdf>.

²⁷ Ibid.

religious rhetoric of many non-religious persons is itself a manifestation of absolutism and threat to the freedom of expression. While a contentious, anti-religious approach is not representative of the attitude taken by all non-religious persons, it is the approach for some of the most vocal, non-religious voices out there. In the same way that the public image of Christianity has been painted by the ultra-conservative Christian voice, so has the public image of atheism been painted by its extreme voices. It is the prevalence of this extreme, absolutist perspective on all sides that is making dialogue very difficult.

Writer and activist Be Scofield has been working to bring the religious and non-religious together to promote peace and justice but admits that the extreme voices representing the religious and non-religious are an obstacle: “the mainstream sentiment, fueled by the most vocal New Atheists and ardent religious fundamentalists is still one of hostility and animosity . . . slogans like ‘religion is evil,’ and ‘atheists are going to hell’ still frame the discussion.”²⁸ According to Scofield, hostility between the religious and non-religious has had severe repercussions and has negatively impacted the idea that the two groups can be in dialogue. Scofield hopes that there will be room in the new social justice movement called “Atheism+” for atheists and religious people to work together—for example, in interfaith contexts—but admits that it will be difficult to engage the more “hard-lined” atheists who believe that religion is in direct opposition to the pursuit of social justice:

One of their cherished traditions is dismissing religion at large with crude, simplistic and antagonistic language. Furthermore, many are staunchly opposed to any form of interfaith engagement . . . Jen McCreight, the author of the blog post that led to the creation of the Atheism+ movement, held a sign at the Reason

²⁸ Be Scofield, “Two Pillars of Religious-Atheist Dialogue,” *Huffington Post* (June 26, 2012), accessed January 31, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/be-scofield/religious-atheist-dialogue_b_1626450.html.

Rally that said, “Obama isn't trying to destroy religion . . . I am.” PZ Myers is stridently against any sort of “interfaith nonsense” and thinks it could be profoundly problematic to the atheist movement . . . Adam Lee also echoes his critical views of religion: “we care about creating a world that's more just, more peaceful, more enlightened, and we see organized religion as standing in the way of this goal.”²⁹

Chris Stedman, nationally-known author, humanist, and interfaith proponent also brings to light the great difficulties that will have to be overcome to bring the religious and non-religious together. Stedman says that atheists are very divided about the possibility of participating in interfaith dialogue and that some of this “stems from the fact that many atheists see themselves as ‘deconversion missionaries’ opposed to any efforts that would promote religious identities.”³⁰ Stedman goes on to suggest that atheists may also feel some “resentment over the lack of invitation atheists have sometimes received from interfaith communities”³¹ and are reacting accordingly.

Attempts to Advocate for Positive Dialogue

Opportunities and the Role of Interfaith Circles

Despite the above challenges that make dialogue between the religious and non-religious problematic, individuals from both groups insist that such a task is imperative—especially if we are serious about protecting freedom of thought and combating injustice. While the religious/non-religious conversation has proven to be precarious at times, as is

²⁹ Be Scofield, “Why Atheism+ Should Lead to Interfaith Dialogue,” *Huffington Post* (October 18, 2012), accessed January 31, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/be-scofield/why-atheism-plus-should-lead-to-interfaith-dialogue_b_1975193.html.

³⁰ Chris Stedman, “Interfaith Dialogue Must Include Atheists,” *Huffington Post* (October 8, 2010), accessed January 31, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-stedman/dont-leave-atheists-out-o_b_756120.html.

³¹ *Ibid.*

described above, there are attempts being made to engage in genuine, positive dialogue. Those advocating for dialogue are turning to interfaith circles who have already had extensive experience hosting conversations and building relationships across belief divides. Three Faiths Forum (3FF)—a UK-based interfaith organization that works in the EU, USA and Middle East³²—started off as a partnership between Muslims, Christians, and Jews³³ but now integrates the voices of people from other religious and non-religious backgrounds. Director of 3FF Stephen Shashoua states that they made the decision to include the non-religious because

we work towards a society where diversity can be expressed and embraced by all . . . we work against all forms of stereotyping and champion people’s rights to be who they are and believe what they do without facing prejudice. These purposes are in no way the exclusive domain of religious communities.³⁴

Stedman echoes this sentiment and believes that interfaith cooperation is a vital component to protecting the rights of the religious and non-religious alike. “. . . it is precisely because I am an atheist, and not in spite of it, that I am motivated to do interfaith work,” says Stedman, “. . . without religious tolerance and pluralism, I wouldn’t be free to call myself an atheist without fear of retribution.”³⁵ In fact, in the opinion of Scofield, if the religious were better at advocating for the non-religious’ right to freedom of thought, the non-religious would be more willing to participate in interfaith dialogue:

³² “Who We Are,” *Three Faiths Forum*, accessed February 1, 2013, <http://www.3ff.org.uk/about-us/>.

³³ Stephen Shashoua, “Interfaith Needs Atheists,” *Rationalist Association* (July 16, 2012), accessed August 15, 2014, <http://rationalist.org.uk/2840/interfaith-needs-atheists>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Stedman, “Interfaith Dialogue Must...”

I know it may seem like an oxymoron to ask religious institutions or leaders to defend atheists who call for the removal of God language from government. However, so many progressive religious communities are on the front lines of battling economic injustice, racism, poverty, homophobia, sexism and other forms of marginalization. There's no reason that we as progressive spiritual or religious leaders can't address the dehumanization that atheists face—regardless of whether we agree with their views about God . . . If progressive religious communities stood up to this type of harassment and began taking the concerns of atheists more seriously it would be a positive step towards creating dialogue with atheists.³⁶

Such an argument reveals that dialogue between the religious and non-religious is not just about protecting the freedom to believe what one wants to believe, but is about fighting injustice.

In their definition of pluralism, the nationally-recognized organization Interfaith Youth Core maintains that interfaith cooperation is all about “respect for individual religious or non-religious identity . . . mutually inspiring relationships, and . . . common action for the common good.”³⁷ Interfaith dialogue, therefore, is not just about talking but about doing. This assertion speaks to both the religious and non-religious alike whose belief systems and ethical frameworks motivate them to work towards peace and justice. Interfaith dialogue, therefore, has the potential to not only reconcile these two groups, but could create an invaluable base of resources, passion, and skills to struggle against injustice. Unfortunately, many in the religious and non-religious communities doubt the need to include the non-religious in interfaith initiatives. Some religious interfaith proponents ask: how is it inter-faith if those with no faith are involved and does this compromise the integrity of the movement which was built on the consideration of faith?

³⁶ Scofield, “Two Pillars...”

³⁷ “Communicating the Movement,” *Interfaith Youth Core*, accessed January 31, 2013, <http://www.ifyc.org/communicating-movement>.

Some non-religious activists ask: why continue to give the time to religion and religious people and questions when we orient our meaning and motivation for doing good elsewhere?

Despite the skepticism on both sides, dialogue proponents continue to insist that bringing the religious and non-religious together benefits everyone, promotes freedom of belief for all people and is simply the responsible and intelligent thing to do in the fight for justice. Scofield makes a plea to the Atheist+ community, urging them to partner with the religious and consider the significant contributions made by theologians and religious institutions to promote social justice. “Imagine,” he reflects, “the Atheism+ movement and progressive religious groups united in solidarity against the real enemies: oppression, injustice and indifference!”³⁸ Stedman, in a similar fashion, points out the positive influence participation of the non-religious—in this case humanists—could have on social justice work and interfaith dialogue in general:

The reasons the interfaith movement would be wise to invite Humanist participation echo the reasons secular individuals might engage in interfaith endeavors: we exist, they want to end religious extremism and other forms of oppression and suffering, we have a lot to teach, and we're a religious minority that experiences discrimination . . . Humanism takes this so-called "spiritual" component of life—an innate human inclination toward imagination and moralism—and articulates it in a distinct way that is well-equipped to add richness and complexity to the interfaith movement.³⁹

By incorporating the non-religious in interfaith dialogue, argues Stedman, the movement can only become stronger and better. “Any discomfort religious people experience over engaging with the nonreligious must be set aside for the sake of truly inclusive interfaith

³⁸ Scofield, “Why Atheism+ Should...”

³⁹ Chris Stedman, “Should the Nonreligious Join in Interfaith Work,” *The New Humanism*, accessed February 1, 2013, <http://thenewhumanism.org/authors/christopher-stedman/articles/should-the-nonreligious-join-in-interfaith-work>.

collaboration,” writes Stedman, “. . . They are part of a growing population of people who don't believe in God but still want the same things everyone else wants: meaning, community, and a better world.”⁴⁰ The non-religious may be a minority, but their voices are vital and their goals extremely relevant to the interfaith movement.

As can be seen, the American context and recent history behind the relationship between the religious and non-religious is fraught with complexity. The marginalization of atheists and other non-religious persons has created a backlash of mistrust of and anger against religious individuals and institutions. Struggling against religious absolutism, many in the non-religious community have themselves become intolerant of religion and religious persons, making absolutist claims of their own about the evil of religion. This has resulted in both a vicious cycle of religious/non-religious extremism and great hesitancy from both the religious and non-religious community asked to consider participating in dialogue, interfaith dialogue included. Nevertheless, religious and non-religious leaders alike are adamant that dialogue and interfaith cooperation is necessary if both communities are serious about protecting freedom of thought (which includes religion) and fighting for the common good.

For many, the desire to establish right relationships, promote freedom of thought, and seek justice will be reason enough to engage in dialogue together. For others, the tension that exists between the religious and non-religious may still be too overwhelming of an obstacle to overcome. Entering into dialogue with a worldview that is so incredibly different, even contrary, to one's own can be intimidating and may not seem worth the energy and effort. I would like to suggest that part of this intimidation comes not from a

⁴⁰ Stedman, “Interfaith Dialogue Must...”

lack of motivation, but a lack of knowledge about the history and terminology that already surrounds the conversation which may discourage people from trying. The best way to educate one's self in these matters is to, of course, just enter into dialogue and learn from dialogue partners. For those who prefer to enter into a conversation with more preparation, however, we will now attempt to familiarize the reader, in particular the Christian reader, with a basic knowledge of the incredible conversation between the religious and non-religious that has already existed for centuries.

CHAPTER 3
UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR

Dialogue between the religious and non-religious is not new, nor is the relationship between the spheres in which they claim to inhabit new either, these spheres being the *sacred* and the *secular*. From the surface, one may automatically equate the sacred with the religious and the secular with the non-religious. Do not religious people believe themselves to be in touch with a sacred sphere in which God or gods reign and give meaning to life, angelic beings relay divine messages, the unexplainable and miracles happen, salvation is found and all forms of transcendence flourish? Do not non-religious people deny the existence of this sacred sphere, claiming loyalty to the secular sphere where humans are ultimately responsible for themselves, science explains all phenomena, technological advances sustain life, and only that which can be rationally and empirically experienced is worth considering. Already, however, we find these assumptions lacking because meaning-making, “salvation” and transcendence are not regulated to the religious alone, nor is science, rationality, and human responsibility the expertise of the non-religious alone. Apparently, the religious and non-religious can inhabit both spheres and whether or not persons who would identify as either would like to make such a claim, it will now be made clear here that they do in fact share a common space in which the sacred and secular meet.

The ambiguous line between the sacred and the secular is not a new discovery. Not only are religious persons often accused of being “too secular,” it is also the case that many non-religious persons are said to have a “religion” of their own, masking sacred concerns in non-religious language. Both of these claims can be equally substantiated or denied depending on one’s definitions of religion and non-religion, the sacred and the secular. Adding to the chaotic mix of definitions that confuse the conversation are the diverse understandings of *secularization*, a concept that is often spoken of but whose meaning and significance is also hotly disputed. While reconciling these two spheres may seem like an unlikely, difficult and overly complicated endeavor, I believe that recognizing the places in which they do overlap will be invaluable to our pursuit here, which is to recognize and strengthen the common space of dialogue between the religious and non-religious where we can build right relationships, learn from each other, and pursue the common good together. The ambiguity and complexity which surrounds the sacred/secular question need not be threatening but can in fact give room to the possibility of shared space where the religious and non-religious can ask difficult questions, articulate meaning, and seek justice together. We will begin by looking at *secularization*, a term that plays an integral role in the discussion within and between the religious and non-religious communities. A process and word so often eschewed by the religious, secularization actually has its roots in religion itself.

The Sociological and Historical Development of Secularization

Secularization, what many consider to be the process in which there is a practical and symbolic move from the sacred to the secular sphere,¹ is an overly misunderstood concept often credited as the “enemy” of religion. Unbeknownst to many, however, secularization is not only intimately tied up with religion, but is considered by many scholars to be the very product of religion. Such is the opinion of both well-known sociologist Peter Berger and philosopher Charles Taylor, both of whom offer an incredible amount of insight into the historical development of what we now call secularization. The term “secularization” itself has had many meanings and has produced an array of emotional responses throughout history. The first use of the term referred to the process of repossessing land and property from the church. There was already, therefore, a move from the sacred to the secular sphere, economic authority being transitioned one to the other. Later, the term took on more emotionally-charged connotations, used positively by anti-religious persons to describe “the liberation of modern man from religious tutelage” and negatively by religious persons as the process of “de-Christianization” or “paganization.”² Very early then, consideration of the term and its significance brew divisiveness between the religious and non-religious. Not all religious persons would take this view, however, and secularization would be seen by

¹ One may already observe that a power dynamic is at play in which the religious interlocutor begins to dominate the conversation. To say that one moves *from* the sacred sphere and *to* the secular sphere assumes that former sphere has an assumed “right” over the other or is more “natural” than the other. Secularization, in other words, is already seen as something *done to* religion. Inevitably, this will continue to be the stance taken by many of the authors engaged here. That being said, there will be an attempt to reconcile this unbalance later on by recognizing the *exchange* that occurs between the sacred and secular spheres and the contributions made to each sphere by the other.

² Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 106.

some theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, as a fulfillment of Christianity itself, and therefore ultimately irrelevant, a term that “should be abandoned as confusing if not downright meaningless.”³ Whether considered valuable or not, however, the term “secularization” has not disappeared nor does it show signs of doing so.

Despite there being debate over the legitimacy of the term itself, Berger and Taylor both make worthy attempts to formulate definitions of the concept. Berger defines secularization as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”⁴ The move from private to public education could be considered one example. Taylor, while agreeing with this definition, does not limit it so. He expands this definition to include not only the separation of religion from the public sphere,⁵ but also the decline of religious belief and practice in individuals’ lives⁶ and more importantly, the changing “conditions of belief” in which individuals now have meaningful *options* for systems of belief and *unbelief*.⁷ One may not only choose a public education for her child, but she may also decide to be married in a courthouse instead of a church and go to a swami or trusted friend instead of a pastor for spiritual advice. While these above understandings of secularization are relatively recent, having emerged over the last century, it will be discovered that the process being described was in play long before the term materialized.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-2.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

Berger locates some of the earliest uses of the secularization process within religion itself, ancient Judaism in particular. He makes a strong case for this argument by referring to the “demythologizing” move of the ancient Hebrews from the mythical world of Egypt and Mesopotamia,⁸ the increased importance of the individual and significance of individual actions in the Old Testament,⁹ and the ethical rationalization developed by the ancient prophets.¹⁰ The Genesis story is an excellent example. While the Hebrews did borrow various elements from the creation myths born out of their Mesopotamian context, they also stripped these stories of much of their mythology. They did this by reducing the gods of the cosmos to a God outside and separate from the cosmos, reutilizing the well-known myth of the goddess Tiamat as simply “an abstract metaphysical category,” and asserting that human beings were distinct and separate from the rest of the natural and living world. It is through this Genesis account, Berger explains, that one finds a “fundamental Biblical polarization between the transcendent God and man, with a thoroughly ‘demythologized’ universe between them.”¹¹ In other words, the Hebrews “secularized” the religious stories of their time by removing them from mythical categories and placing them in a worldly, historical one where God acted in time and space as *experienced* by the Hebrews. “It may be said,” Berger expounds, “that the transcendentalization of God and the concomitant ‘disenchantment of the world’ opened up a ‘space’ for history as the arena of both divine and human actions.”¹² The

⁸ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 115-117.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 117-119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

power and relevance of the ancient gods was challenged, undoubtedly considered “un-religious” or even “anti-religious” by those who still oriented themselves in the popular Mesopotamian religion of the time.

Moving forward several centuries, Berger observes the secularizing process again, but this time in the Christian tradition with the rise of Protestantism in which the presence of the sacred in real life (i.e., “mystery, miracle, and magic”) is minimized.¹³ With the major reformulation of theological thought that was born out of the Reformation, the belief that the secular sphere could be connected with the sacred sphere was challenged. This was a major “secularization” of Catholic thought which maintained that human beings could be in touch with the sacred in a number of ways including “the sacraments of the church, the intercession of the saints, [and] the recurring eruption of the ‘supernatural’ in miracles.”¹⁴ With Protestantism, these forms of mediation were dramatically reduced, and sometimes disappeared altogether.

. . . Protestantism may be described in terms of an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality, as compared with its Catholic adversary. The sacramental apparatus is reduced to a minimum and, even there, divested of its more numinous qualities. The miracle of the mass disappears altogether. Less routine miracles, if not denied altogether, lose all real significance . . . The immense network of intercession that unites the Catholic in this world with the saints . . . disappears as well.¹⁵

The only real miracle left by Protestant thought, writes Berger, is “God’s sovereign grace” as mediated through God’s word.¹⁶ With time, he maintains, this last-remaining

¹³ Ibid., 111-113.

¹⁴ Ibid., 112.

¹⁵ Ibid., 111.

¹⁶ Ibid., 112.

connection with the sacred would also be brought into question and “open the floodgates of secularization” so that for many, no empirically-verifiable relationship with the sacred would remain. “A sky empty of angels,” he says, “becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut.”¹⁷ In the same way that ancient Judaism stripped the old Mesopotamian mythologies of their legitimacy for the Hebrews, therefore, we find that the Reformation also stripped much of the Catholic tradition of its legitimacy for Protestants.

Taylor develops this history of secularization even further, describing in detail three distinct religious forms demonstrated through time that ultimately brought about secularization—these being the “ancient régime,” the “Age of Mobilization,” and the “Age of Authenticity.” In the “ancient régime” matrix (a time which includes the ancient Judaism and Protestant Reformation described above), religion and its hierarchical nature was intimately involved with the functioning of society. This is what Taylor calls a “Durkheimian” society in which the religious and social are one, the kingdom or state a fulfillment of divine will.¹⁸ Taylor describes this worldview in more detail:

. . . the understanding of order widespread among the people . . . is of a pre-modern kind, an order of hierarchical complementarity, which is grounded in the Divine Will, or the Law which holds since time out of mind, or the nature of things . . . we are subordinated to King, Lord, Bishops, nobility, each in their rank; and also for the microcosm of the village or the parish, where priest and noble . . . hold sway, and each person has their place. Indeed, we only belong to the larger society through our membership in this local microcosm.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 112-113.

¹⁸ Taylor, 442.

¹⁹ Ibid., 438.

Religion, therefore, while having been stripped time and time again of its mythical elements, was still of central importance to the majority of society during the “ancient régime.” Much of this loyalty to religion, however, was not deliberate but automatic. While everyone was “religious” in a sense, critical questions of theology were not necessarily on the minds of everyday people who were much more interested in simply fulfilling their roles in the community. These roles were adequately accomplished through religious rituals²⁰—there was therefore, no need to search for alternatives or question the already-available frameworks. This is not to say that religion wasn’t important—indeed it was—or that people in general did not have deep religious convictions—indeed, they did—but religion played a practical role and was not an area that attracted much deliberation apart from scholars and those with the time to think about such things. Unquestioned loyalty to religious categories and authority, however, would not always be maintained by all people.

As the West entered into the nineteenth century, religion and the church would face a number of difficulties as the “ancient régime” came to an end and a new age came into being. While it was taken for granted that the church played a role of utmost importance in a society shaped by divine will, this divine role was soon reconsidered by some who began to question the allegiance of the church and its religious leaders, both of whom seemed to be increasingly aligned with the wealthy and their interests.²¹ This resulted in a resistance to church authority, seen within religious movements themselves,

²⁰ Ibid., 438-440.

²¹ Ibid., 443.

the Reformation being one example.²² These rebellions, however, did not always happen from a religious frame of reference. “Secularist” intellectuals and social elites also rebelled against church authority, the French Revolution being an example of this type.²³ Questions of wealth and economics continued to be an issue as more and more people moved to the cities. “. . . the new city-dweller, no longer relating back to a living community,” writes Taylor, “. . . would find himself with a void in his spiritual life, and have to find way of weaving forms and community allegiances in the new situation.”²⁴ Lay ideologies filled this “void,” gaining in popularity as an increasing number of alternative thought systems came into being. “Modalities of exclusive humanism were now options,”²⁵ writes Taylor, which were often philosophically instead of religiously based. Here, we begin to see Taylor’s third definition of secularization emerge (i.e., “the changing ‘conditions of belief’ in which individuals now have meaningful options for systems of belief and unbelief”).²⁶ This did not only include exclusive humanism (i.e., the structure of meaning that allows for the flourishing of people without reverence for a higher being or power),²⁷ however, but new forms of religious practice as well. Despite negative attitudes towards religious leaders, therefore, the Church also managed to successfully reform itself to the extent needed to provide people with fresh religious

²² Ibid., 441.

²³ Ibid., 442.

²⁴ Taylor identifies this as the later “dechristianization” of the nineteenth century’s urban working class (See Taylor, 444).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Ibid., 18.

alternatives as opposed to the old, stifling models. It rid of “rigorism, the harsh stance towards sinners,” and developed a “more compassionate stance” and “was more tolerant and open to popular modes of piety . . .”—all of which retained and grew participation in religious practice.²⁸

Notwithstanding the growth of new religious options, the end of the “ancient régime” did arrive and transitioned into the beginning of the “Age of Mobilization,” a movement that Taylor places in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.²⁹ During this time, the will of God was no longer assumed to be the sole responsibility of the rulers—who were supposed to have the unquestioned support and obedience of the people—but was instead the work of the people themselves. This “neo-Durkheimian” approach, called “the Modern Moral Order,” relied not on a hierarchical structure, but the collectivities of “disembedded individuals” who were called to create societies “structured for mutual benefit, in which each respects the rights of others, and offers them mutual help of certain kinds.”³⁰ These groupings of individuals would inevitably lead to the establishment of various religious denominations, each of which was “a divinely established body” that was created for the purpose of fulfilling “the plan of God.”³¹ This was especially the case in the United States, where denominations could flourish and were not discouraged by “state religion” as was the case in much of Europe, although there were exceptions.³² One began to see a heightened separation of church and state

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 444.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 471.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 447.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 450.

³² *Ibid.*

since a single denomination could not represent the whole state—“Denominationalism implies that churches are all equally options” Taylor explains.³³ That being said, there was in early American history still an overall “Christian” identity that affected politics.³⁴ Religious affiliation became connected with political affiliation, and religion became the way “civilized” society was believed to be achieved.³⁵ This reality, while still associated with religious denominations, created opportunities for secular circles as well, “enabling certain populations to become capable of functioning as productive, ordered agents in a new non-traditional environment.”³⁶ These agents, while more free than ever to succeed apart from one singular, traditional religious institution, still chose to be affiliated and identified with particular groupings.³⁷ This freedom to “self-identify” one’s self would be the catalyst for the next major shift from the “Age of Mobilization” to the “Age of Authenticity,” forever affecting the religious and non-religious alike.

It is in the “Age of Authenticity”—where Taylor places our world now—that religion undergoes major changes and secularization even more attention. In this movement, begun in the 1960s,³⁸ “self-orientation” amidst chaos becomes “a mass phenomenon.”³⁹ It becomes increasingly more important to people that they have a choice in what they believe or not believe—in other words, an “authentic” approach to

³³ Ibid., 454.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 455.

³⁶ Ibid., 452.

³⁷ Ibid., 458.

³⁸ Ibid., 473.

³⁹ Ibid.

their individual lives. Taylor describes this approach of “authenticity” as a way of life that affirms that

each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.⁴⁰

By embracing this approach, there is an inevitable move by some segments of society to reject religious forms of the past, more so than was seen by groups of social elites during previous times. This is the reality of a “post-Durkheimian” age in which choice is key and one adheres to that religious or spiritual practice that “moves and inspires” them—not to those beliefs or rituals forced by some other authority. To do so would be “wrong... absurd, contradictory.”⁴¹ Taylor maintains that this new development (i.e., having a “choice that feels right for me”) not only results in some peoples’ choice to move away from religion—for whom that “feels right” for them— but also results in peoples’ move towards existing structures of religion and even newly-articulated understandings of religion—because that is what “feels right” for them.⁴² This is a familiar attitude in many religious settings where people are encouraged to “claim their faith,” confirm their beliefs and take ownership of their religious convictions.

Secularization, as can be seen above, has a much more complicated history than is normally considered when discussing the concept. It is a process not only embraced by many non-religious persons who may want to see more or all forms of public life separated from religious symbols and institutions, but also by many religious persons

⁴⁰ Ibid., 475.

⁴¹ Ibid., 489.

⁴² Ibid., 486.

who have for theological and practical reasons advocated that mythical elements be detached from religious doctrine, that political power be transferred from religious to secular institutions, and that loyalty to religious categories be the result of authentic choice and not forced coercion (or even uncritical acceptance for that matter). To speak of secularization as the “enemy of religion” on one side or to claim it as a tool for ridding society of religion on the other side, is to deny the historical importance it has had for religion, as proliferated by religious people themselves. Admittedly, this is a history that can be easily forgotten or even rejected by various individuals and groups in America who wish to unite politics with their own brand of religion at the cost of squelching other religious and non-religious worldviews or on the other end, confusing the separation of church and state with the total privatization of religious expression as if someone’s public choices were not informed by their religious convictions. These approaches do not obviously contribute positively to the environment needed to have productive dialogue and collaboration between religious and non-religious entities. Instead, when considering the history behind secularization, it may be seen that the motivations for maintaining a distinction between religious *authority* and “secular matters” can and are shared by the religious and non-religious alike, even if there are exceptions. This distinction, however, does not require silence on the issue nor should it limit opportunities for religious and non-religious expressions. There is a shared space that exists in which the religious and non-religious can come together to publicly dialogue about these issues. This shared space, we shall soon see, is not just built upon a common history of the development of secularization, but is also made possible by more closely considering the elements that are so intimately connected with the secularization question: the sacred and the secular.

Secularization and the Ambiguous Space between the Sacred and the Secular

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?” (Ps. 42:1-3, NRSV)

The cry of the psalmist—the longing for God, meaning, peace—is not an unfamiliar cry. It is the cry of the human in history, past and present. This cry for meaning and fullness in life echoes through time and is present not only in the loud clamoring of the major spiritual and religious movements of history, but also in the quiet solitude of the human heart for every person who has ever lived—the religious and non-religious alike. Many in our world today may question this assertion, doubting sincerely that every individual is seeking a “meaningful life.” This is especially the accusation of many religious persons who charge those who are labeled or self-identify as non-religious of living out lives of “meaninglessness,” or worse, abject selfishness. These accusations, however, are weakly supported and do not stand up to evidence for the contrary. It is found throughout history, past and present, that non-religious persons are very much capable of articulating meaning in their lives—articulations that are quite often the source of energy that motivate them to pursue the common good—even if these frameworks are not understood or accepted by religious persons. Admittedly, this can be disconcerting for many religious people who struggle to reconcile the fact that those they call “unbelievers” or “secular” are not all bad people and that somehow they can be good without God. Somehow, bewildering for many of those who orient their entire way of being within a religious framework, the non-religious have found or created ways to be in the world that bring them peace and comfort without the need for Another, and apparently without the need for the sacred. It is this supposed movement of loyalty from the sacred to the secular—

secularization as it is often characterized—that has become a problem for those who view a relationship and connection with the sacred as vital to meaning-making and the inspiration for doing good. Is this movement from the sacred to the secular, however, as simple as it seems? Have we completely cut ourselves off from the sacred? Do the non-religious really have no grasp of or respect for that which constitutes the sacred? Is that which is secular as unholy and un-sacred as many religious people have described it as being? Are the sacred and secular totally incompatible? Answers to these questions vary greatly and depend on how one defines and understands the sacred, the secular and the process of secularization that encompasses both of these concepts. What’s more, the task of responding to these questions is deeply affected by the identities and values held by those who study and wrestle with it. The scholarly and public exploration of secularization, and the so called sacred/secular divide, is not just an academic or educational duty for those who are involved, but a question of values, the future, and for some . . . the integrity of faith and non-faith itself. It is no wonder that conversation about these issues can be so emotional for those involved. If the goal of this investigation is to seek unity, however, what resources can be explored to mend this so-called sacred/secular divide that has developed? For those religious and non-religious persons who seek to reconcile their diverse perspectives, who desire to be in dialogue with each other, to build right relationships and seek justice together, the work of philosopher and historian of religion Mircea Eliade, the previously considered sociologist Peter Berger, and professor of religion Conrad Ostwalt can all be helpful resources.

It should be said before we begin analyzing the contributions of these scholars that some of the perspectives held by them are not equally “friendly” in their stance

towards secularization and that which is associated with the secular. Eliade and Berger especially share a bias in favor of the promotion of religious orientation and are more skeptical about the merits of secularization and non-religious worldviews. Ostwalt, on the other hand, is not so skeptical and is openly optimistic about the value of secularization and the secular, all the while supportive of religious worldviews as well. Why then engage them here? Taken together, I believe the ideas of Eliade, Berger and Ostwalt can collectively begin to help us positively recognize the shared space that exists between the sacred and the secular, the religious and non-religious. Their thoughts are especially helpful for the religious person as the scholars themselves write from a religious perspective. This does not, however, mean they cannot be useful to the non-religious person as well.

Despite having distinct and differing approaches to secularization— and the sacred and the secular elements that are a part of this phenomenon—all three academics affirm one thing: even though the role of religious institutions is undoubtedly changing, the “religious” spirit of the human species is still alive and well and as present as ever. They maintain that this “religious” spirit, which seeks meaning and the good, is inherent in all people. While many may disagree with the use of the word “religious” to describe this attribute, a compelling case is made that all people, religious and non-religious alike, share an appreciation for that which is “sacred,” even if they do not name it as such. In Eliade’s estimation, this makes secularization an *illusion* since the sacred is actually inescapable, being simply hidden within the secular. Berger says that this makes secularization a *misnomer* since the “desecularization” of the world is the real norm.

Finally, for Ostwalt, secularization is actually a natural, never-ending *exchange* between the sacred and secular in which the sacred is secularized and the secular is sacralized.

In Bryan S. Rennie's *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion*, Eliade's thoughts on religion and the "religious" nature of people are thoroughly explored, beginning with his treatment of "hierophany," or what he describes as "lived experience as simultaneously revealing and concealing the sacred."⁴³ This concept, if seriously considered, can provide religious persons a way of understanding how all people, the non-religious included, can and do identify the "sacred" and appropriate it into their lives to construct meaning, even apart from belief in God, the afterlife, etc.⁴⁴ That is because meaning, according to Eliade, is constructed by experiencing that which is "real" and "concrete"⁴⁵ and is focused "on humanity, not on the debated independent existence of a Divine Being."⁴⁶ That is not to say, however, that one could not believe in a higher being. Belief in God for the Christian, for example, is itself a hierophany and is therefore "real" for those experiencing it as such. While many rightfully critique this process for leading to relativism, Rennie argues that Eliade would actually contend that universally we are all human and would therefore "all have a similar preparation and inhabit a similar reality," making pure relativism not ultimately possible.⁴⁷ More importantly, and the point being

⁴³ Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

made here, is that under this system Eliade would actually claim that all persons are essentially “religious.”

Being that all persons perceive the “real” (though sometimes confusing it with the “profane” or that which is “illusory” and “unreal”)⁴⁸ all persons can actually be considered “religious.” To describe this, Eliade uses the term *homo religiosus*, or “religious humanity”⁴⁹ describing the human as one who “always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests in this world, thereby sanctifying it . . .”⁵⁰ Though it is possible people will not always perceive the real—which is concealed by the profane—it cannot all together be avoided. Rennie explains,

. . . those who recognize the structures which identify the real in their own lives have the most authentic existence since they exist in the awareness of the facts, that is, more completely in the real, the sacred. It is the mistaken apprehension of an distinction between religious and “non-religious” humanity which implies a normative judgment. Eliade is not insisting that humanity *should* be religious. He is pointing out that, in truth, we *are* religious. To live one’s life as fully as possible “in the sacred” is then to be aware of the sources of one’s own apprehensions of the real, of one’s own hierophanies, one’s own religion.⁵¹

All people, therefore, have their own “religion” and way of perceiving the “real” or “sacred” as experienced in their individual lives. They may not all call it “religion” since traditional definitions of religion may not entice them to do so. If everyone is religious in Eliade’s estimation, however, how do we explain the phenomenon of secularization? According to Rennie’s take on Eliade,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁵¹ Ibid., 203.

The innate human desire which he [humankind] detects to live in proximity and constant contact with the real produces symbolisms which extend the hierophanies throughout otherwise profane human existence... this has eventually led to a complete identification of the profane with the sacred and a concomitant difficulty in recognizing the real . . . This, I hope, has gradually become clear as the primary characteristic of modern secular humanity.⁵²

Secularization then, is an illusion—or the heightened “hiddenness of the sacred” which is to a large part due to the modern person’s commitment to rationalism. Even rational people, however, “find themselves emotionally committed to a conceptual schema which does not clearly and entirely correspond to the dictates of rationalism”⁵³ and are thus again functioning as “religious” persons.

In a humble “correction” of sorts from his earlier book *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* which was covered in the first part of chapter two, Peter Berger contends with enthusiasm in his more recent commentary found in the volume that he edited, *The Desecularization of the World*, that society in a global context is not undergoing a phenomenon of secularization but is in fact experiencing the opposite—“desecularization.” Just as Eliade had argued before, the religious nature of human beings cannot be denied nor can it be stopped from expressing itself.

The religious impulse, the quest for meaning that transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in this world, has been a perennial feature of humanity . . . It would require something close to a mutation of the species to extinguish this impulse for good.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid.,59.

⁵³Ibid., 129.

⁵⁴ Peter Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 13.

Given this “religious impulse,” it should not surprise anyone, says Berger, that religion is just as present and as strong as ever. Secularization, therefore, is a misnomer because people are not moving away from the sacred, but moving towards it as they always have and always will. Unlike past contexts in which religious bodies often dominated the area in which they flourished, however, Berger admits that today’s globalized context has indeed brought about a new situation in which persons holding diverse religious beliefs must now deal with each other in a way they did not previously. This is supported by other authors in Berger’s edited volume, all of whom reflect on how their various religious communities have been coping with this increasingly pluralistic context which includes commitments to secular ideologies. According to George Weigel, under the leadership of Pope John Paul II the Roman Catholic Church approached this interreligious context by emphasizing universal human rights and the dignity (and agency) of all people no matter what their background (i.e., religious or not).⁵⁵ The Jewish people, in a very different manner, says Jonathan Sacks, are working on reclaiming their religious identity after years of outmarriage and secularization within the Jewish community throughout the world in the nineteenth century until present day.⁵⁶ Grace Davie points out that in Europe, a now mostly secularized continent, secular governments are dealing with major questions about the increased populations of religious immigrants.⁵⁷ Abdullahi A. An-Na’im writes that Muslims around the world are

⁵⁵ George Weigel, “Roman Catholicism in the Age of John Paul II,” in *The Desecularization of the World*, 25-30.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Sacks, “Judaism and Politics in the Modern World,” in *The Desecularization of the World*, 59.

⁵⁷ Grace Davie, “Europe: The Exception That Proves the Rule?,” in *The Desecularization of the World*, 73.

also trying to figure out how to govern their countries in such a way that stays true to their commitment to religiously-influenced law while also being simultaneously committed to human rights and conscious of international realities without falling victim to both religious and secular fundamentalist approaches that deny one commitment for another.⁵⁸

So it would seem, considering the above situations, that religion is not so much “threatened” by secularization as it is by establishing its identity within increasingly religiously-diverse communities and global political and economic systems. This is an important consideration to make in our pursuit for dialogue between the religious and non-religious because it not only indicates the urgent need for reconciling differences between diverse belief systems, but also highlights the fact that “religion” as an issue and topic of conversation shows no sign of disappearing. We need, more than ever, ways of dialoguing about religion and belief that build up and do not tear down relationships and efforts to do good. While Berger does not give a lot of credit to secular and non-religious worldviews, this dialogue includes all persons, the religious and non-religious alike, who seek the freedom to express and live out their “impulse for good.” Berger makes the claim that this impulse will be impossible to extinguish, and he is right. What he does not do a very good job at recognizing, however, is that this impulse is also shared by non-religious persons and those who consider themselves to be “secular.” As we will now see in the work of Conrad Ostwalt, the desire to connect with the sacred will indeed always persist, sometimes within religious contexts, but also within secular contexts as well.

⁵⁸ Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, “Political Islam in National Politics and International Relations,” in *The Desecularization of the World*, 103-121.

Unlike Berger who argues for a “desecularization” thesis, in *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* Ostwalt contends that secularization is indeed the norm but functions in such a way that takes into account the same affirmation that Berger and Eliade hold: religious consciousness is powerful in peoples’ lives and is not going away, probably ever.⁵⁹ The form in which this religious impulse will express itself, however, will inevitably change. It is changing today, asserts Ostwalt, by taking on more secular forms. This goes two ways he says: 1) when traditional sacred forms are secularized to become more like secular forms and 2) when secular forms are sacralized and give expression to sacred concepts.⁶⁰ In both instances, he maintains, secularization is what occurs. As where Berger looks at the numbers and argues that the world is undergoing a “desecularization” process because just as many people as ever are openly religious, Ostwalt looks at the cultural manifestations of religion themselves and concludes that while religious expression is indeed as strong as ever, it is actually happening thanks to the adoption of secular cultural forms such as non-church-like buildings and spaces⁶¹, literature⁶², film⁶³ and much more. This is not something that should frighten religious people, he contends. Unlike some of his colleagues, Ostwalt does not see secular culture as the antithesis of religion.

. . . rather than seeing sacred and secular as oppositional whereby one must capitulate to the other, it is more helpful to see sacred and secular worldviews on

⁵⁹ Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 57-73, 78-86.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 97, 107-135.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 157-186.

a continuum along which we attempt to define ‘the good, the true, and the beautiful’ in commonly held value structures including religion, popular culture, literature, music, and community. Be it categorized as secular or conceived as sacred, the compartmentalization of culture matters less than legitimation of value for a group, either formally or informally, conceived within a common cultural context.⁶⁴

Such a concept is extremely helpful in a cross-cultural, multi-religious context and could serve as a good starting point for dialogue between religious and non-religious folks who may be able to identify the common cultural forms they share and even work collaboratively to express meaning together through these forms.

One of Ostwalt’s arguments that may be challenging, especially for religious institutions, is that it may also be the case—and in fact many times is—that if a person cannot understand and/or express their religious instinct within a religious institution (or even if they can) they may choose to deliberately move into the secular sphere to do so. “It might be that in our postmodern context, with shifting authority structures,” Ostwalt contends, “popular cultural expression of religiosity is more important, more available, and more powerful than traditional expressions of religious truth.”⁶⁵ This could explain the rising number of religious “nones” who have severed ties with religious institutions and found meaning in more secular forms or the “spiritual-but-not-religious” folk who are not affiliated with a religious community but may still be actively involved in practices of meditation, prayer, and so on. This could also, however, explain the increased diversity of religious movements themselves which have moved away from traditional religious structures and towards more popular, secular forms of expression.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 202-203.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14.

The possibility exists that religion dissipated throughout the culture, arising authentically in the hands and creations of representatives who are removed from the restrictions of orthodoxy, can become a religion that empowers and functions to grant meaning to a more diverse population than can official religious bodies alone.⁶⁶

While this need not be a bad thing, it can admittedly be discouraging for religious institutions that hope to retain their membership and may seem like a continued proliferation of the “pains” of secularization.

We learn from Ostwalt, therefore, that the search for meaning, the “recognition of the real,” the “religious impulse,” the “expression of religiosity,” or whatever it is scholars may call it, can be pursued in the religious *and* secular spheres. The sacred and the secular are not as distant as we make them to be and the sacred/secular divide, or “problem” of secularization as we so often call it, is not as simply defined or understood as we thought it either. This is an important realization for the religious and non-religious both. The secular sphere is not void of ways to express meaning and inspire good. The religious, or “sacred,” sphere is not a closed-system incapable of changing and giving birth to new forms of expression in light of secular realities. The sacred is found in the secular and the secular cannot escape the sacred—the separation between them is found to be fairly ambiguous. While one may or may not agree with these assertions, Ostwalt provides the religious and non-religious seeking dialogue together, a shared space in which they may not have everything in common, but are both sincerely attempting to make meaning and do what is right based on the frameworks of belief from which they orient themselves.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 196.

Eliade, Berger and Ostwalt all help create the possibility of shared space between the religious and non-religious, though a warning should be mentioned. While considering the possibility that all people share a universal “religious” nature can be helpful for identifying common ground between people of diverse belief systems, it is also true that utilizing the label “religious” for all people can be considered imperialistic and unhelpful for others. The *homo religious* concept will definitely be regarded as a useful category by some religious and non-religious persons who are trying to relate at a deeper level of understanding. In this case, those coming together in dialogue may choose to adopt this universal understanding as a common denominator that unites the group while still allowing for diverse manifestations and expressions. That being said, it may also be decided that the word “religious” is too much associated with particular religious beliefs and a different word may be used such as “spiritual” or “the common human search for meaning and good,” or so on. It may also be the case, however, that the *homo religiosus* category will be difficult if not impossible for others to accept. Not all religious people will want “their” category to be too broadly applied to others who do not share their own commitment to religion as it is traditionally understood. Neither will all non-religious people consent to being adopted under this language of no choice of their own and even contrary to their own self-identity. In this instance, it may be better to discard the concept all together and explore other points of commonality or ways of being peacefully in disagreement with each other. However one may decide to proceed, the point is that the religious and non-religious, while having incredibly different worldviews which must be respected and appreciated distinctly from each other, the undeniable fact is that we all do share in a common humanity together, a humanity which does seek and

make meaning on a daily basis, and sometimes better than other times, desires peace, justice, and good. Respecting and recognizing this common humanity opens up a shared space in which the religious and non-religious can dialogue, build right relationships, and seek the common good together.

All this being said, while the language we use may not always play a prominent role in whether or not we can dialogue together—sometimes agreeing to certain terms and categories can be incredibly useful and fruitful for building the deep relationships needed to overcome division and motivate action for the common good. That is why, in the following chapter, we will make very specific recommendations for the religious and non-religious coming together to dialogue as inspired by the work of theologian Paul Tillich. These recommendations are like any, propositions, and can be embraced or denied. Given the opportunity to be tested, however, I believe they could strengthen the common space of dialogue we have already discovered exists between the religious and non-religious.

CHAPTER 4
TILLICHIAN CONTRIBUTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING DIALOGUE
BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS

Much of our approach to the question of dialogue between the religious and non-religious has so far relied on anecdotes from popular culture, considerations of emerging trends, and historical and sociological perspectives on the concepts and movements that encompass the conversation about the so called sacred/secular divide. By engaging these fields of study, we have discovered that a common space of dialogue does indeed already exist between the religious and non-religious. What has been missing until this point, however, is the engagement of a substantial theological perspective. Why, when a solid case has already been made for the benefits and points of entry into dialogue between the religious and non-religious, ought we engage the *study of God*? Have we not already pushed too far in the previous chapter by suggesting that all people have a religious nature? Is this not condescending for those entering into the dialogue with an intentional and deliberate choice to self-identify as *other* than religious? On the one hand, yes—pursuing the issue from a theological frame of reference may set up an unfair power dynamic between those who would welcome such a perspective and those who might have something to lose by allowing it. On the other hand, to ignore such a perspective would be to dismiss an entire field of study long committed to the interpretation of popular culture, emerging trends, history, sociology and more and invested in questions of religion and non-religion—setting up an unfair power dynamic still. If religion, faith,

institutions, culture and other similar topics continue to be subjects of debate between the religious and non-religious, we must engage the theological voice. The voice we will engage—that of mid-twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich—will not only provide the non-religious reader with compelling considerations in regards to *faith* and meaning-making, but will also and perhaps more dramatically, challenge the religious reader (in particular the Christian) to reconsider their oftentimes exclusive claim on faith and meaning-making. Primarily, by engaging with Tillich’s system of thought, we will continue to support the principal motivation of this exploration which is to recognize and build up the shared space where the religious and non-religious can come together in dialogue to build relationships, learn from each other, and pursue justice together.

Paul Tillich, called a “pacific theologian” by Reinhold Niebuhr and said to have had a “style of discussion and debate [that] was never confrontational,”¹ is an ideal candidate for consideration when exploring the issues at hand. According to Tillich scholar and biographer Marion Pauck, “. . . his work engaged the attention of many who had little or no relationship with either the Christian churches or with organized religion.”² Tillich, regarded by the religious and non-religious alike, emphasized the importance of dialogue when encountering other religions—including what he would call at the time the secular “quasi-religions.”

Not conversion, but dialogue. It would be a tremendous step forward if Christianity were to accept this! It would mean that Christianity would judge itself when it judges the others in the present encounter of the world religions. . . . But it would do even more. It would give a new valuation to secularism. The attack of secularism on all present-day religions would not appear as something merely negative . . . the secular development could be understood in a new sense, namely

¹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1957), xi.

² *Ibid.*, viii.

as the indirect way which historical destiny takes to unite mankind religiously, and this would mean, if we include quasi-religions, also politically.³

Already, we see that Tillich not only stresses dialogue over conversion but also has an investment in thinking seriously and not dismissively about the secular and non-religious perspective. In addition to having a collaborative approach towards discussion about the issues we have been exploring, Tillich's system of thought itself—his theology—provides us with a rich array of resources in which to think about dialogue between the religious and non-religious. In this chapter, we will focus on four elements of Tillich's theology which will support our effort at creating and strengthening a shared space for dialogue between the religious and non-religious including 1) Tillich's definition of "faith" as *ultimate concern*, 2) Tillich's framework for the "holy" and his warning against the "demonic," 3) Tillich's thoughts on "de-demonization," and 4) Tillich's approach to dialogue itself. These four foci will help the Christian reader in particular think about their faith in such a way that makes dialogue with the non-religious not only possible, but necessary. For the non-religious reader, while Tillich's view on secular "faith" may not be an accepted category of identity, it can help create a better appreciation for the term. What is more, Tillich's theology will help the religious and non-religious alike contemplate new points of encounter that if considered seriously, can generate an even more intimate, shared space for dialogue, relationship-building, and the common pursuit of justice. For Tillich, this first means coming together to take seriously the term that is so often fraught with discord, but which can in fact be a means of connection: *faith*.

³ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, [1963] 1994), 60-61.

Tillich’s Definition of “Faith” as Ultimate Concern—Entering into a Common Sphere of Doubt and Courage

Faith” is not an easy word. Those who are religious take the word for granted and believe they are the only ones that have it, and in many instances the non-religious are happy to let them. Unfortunately, this is not a simple issue of defining terms, but a serious question of identity that has often made dialogue between the religious and non-religious difficult. “How”, many in the interfaith and secular realm ask, “can we include those without faith in conversations about faith?” Responses to such a question in the interfaith field range from ignoring the question all together and therefore inevitably reducing the participation of the non-religious in dialogue to changing the language around interfaith dialogue to become “inter-belief,” “multi-religious,” and or some other term that excludes the word “faith” altogether. Such attempts to alter the language around interfaith, however, have had mixed results. In some instances, such a change is positive and allows and encourages a greater diversity of participation. In other instances, previous participants become weary and fearful that by taking “faith” out of “interfaith,” something profound has been stripped of the endeavor. What is more, by employing new terminology it is soon discovered that there is just as much disagreement and confusion about the acceptability of the new words as there were the old. According to Tillich, frustration over the term “faith” is due to the “confusing and distorting connotations” associated with the word.⁴ While not all religious and non-religious people will be interested in redeeming the word, Tillich makes a strong and admirable case for reconsideration, stressing that it need not be a word that creates division, but can in fact

⁴ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, xxi.

create unity. In other words, we need not rid of the term but can in fact reclaim it in such a way that it can affirm the diverse identities of the religious and non-religious alike.

“Faith,” Tillich admits, is a term “more productive of disease than of health” in that it “confuses, misleads, creates alternately skepticism and fanaticism, intellectual resistance and emotional surrender, rejection of genuine religion and subjection to substitutes.” That being said, he argues, the word cannot be done away with because despite all its problems, a “powerful tradition protects it” and “there is as yet no substitute expressing the reality to which [it] . . . points.”⁵ This reality is the “ultimate,” the “infinite,” and all of that which is experienced as holy, sacred, good and just—whether or not those are the words that one would choose to use to describe such experiences. Being that there is a word that already exists that can point to this experienced reality, Tillich argues, we need not come up with a new word but take seriously the word that is available to us, stripping it of its negative connotations and returning to its actual meaning.

“Faith,” Tillich is famous for saying, “is the state of being ultimately concerned”⁶ This state of being ultimately concerned is not monopolized by Christians or other traditional religious identities, he says, but is the “integrating center of the personal life For this reason one cannot admit that there is any man without an ultimate concern or without faith.”⁷ This means, in Tillich’s line of thought, that all people—the religious and non-religious alike—have faith, even if the content of their faith is different. To say that

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Ibid., 123.

one does not have faith, Tillich states, is to misunderstand what faith is. “The most ordinary misinterpretation of faith is to consider it an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence . . . If this is meant, one is speaking of belief rather than of faith.”⁸ Faith, therefore, is not belief, nor is it the will to believe. “No command to believe and no will to believe can create faith . . . Finite man cannot produce infinite concern. Our oscillating will cannot produce the certainty which belongs to faith . . . Neither arguments for belief nor the will to believe can create faith.”⁹

Faith, therefore, is not belief or even the content of one’s belief, but is the state of being ultimately concerned about something—which Tillich claims is a common human experience. This is an important consideration, he says, for the religious and non-religious alike.

If faith is understood as what it centrally is, ultimate concern, it cannot be undercut by modern science or any kind of philosophy. And it cannot be discredited by its superstitions or authoritarian distortions within and outside churches, sects and movements. Faith stands upon itself and justifies itself against those who attack it, because they can attack it only in the name of another faith. It is the triumph of the dynamics of faith that a denial of faith is itself an expression of faith, of an ultimate concern.¹⁰

Faith, if understood as Tillich has outlined above, could be viewed as a universally applicable category of human experience, passion and concern that transcends any one particular expression of that concern. This includes not only the Christian, the Hindu, the Sikh and the Muslim and how they express the content of their ultimate concern, but also the Humanist, the Atheist, the Skeptic and the Agnostic and how they express the content

⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰ Ibid., 147.

of their ultimate concern. “Man’s spiritual function, artistic creation, scientific knowledge, ethical formation and political organization” Tillich states, “are consciously or unconsciously expressions of an ultimate concern . . .”¹¹ Tillich makes this point time and time again, focusing here on humanism in particular:

For humanism . . . the ultimate concern of man is man . . . For this reason the humanist faith is called “secular,” . . . Secular means belonging to the ordinary process of events, not going beside it or beyond it into a sanctuary. In Latin and some derived languages one speaks of profanity in the sense of “being before the doors of the temple.” Profane in this sense is the same as secular. Often people say that they are secular, that they live outside the doors of the temple, and consequently that they are without faith! But if one asks them whether they are without an ultimate concern, without something which they take as unconditionally serious, they would strongly deny this. And in denying that they are without an ultimate concern, they affirm that they are in a state of faith. They represent the humanist type of faith which itself is full of varieties; the fact that they are secular does not exclude them from the community of the faithful.¹²

Obviously, to make such a statement—that all people have faith—requires a great deal of buy-in in order to be constructive in a dialogue setting. It requires the religious person to let go of the idea that she owns faith and requires the non-religious person to claim ownership of a term that she has perhaps deliberately rejected. If all parties can accept the meaning behind the word (i.e., *ultimate concern*), however, we can move even more intentionally into a shared space in which meaning-making isn’t coopted by the religious but can be pursued by all participants under a common human framework.

To make meaning of our ultimate concern, Tillich writes, is an act of love for “faith as the state of being ultimately concerned implies love, namely, the desire and urge toward the reunion of the separated . . . Love is present, even if hidden, in a human being; for

¹¹ Ibid., 125.

¹² Ibid., 72-73.

every human being is longing for union with the content of his ultimate concern.”¹³ Each will have one’s own particular expression of ultimate concern and one’s own content of concern—whether it be Jesus, Allah, Buddha, Justice, Community, Progress, or so on. In other words, one need not let go of one’s existential, ethical, philosophical, or religious identity or priorities in order to simultaneously work from a common category of human experience—which is the state of being ultimately concerned, or faith. To make this step certainly requires great humility and courage from the religious and non-religious alike, and will not exclude the possibility of great doubt as well.

Tillich affirms the risk involved in this process, remarking that in our pursuit to make sense of our experiences in relation to reality and our ultimate concern, doubt will play an important part. “Existential doubt and faith are poles of the same reality, the state of ultimate concern,” he says, “But serious doubt is confirmation of faith. It indicates the seriousness of the concern, its unconditional character.”¹⁴ Doubt is an inevitable element of faith and having it does not exclude one from the “community of the faithful.” This element of faith, like meaning-making, can be acknowledged by the religious and non-religious alike in such a way that does not judge, but validates the doubts and questions we all have—many of them the same. This requires courage, not repression Tillich insists:

Courage does not deny that there is doubt, but it takes the doubt into itself as an expression of its own finitude and affirms the content of an ultimate concern.

¹³ Ibid., 132.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

Courage does not need the safety of an unquestionable conviction. It includes the risk without which no creative life is possible.¹⁵

When we enter into the common sphere of *faith*, therefore, we enter not only into a shared space of meaning-making, but also one of risk-taking, doubt and courage as well.

To embrace the category of faith universally for the religious and non-religious undoubtedly has its complications and risks for all involved—and yet, to do so allows us to gain so much more than we think it is we might lose. We can call it *faith* as Tillich would insist we do, or call it *ultimate concern* or something else if absolutely necessary—what is important is that we enter this space together and take seriously each other’s experiences, doubts, and questions as we also begin to learn of the different contents of each other’s ultimate concern. To embrace this common human category together “levels the playing field” and gives all involved a safe and constructive space in which to do this work. The benefit of calling this realm by the same name (i.e., faith), is that we can move beyond the technical wording of what it is we call it and actually move forward with dialogue, relationship-building, and the pursuit of justice. To continue to battle over the word, while there are legitimate reasons for doing so, may cause a delay or worse an impediment to dialogue period. Whether or not we all agree with the label for this common pursuit, we must at least begin to form a shared understanding of what it is we are trying to do together and affirm the shared human drive we all have to make meaning of our lives. It is from this point, Tillich states, that we can begin to dialogue and not only appreciate the various religious and non-religious symbols that point to our

¹⁵ Ibid., 117-118.

ultimate concern, but can also begin to think critically about how those symbols can end up becoming idols and threaten the pursuit of what is truly ultimate, just, and good.

Tillich's Framework for the Holy and Warning against the Demonic—Naming and Claiming our Symbols and Idols

Once the religious and non-religious have established a common space in which all are welcome and encouraged to share what it is that ultimately concerns them, they can begin to seriously consider the content of each other's ultimate concerns. In Tillich's terminology, one can begin to really appreciate the symbols, myths and rituals that point to what is ultimate, holy, infinite, just and good. One difficulty that often faces the religious and non-religious seeking to dialogue is the uncritical and artificial awareness of each other's symbols. Even the most sincere and well-meaning interlocutors struggle to overcome their simple and narrow regard for the other's symbols. Statements like "Jesus is just a first-century dead guy," "science is just God's way of testing our faith," "the Bible is just a book of fairytales," or "Atheism is just a license for apathy" abound, sometimes leading to deeper conversation but more often than not shutting down the conversation all together. What's more, Tillich remarks, there is a great misunderstanding of what *symbols* actually are and do and a lack of proper identification of them. To call "God" a symbol can be confusing for a Christian and claiming profound "holy" significance for any sort of symbol may seem inappropriate to a non-religious person. Tillich warns that the danger of not naming a symbol for what it is, however, is that it threatens to become idolatrous and demonic (i.e., absolutist), and therefore unable to accommodate other realities that may also point to ultimate concern, holiness, justice, goodness, etc. By considering Tillich's approach to *symbols* and the concepts that

surround them, we can continue to build a common space of dialogue whose structure is better understood by all participants, making it easier for us to appreciate the value of each other's symbols and also more self-aware of how our own symbols can become problematic.

A *symbol*, according to Tillich, is a finite object or concept (i.e., something that physically exists in empirically-verified reality) that points to an infinite reality (i.e., something that is experienced as real but transcends our physical surroundings).¹⁶ “Love” for example, is the linguistic symbol—all language being symbolic—that describes an experience that transcends the word itself and all other symbols that might attempt to do the same (i.e., the image of a heart, the giving of a ring, the story of the Roman god Cupid, etc.) Being that we are finite beings, living in a finite world, we must use symbols to point to that which we experience as infinite, though it is important to note that these symbols themselves are not infinite. The infinite reality to which a symbol points is ultimate concern as described previously—or what Tillich likes to refer to as the *holy*. In Tillich's system of thought, to say that something is *holy* is to say that it has the quality “of that which concerns man ultimately.”¹⁷ To call something holy in this context, therefore, need not assume religious connotation. That which is holy, as has already been emphasized, can only become comprehensible to us through “holy ‘objects’”—symbols, myths, rituals, etc.¹⁸ For Christians, for example, God as an ultimate concern and infinite reality is called holy. The proper name “God,” however, is still a symbol. “That which is

¹⁶ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 215.

¹⁸ Ibid., 216.

the true ultimate transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely,” Tillich writes, “Therefore, no finite reality can express it directly and properly. Religiously speaking, God transcends his own name.”¹⁹ The moment we begin to describe those things which transcend the finite— i.e., justice, love, God, Dharma, goodness, etc.—we are speaking in symbols.

Similarly, when we begin to speak about “holy events,”— i.e., God’s action in the world, the spread of democracy, the pursuit of justice, etc.—we are still speaking in symbols, or more specifically, with *myths*. To say that these stories are myths is not to reduce their “truthfulness” but is to in fact regard them with an honest appreciation for the manner in which they do point to the infinite, all the while conscience that they are told by finite beings using finite concepts, and are therefore limited and still slightly separated from the infinite. This is a positive thing, Tillich insists, in that it still maintains the seriousness of our sacred stories while simultaneously discouraging us from committing ourselves to the stories over the infinite reality to which they point. It is one thing, for example, to believe in the Genesis creation story and interpret its deeper meanings and the reality to which it points— i.e., God’s concern for the natural world, community and relationships, order out of chaos, etc.—and quite another thing to demand that biblical creation stories be taught as science in public schools or tell someone they’re going to hell because they think Adam is a metaphor and not a real person. This, Tillich says, is the point in which symbols become idols and take on infinite significance even though they themselves are finite. In the same regard, to say that the Bible or any other religious texts are “just a bunch of myths” in a pejorative sense—or to mean that they are

¹⁹ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 51.

“untrue”—is just a great a misunderstanding of what they are attempting to do than is a literal reading of the stories. Tillich, ready to call a symbol and a myth for what they are, also stresses the importance of recognizing the great undertaking being done to point to that which is ultimate, true, and infinite. “Myths are symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters”²⁰ he says, and

All mythological elements in the Bible, and doctrine and liturgy should be recognized as mythological, but they should be maintained in their symbolic form and not be replaced by scientific substitutes. For there is no substitute for the use of symbols and myths: they are the language of faith.²¹

We’d do well, therefore, to regard such stories—ours and those of others—with critical respect and humility. Also, by calling “God” or the “Bible” or “democracy” or “justice” symbols, we do not claim that they are insignificant, but very important indeed. It is a symbol that “opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us.”²² It is symbols, in other words, that connect us to the life of the infinite, to the content of our ultimate concern.

It is here that we make a very important point about symbols themselves: we could not have them if we did not have what we call the “secular world.” If the non-religious are asked to contemplate calling that which concerns them ultimately as “holy,” then the religious must take into consideration the fact that everything we use to describe the holy is by default “secular” even if it does eventually take on holy meaning. Tillich emphasizes this point:

²⁰ Ibid., 56.

²¹ Ibid., 58.

²² Ibid., 48.

The holy embraces itself and the secular . . . Everything secular is implicitly related to the holy. It can become the bearer of the holy. The divine can become manifest in it. Nothing is essentially and inescapably secular . . . Everything secular is potentially sacred, open to consecration . . . Furthermore, the holy needs to be expressed and can be expressed only through the secular, for it is through the finite alone that the infinite can express itself. It is through holy ‘objects’ that holiness must become actual. The holy cannot appear except through that which in another respect is secular. In its essential nature the holy does not constitute a special realm in addition to the secular . . .”²³

Peace, the Cross, freedom, America, and other such concepts, are or were at one point, secular symbols. To state the point is not to belittle these symbols but to encourage us to both appreciate the ultimate reality to which they point and also prevent us from claiming that they themselves are ultimate. “The human heart seeks the infinite because that is where the finite wants to rest. In the infinite it sees its own fulfillment” writes Tillich. We are thus attracted to all that which manifests the ultimate, but in doing so, come to recognize “the infinite distance of the finite from the infinite and, consequently, the negative judgment over any finite attempts to reach the infinite.”²⁴ Unfortunately, such a realization does not always prevent us from trying to do so. This is where Tillich begins to warn us of the absolutist nature that our symbols can take on when they themselves claim ultimacy instead of just pointing to that which is ultimate.

Being that faith—i.e., ultimate concern—expresses itself concretely in symbols, there is always a risk that we will mistake our symbols for that to which our symbols point. This is, in the words of Tillich, idolatry and the point at which our symbols become *demonic*. When Tillich claims that something has become *demonic*, he is not referring to

²³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, 217-218.

²⁴ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 15.

the possession of evil spirits, but is saying that something has claimed ultimacy which is not truly ultimate.

Innumerable things, all things in a way, have the power of becoming holy in a mediate sense. They can point to something beyond themselves. But, if their holiness comes to be considered inherent, it becomes demonic. This happens continually in the actual life of most religions. The representations of man's ultimate concern—holy objects—tend to become his ultimate concern. They are transformed into idols.²⁵

Such a threat presents itself when one becomes unconditionally devoted to a symbol instead of that to which the symbol points. Such instances include, for example, the fight to recognize Christmas in the public square instead of spending the holiday to appreciate the humanity and vulnerability of Jesus the Christ, to idealize American democracy and patriotism over the humanitarian needs of outsiders, to mercilessly defend a particular idea of marriage at the expense of others' livelihood, to prioritize the separation of church and state to a point that stifles religious and spiritual expression of any kind, and so on. What happens, says Tillich, is that the "one expression of the ultimate denies all other expressions. It becomes—almost inevitably—idolatrous and demonic."²⁶ Such absolutism is rampant not only in religious communities, but non-religious ones as well and is an obvious impediment to peaceful relationships.

An idolatrous faith which gives ultimacy to a preliminary concern stands against all other preliminary concerns and excludes love relations between the representatives of contrasting claims. The fanatic cannot love that against which his fanaticism is directed. And idolatrous faith is by necessity fanatical. It must repress the doubts which characterize the elevation of something preliminary to ultimacy.²⁷

²⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, 216.

²⁶ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 142.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

Idolatry—or the demonization of our symbols—therefore, is a major danger and obstacle to efforts to dialogue between the religious and non-religious. It creates intolerance, ignorance, and even violence. This can be prevented, however, through dialogue itself when a space is created to name and claim our symbols and idols.

To name and claim our symbols and idols for each other would obviously be problematic—though such an opportunity may be appropriate in certain contexts as we will soon see. Naming and claiming our very own symbols and idols, admitting period that we have them, is already a significant step. By doing so, we are not only able to identify for ourselves and others that which is most important to us, but we are also publicly able to admit that the symbols, stories, and rituals that we use to describe the content of our ultimate concern are themselves limited. To confess such fragility is a risk, of course, but one that lends itself much more constructively to dialogue than does the sort of haughty self-assurance that ignores reality and the experiences of others. To name and claim our symbols and idols, for the religious and non-religious alike, is to enter into the common sphere of meaning-making, risk-taking, doubt and courage described in the previous section. By entering this space together, we open ourselves up to genuine listening, learning, and a commitment to that which is truly ultimate, good, and just. As we begin this process of sharing with each other our symbols and idols, we create an environment of greater vulnerability and trust that allows us to enter into even deeper conversation. It is at this point that we can do the hard work of self-critique and de-demonization that Tillich says is made particularly possible through dialogue between the religious and non-religious.

Tillich's Thoughts on De-demonization—Implementing Secular and Christian Forms of Critique

We are reminded that Tillich, as quoted in the beginning of this exploration, stressed the importance of dialogue over conversion between the religious and non-religious, an endeavor that he said would help Christianity “judge itself,” would “give new valuation to secularism,” and would perceive the attack on religion that comes out of the secular sphere not “as something merely negative.”²⁸ This is because Tillich believed that the secular sphere and non-religious perspectives provide an invaluable critique of religion that can help Christians and other religious folk “de-demonize” their idolatrous symbols by leading them to recognize the way in which their finite symbols have taken on infinite status. This process, of course, goes the other way around as well. While the religious have a great deal to benefit from the non-religious critique, so too are the non-religious asked to identify and “de-demonize” their own idolatrous symbols. For Christians, Tillich points out, it is the self-negating symbol of the Cross of Christ in particular that provides the standard by which Christians are to critique other religious and non-religious faiths, including its own. Obviously, in order to reach this point in which such critiques can be employed, the religious and non-religious need to have established a safe space in which they are able to receive them. By previously naming and claiming our *own* symbols and idols, such a space of vulnerability has already begun to take shape. All the while, it is important when embarking on this difficult endeavor, that we reestablish a commitment to pursue what is truly ultimate together, accepting from the beginning that the expressions and manifestations of ultimate concern will

²⁸ Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of . . .* 61.

inevitably vary. In the end, Tillich suggests we all hold each other to the same question: do the mediums through which we experience ultimate concern truly express what is ultimate?²⁹

The secular or “non-religious” contribution that Tillich finds most fruitful for dialogue between the religious and non-religious is reason and rationalism. It is through reason and an understanding of our finite world that we are even able to express that which we experience as infinite. “A faith which destroys reason destroys itself and the humanity of man,” Tillich states, for it is only with reason that we are “able to be ultimately concerned, to distinguish ultimate and preliminary concerns, to understand the unconditional commands of the ethical imperative, and to be aware of the presence of the holy.”³⁰ This is an important point to make, especially for the religious who sometimes relegate reason and rationalism to a lower level of importance when compared to say “faith” understood in its improper definition as “belief in the unseen.” What Tillich wants to stress, an important reminder provided by the secular mindset in particular, is that we can only experience that which we call holy, finite, God, etc. through the finite, secular world.

Our symbols, rituals, doctrines, and texts, must never be viewed as ultimate in and of themselves even if they do point to that which is ultimate. That is why, when our symbols threaten to become demonic, we depend on the secular critique to remind us of their finiteness. “The holy is not only open to demonization . . . But the holy is also open to secularization. And these two, demonization and secularization, are related to each

²⁹ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

other insofar as secularization is the . . . most radical form of de-demonization.”³¹ Tillich describes this process of secular de-demonization further:

The secular is the rational, and the rational must judge the irrationality of the Holy. It must judge its demonization . . . The consecration of life which the Holy gives is at the same time the domination of life by the ecstatic forms of the Holy and the repression of the intrinsic demands of goodness, of justice, of truth and beauty. Secularization occurring in such a context is liberation...³²

The secular critique, therefore, challenges the religious to check their symbols when they reach a point of claiming an ultimate status that they do not and cannot have. What’s more, it humbles the religious into considering the ways in which they have allowed their symbols to take precedence over that which is truly ultimate and holy, such as goodness and justice—recalling Jesus’ own accusation of the religious leaders of his time when they prioritized rites and rituals over the weightier matters of “justice and mercy and faith”. (Mt. 23:23) Christians today are equally guilty, fighting for the proliferation of things like the Bible, the Ten Commandments, Christmas music, and Creation curriculums in the public square for the sake of establishing the power and presence of these symbols themselves, thus idolizing them. When they are berated by religious and non-religious voices alike, a legitimate criticism is raised concerning the manner in which these symbols have taken on demonic forms. “Our traditions, scriptures, teachers and authorities are certainly important—if it were not for them “our world would be infinitely smaller than it actually is,”³³ writes Tillich, and yet we are not to have “faith” in them.

The Christian may believe the Biblical writers, but not unconditionally. He does not have faith in them. He should not even have faith in the Bible. For faith is

³¹ Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of . . .*, 73-74.

³² *Ibid.*, 74.

³³ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 37.

more than trust in even the most sacred authority. It is participation in the subject of one's ultimate concern with one's whole being.³⁴

Instead, stemming from a common point of criticism made by the non-religious, Christians should start living the faith they say they have instead of working so ardently to promote their symbols in a competition of power and prestige. In other words, they should prioritize the ultimate concerns to which their symbols point like justice, right relationships, forgiveness, charity, and more. They need not give up their symbols, but they must not idolize them either.

Such a critique, of course, can be used by both the religious and non-religious alike. Tillich says that is why it is so important that the non-religious also name and claim their own symbols and idols as they too are at risk of becoming demonic. Such was and is the case, Tillich claims, with the “nationalist quasi-religions” of Nazism and modern American patriotism,³⁵ whose symbols drown out competing ideas and ignore other expressions of ultimate concern, or with an absolutist scientific approach that confuses dimensions of meaning by trying to debunk faith with science.³⁶ Fanaticism and radicalism, Tillich points out, while often religious, can take on secular forms as well and prove to be just as oppressive as the “demonic elements of the religions.”³⁷ For Christians, the tool of critique with which such absolutism can be judged—in both the religious and non-religious realms—is situated in its most valued symbol, the *Cross of Christ*.

³⁴ Ibid., 37-38.

³⁵ Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of . . .* 32.

³⁶ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 93-95.

³⁷ Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of . . .* 74.

The Cross is a complicated and loaded symbol that has taken on a great number of meanings over the centuries. In its most humble form, it points to a Christian's ultimate concern for things like grace, love, and redemption and inspires a passion for justice and mercy. In its most demonic form, the symbol of the Cross has been used to conquer and destroy lands and cultures, force conversion, and murder. To approach it as the criterion through which a Christian judges itself and others is fraught with complexity and an expected weariness on the part of those who it has harmed. Tillich hopes, however, to redeem this symbol in the same way he worked to redeem the true meaning of *faith* and *symbols* themselves. To fight against idolatry and the demonic, Tillich says, faith needs "an element of self-negation" that prevents symbols from claiming absolute status. Being that faith is expressed and lived out through symbols, however, we must find a symbol that can do the double-duty of both pointing to the ultimate and "its own lack of ultimacy."

Christianity expresses itself in such a symbol . . . namely, in the Cross of the Christ. Jesus could not have been the Christ without sacrificing himself as Jesus to himself as the Christ. Any acceptance of Jesus as the Christ which is not the acceptance of Jesus the crucified is a form of idolatry. The ultimate concern of the Christian faith is not Jesus, but the Christ Jesus who is manifest as the crucified. The event which has created this symbol has given the criterion by which the truth of Christianity, as well as of any other religion, must be judged.³⁸

That means, a symbol—even Jesus himself—is not to assert itself but is to give itself up for the sake of ultimacy. This is a dramatic proposition, but in Tillich's mind, absolutely necessary if one's symbols are to truly point to the content of one's ultimate concern. For the Christian, this is best done in the Cross of Christ. What's more, this example gives the Christian the criterion through which to judge all other symbols—its own and others'.

³⁸ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 112.

This criterion is established in the event of the Crucifixion of Jesus on the Cross which first produced the symbol:

The meaning of this event shows not in its providing a foundation for a new religion with a particular character (though this followed, unavoidably, with consequences partly creative and partly destructive, ambiguously mixed in church history), but it shows in the event itself, which preceded and judges these consequences. It is a personal life, the image of which, as it impressed itself on his followers, shows no break on his relation to God and no claim for himself in his particularity. What is particular in him is that he crucified the particular in himself for the sake of the universal. This liberates his image from bondage both to a particular religion—the religion to which he belonged has thrown him out—and to the religious sphere as such; the principle of love in him embraces the cosmos, including both the religions and the secular spheres. With this image, particular yet free from particularity, religious yet free from religion, the criteria are given under which Christianity must judge itself and, by judging itself, judge also the other religions and the quasi-religions.³⁹

When dialoguing with the religious and non-religious, therefore, the Christian can lend the critique produced by consideration of the Cross, asking questions like “does this symbol point to the truly ultimate . . . is this symbol willing to negate itself for the sake of that to which it points . . . does this symbol embrace the cosmos, the religious and the secular?” These are questions that can be asked by the religious and non-religious alike and help both reflect deeply on their symbols and consider whether or not these symbols have the ability to give over their own power for the sake of the ultimate concern to which they point. While it is a Christian symbol—the Cross of Christ—that provides this criterion, such a critique is still a valuable and worthwhile one to employ for both the religious and non-religious alike. It is when we allow this self-criticism that we are more likely to express that which is truly ultimate. This keeps our communities from becoming static, Tillich states

³⁹ Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of . . .* 52.

. . . creedal expressions of the ultimate concern of the community must include their own criticism. It must become obvious in all of them—be they liturgical, doctrinal or ethical expressions of the faith of the community—that they are not ultimate. Rather, their function is to point to the ultimate which is beyond all of them.⁴⁰

The Cross of Christ is one such tool of self-criticism. Paired with the secular critique of reason and rationalism, religious and non-religious participants in dialogue have a rich base of resources in which to consider their symbols and avoid the type of absolutism that disregards other expressions of ultimate concern.

As was stated before, to apply these critiques during dialogue is no easy task and demands that we continue to occupy a common space of doubt and courage. Fortunately, this can be done in such a way that there is no one party that takes the upper-hand because both the religious and non-religious have tools to share and ways to benefit from their use. No one intends for their symbols to become demonic, but the reality is that they do. When they do, the fact often goes unrecognized—especially when we are not in dialogue with those who might help us make that realization. If we are only ever in conversation with those who have also succumbed to idolizing the symbols we hold dear, we risk becoming unfaithful to the actual ultimate concerns to which we had hoped to be committed in the first place. By dialoguing with diverse perspectives, we are gifted with a special opportunity to re-commit ourselves to that which truly moves and grasps us as we become reacquainted with our symbols and wrestle them away from their demonic forms. We do this by taking seriously each other's symbols and tools of critique and with an attitude that is conducive to learning and relationship-building. This brings us to our final

⁴⁰ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 33.

consideration of Tillich's theology and one more contribution he has to make to dialogue between the religious and non-religious: his approach to dialogue itself.

Tillich's Approach to Dialogue—Adopting Constructive

Attitudes for the Sake of the Truly Ultimate

In an impressive effort to organize Tillich's thoughts on dialogue for easy-use by the general public, Robison B. James endeavors to synthesize and package a Tillichian approach to dialogue in his book *Tillich and World Religions: Encountering Other Faiths Today*. This thoughtful piece of writing presents Tillich's theology and translates it into a practical and functional guide for engaging in dialogue between diverse perspectives—making it incredibly useful for our purposes here. Now that we have already established some of the principal concepts in Tillich's thought that can be helpful for dialogue between the religious and non-religious— i.e., the meaning of *faith*, *symbols*, and the *demonic* the secular critique of *reason* and *rationalism* and the Christian critique of the *Cross of Christ*—we will finally consider Tillich's approach to dialogue itself, one that will prove to be extremely relevant and fruitful for the type of common space of meaning-making, doubt and courage that we have been working to create. Taking directly from the work of Tillich, Robison presents us with three *attitudes* in which we can enter into dialogue between diverse and differing beliefs: contextual pluralism, reciprocal inclusivism, and contextual exclusivism. Before taking note of these approaches to dialogue, however, it is important to first consider Tillich's identification of the three “levels of experience” in which one might encounter a belief or worldview different from one's own.

According to Tillich, there are three different levels that we experience our own faiths and engage with those of others. The first is a more “theoretical and detached”⁴¹ level at which an objective, empirical, and “controlling knowledge” is gained through the experience.⁴² This would take place, for example, in a scholarly or academic setting when learning about other belief systems, while reading a book, listening to a lecture, or watching a documentary. At this level, one obtains information but may or may not integrate such information into one’s personal belief system or set of values.⁴³ The second level of experience is less theoretical and detached and more invested in gaining “empathy, insight, and understanding.”⁴⁴ At this level, one is more likely to gain the sort of knowledge that one will integrate into one’s personal belief system and set of values, or will at least consider and judge them based on what it is one already believes and values. In the words of James, this level “is the depth in which we understand and interpret the manifold expressions of the human spirit, in the arts, in scientific projects, in mastering and using a language, in social movements, in political causes,” etc.⁴⁵ Finally, in the third level of experience, one is “profoundly, existentially, and life-shapingly involved” in what one is experiencing.⁴⁶ This is the level at which one makes decisions about what one believes and values, the point at which one is totally “wrapped up” and

⁴¹ Robison B. James, *Tillich and World Religions: Encountering Other Faiths Today* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 51.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

“grasped” by something. This is “existential knowledge,” or religious or spiritual knowledge, in which we have an “awareness of values, causes, imperatives, and realities that shape and determine who and what we are in our deepest selves.”⁴⁷ It is at this level of experience, in fact, that one is grasped by or accepts the symbols that point to one’s ultimate concern, or on the other hand, rejects those symbols that are unable to do so. It is at these three levels of experience that the religious and non-religious might encounter each other depending on the context—they might, for example, learn of each other’s belief systems and worldviews in the classroom (level-one), engage in conversation together at an interfaith dialogue event (level-two), or sit down one-on-one for an in-depth consideration of deep, existential questions (level-three). Depending on which level of experience one is engaged can affect the type of attitude one might employ in that context.

Attitude, as used above, describes the approach one might take to engage another person, idea, or perspective that is different from one’s own. Typically, James writes, we are presented with three options: a pluralist attitude, and inclusivist attitude, and an exclusivist attitude.

If we adopt a “pluralist” attitude, we say that each of the plural world religions possesses religious or transforming truth that is just as valid, effective, and valuable as any of the others . . . If we adopt an “inclusivist” attitude, we say that the standard for all saving truth is given in “my” religion, but other religions include more or less of that truth and power . . . If we adopt an “exclusivist” attitude, we say that religious or saving truth is found exclusively in our own religion.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.

Tillich, however, provides us with three variations of these possibilities which James believes are more appropriate for dialogue: contextual pluralism, reciprocal inclusivism, and contextual exclusivism. One may engage each attitude at different times or multiple attitudes at one time,⁴⁹ though we may “feel more at home in one of them” and end up adopting it as a “baseline attitude.”⁵⁰ At Tillich’s first, detached level of experience, James recommends contextual pluralism as the best attitude to take.

Contextual pluralism is the manner in which one adopts a pluralist attitude only in certain contexts—in this case level-one objective experiences.⁵¹ According to James, Tillich was himself a contextual pluralist:

He recognized deep structural, thematic, and substantive commonalities between Christian faith and other religions, and is sharply critical of efforts to present a theology of the history of religions that fails to affirm divine revelation in all religious experience . . .⁵²

In other words, Tillich was able to affirm “both the truth of salvation, and its saving or transforming power, in all religion.”⁵³ This means that when we are presented with the opportunity to learn about each other’s beliefs and worldviews—religious or non-religious—we can go about the exercise in such a way that we respect and affirm the value and saving affect that the others’ symbols, stories, rituals, and creeds have on their lives. This does not mean we must adopt these symbols for ourselves, but accept with seriousness the fact that these symbols have a profound impact on others. This is

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁵¹ Ibid., 63.

⁵² Ibid., 62.

⁵³ Ibid., 62-63.

especially needed when entering the sort of common space we have been setting up throughout this chapter where dialogue participants are asked to be vulnerable and trust their counterparts. Adopting a contextual pluralist attitude strengthens this space and makes it more conducive to sharing and learning. As is obvious in any conversation of worth, however, we recognize that the content of the encounter can deepen in nature and thus thrust us into the second level of experience in which we seek to really *understand* each other's symbols.

At level-two empathy-building experiences, James strongly insists that we adopt what Tillich best exemplified in his own life and work: reciprocal inclusivism. Like Tillich's encounter with Buddhism in 1960, it is during more intentional conversations between diverse perspectives— i.e., those found in interfaith dialogues—that “we find ourselves entering empathetically into life forms, sometimes even into strange life forms . . . and they enter partially into us. The result is that we live partly in them, while they live at least a tiny part of their life in us.”⁵⁴ It is this point of dialogue that the participants begin to not only objectively affirm the symbols of others, but to wonder and seriously consider how these symbols might operate in their own belief and value systems.

When we detect these similar or analogous elements, we begin to understand how the transforming truth that grasps us in our faith is making itself felt—with what degree of clarity and strength we may not be sure—in the faith of the other person, also . . . we sense in the other tradition some of the religious power and truth that, for us, are normatively present in our own religious tradition.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 66.

In other words, we not only consider how others' symbols work in our system of meaning, but allow others to consider how our own symbols might work in their own system.

To be an inclusivist is to affirm something about other faiths in this pattern: their saving truth is included in, but also judged by the saving truth in my religion. To be a reciprocal inclusivist is to go beyond that affirmation in such a way that we expect that the representatives of other faiths will have the same inclusivist attitude toward our faith, and also—here is the trademark feature—to approve the fact that these other parties adopt an inclusivist attitude toward our faith, and to approve this fact even when the other parties' inclusivism entail their judging our faith.⁵⁶

This is the sort of dialogue we move into when we begin to appreciate and judge each other's symbols without necessarily giving up our own—when we utilize, for example, the secular critiques of *reason* and *rationalism* and the Christian critique of the *Cross of Christ* that were exhibited earlier for considering our own symbols and idols and those of others. This is, as has been pointed out several times already, an action of risk that may involve a great deal of doubt and courage. Embracing this task, however, and entering into a level-two encounter with other perspectives, is what keeps us focused on what is truly ultimate, infinite, good and just. We are forced to articulate ourselves, describe how it is our symbols point to ultimacy, and redeem our symbols from their demonic forms. It is with a reciprocal inclusivist attitude that this is best achieved and made possible, and is why James recommends it as the best “baseline attitude” one might take in dialogue situations.⁵⁷ By taking this approach, we strengthen the common space we have built together and allow for the possibility of real growth in ourselves and others in that our

⁵⁶ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 113.

expressions of faith may take into themselves new expressions of ultimate concern, stay the same but become more coherent, and/or be judged by our own faith and that of others to the benefit of giving us a more mature faith.

It is with a more mature faith and firm establishment of trust between dialogue partners that the opportunity for level-three, existential experiences are more likely to occur. While we learn new information at level-one experiences and understand and empathize with that information at level-two experiences, at level-three experiences we respond to existential questions fully from our own perspective, most likely utilizing an approach of contextual exclusivism. According to James, a contextual exclusivist has three traits:

The person's baseline attitude in interreligious encounters is not exclusivist . . . It is only in certain contexts, and in encounters of considerable depth, that this person gives relatively free rein to an exclusivist tendency . . . And . . . the contextual exclusivist can conceive the possibility that, in other contexts—contexts besides the ones that evoke an exclusivist response in them—another faith besides their own might serve as the vehicle of ultimate fulfillment, or as the vehicle of some measure of such fulfillment.⁵⁸

To be “exclusivist” at an existential level, therefore, does not require one to be an exclusivist at all times or to adopt it as one's baseline attitude. In certain, contexts, however, such an approach may be the most honest and appropriate. This happens when we come across those moments when we are called in a more intentional way to speak genuinely and completely out of our own faith as individuals.

At this level, we are grasped by reality at its deepest and most embracing. At this depth the ground of our being and the ground of all meaning get at us through religious symbols . . . In and through these realities we are grasped at a level beyond the level at which these realities are simply objects for us as subjects. “Who we are” and “how we shall live” are so tied up with these realities that it

⁵⁸ Ibid., 75.

would be a preposterous trivialization to think that we could swap one of them for another.⁵⁹

In other words, when asked to really account for what it is we believe and what it is that heals us, drives us, “saves” us, “ we will not be able to affirm salvation or ultimate fulfillment within the symbolism of any other religion than the one in whose beneficent grip we sense ourselves then to be.”⁶⁰ The Christian will have to speak from Christian symbols, an Atheist through Atheist symbols, a Humanist through Humanist symbols, and so on. So, when previously we asked the religious and non-religious alike to consider using the Cross of Christ as an example criterion for judging symbols, we were operating at a level-two encounter in which such a possibility exists. At a level-three encounter, it would be impossible for anyone but a Christian to speak personally and existentially about how the Cross of Christ operates as a saving power in their lives. They could not, when asked to make an existential decision, use anything but their own symbols to respond. In this context, one would have to take on an exclusivist approach, but unlike the other approaches, not as an *attitude* per say. James prefers to call this sort of exclusivism a *tendency* instead because it “is something we feel, or something we are moved by, whereas exclusivism is an attitude in the sense of a stance or a position that we adopt.”⁶¹ Also, it is contextual, and is not the sort of approach one wants to take as one’s “baseline attitude” if their aim to engage in the sort of dialogue that produces growth and seeks the truly ultimate. While this is the sort of approach that will likely occur less often, it still works like the other approaches to strengthen the common space of dialogue

⁵⁹ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 67.

⁶¹ Ibid.

between the religious and non-religious because it grants all involved with the permission to be their authentic selves when asked to answer questions of great depth. It creates the sort of environment in which one feels safe to share what matters most to her, even when it disagrees profoundly with other perspectives, and expects that others will feel the same way.

As can be seen, Tillich's approach to dialogue itself—like his ideas on *faith*, *symbols*, and the *demonic* and religious and non-religious forms of self-critique—contributes positively to efforts to dialogue between the religious and non-religious. His practice of contextual pluralism, reciprocal inclusivism, and contextual exclusivism in his own life and theology provide us with helpful and practical ways to go about learning about each other's systems of belief and worldviews, understanding more intentionally the symbols that make up those other faiths as included and judged by our own faiths, and speaking honestly and completely about how our own faiths move, heal and save us.

Like all practical propositions that are made to improve the state of things, Paul Tillich's contributions towards dialogue between the religious and non-religious will have to be tested in reality before their application can be judged. Already tested in his own lifetime, Paul Tillich earned a credible and positive reputation with those in and outside of religion with his theological system and approach towards dialogue. While much has changed in religious and non-religious life since the passing of Tillich in 1965, his ideas can and will continue to influence present life. In the realm of interfaith dialogue—Tillich's system of thought can be of particular service to endeavors to integrate the participation of those who identify as “non-religious” such as atheists, humanists, agnostics, skeptics and freethinkers. By redeeming the meaning of *faith* and

symbols, Tillich has provided us with the categories needed to regard each other's faiths, worldviews, and perspectives with equal regard—whether they be religiously rooted or not. His warning against the *demonic*—or absolutism in more contemporary terms—provides us with an invaluable critique of the type of both religious and non-religious extremism that hinders dialogue in the first place. Tillich's respect and regard for secular and religious criticisms help us recognize the role dialogue has in our society period as it encourages us all stay faithful to that which is truly ultimate, good and just. And finally, Tillich's contextualization of dialogical approaches give us the variety of methods we need to go about dialogue between the religious and non-religious in such a way that not only honors those with whom we disagree but allows us to be true to ourselves. If given a chance to be considered and implemented, Tillich's contributions could create and strengthen an intimate, safe, and thought-provoking space of meaning-making, doubt, and courage shared by the religious and non-religious as they build relationships, learn from each other, and pursue justice together.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the above exploration we have both discovered the rich connections shared by the religious and non-religious and have made specific propositions for strengthening those connections. The religious and non-religious, religion and secularization, and the sacred and secular are intimately tied together. They share a common history, interact with each other in everyday life, and depend on each other to thrive. The religious and non-religious, while oftentimes unaware of the fact, already occupy a common space of encounter in which meaning-making is done and the common good is pursued. The space for dialogue, therefore, already exists. Unfortunately, as is seen in the most publicized venues of communication, this space is often overwhelmed by unproductive debate, power struggles, absolutism and linguistic violence. Many dialogue proponents and interfaith activists, however, are determined to reclaim this space and the potential the religious and non-religious have for engaging in meaningful conversations together for the sake of relationship-building, learning, and the common good. Reclaiming and strengthening this space is made all the more possible by recognizing the common history that has shaped our identities, honoring the experiences and contributions of others, appreciating the diverse symbols and expressions of ultimate concern that give meaning to our lives, and having the courage to embrace doubt and criticism.

The groundwork for dialogue has now been laid, here and by others advocating for cooperation between the religious and non-religious. Now, we must move beyond the

history, theory, and propositions and move towards a practical application of the type of intentional dialogue space we have been promoting, where establishing trust and vulnerability creates the environment for building relationships, where listening and sharing opens us up to new learning, and where honesty and an openness to each other encourages healthy forms of communication and the possibility of cooperation. This process will neither ask anyone to disregard who they are nor will it ignore hard truths—instead, it will allow all parties to come as they are and to speak the truth, but to do so in such a way that is safe, respectful, and open to discovery. As religious and non-religious people alike living in an increasingly pluralistic world that includes more and more diversely religious and non-religious communities, there is much at stake in how we choose to interact with each other. We can avoid and deny the common space we share, stalling for a short time difficult conversations at the risk of being unprepared to deal with them when they finally and inevitably to come to pass. We can enter the space with fists flying and simplistic words of insults ready at the risk of creating more turmoil and division. Or we can, with humility and compassion, step into the space ready to learn, listen, share, and be changed by what we encounter there at the risk of finding out that we actually like each other, have a great deal to contribute to each other, and are better equipped to pursue justice and the common good when doing so together.

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