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Utopia and the memory of religion

Certainly since the work of Ernst Bloch there has been interest in the relationship between religion and utopia. This has focused on two main aspects: 1) religion as a *resource* of utopian material; 2) religion as a *space* in which utopian material can be generated. The relevance of memory should be clear in terms of 1) the nature of religious *traditions*, 2) religions as *communities of memory*. Whilst there are fascinating possibilities in exploring the relationship between the three categories of utopia, memory and religion, there are some major problems – and I want to try to outline some elements of both.

Let us begin with religion; and somewhat elliptically with etymology. The gods are absent in the etymology of the word “religion”.[1] The predominant interpretation grounds the word in the Latin root “lig” which denotes *binds* and *binding* (as in “ligature”). The archaic Indo-European source of this root is suggested by the Urdu-Hindu word “lag” which means “join”, contrasted with the term “alag”, meaning “separate”. That this root lent itself to conceptions of social binding is indicated by the fact that “lig” is the basis of the Latin word “lex” (law). The prefix “re” suggest the possibility that bounds might come undone and need to be re-established; hence the Latin word “religare” – *to bind again* – is considered by most modern authorities to be at the base of the word religion. The need to *re*-bind introduces a temporal

[1] P.G.W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982); Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (eds), *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966); WORD FOR WORD: Zulqarnain – Alexander or Cyrus? – *Khaled Ahmed*, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_14-11-2004_pg3_4; Bonnie McCarson, “What is Religion”, http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/jungian_psychology/95713.

dimension and this has led some commentators, including Jung, to interpret "religare" as "linking back"; but there is clearly the possibility of the forward glance also – re-binding as renewal.

A temporal reading is also present in Cicero's entirely different etymology of "religion" – arguing for a source in the word "relegere" – "to re-read".[2] In the pagan Roman world, as Balagangadhara has argued, it was a commonplace for religious sceptics (like Cotta in Cicero's *The Nature of the Gods*) to take philosophical issue with the existence of gods, and yet at the same time advocate the necessity for devout religious observation, and taking part in such devotions themselves. This was not, as Enlightenment thinkers argued, because they cynically distinguished elite from popular belief, but because the cultic practices were handed down from ancestral times, and thereby embodied the living being of an historical community. As Cicero wrote: "It is wise and reasonable for us to preserve the institutions of our fore-fathers by retaining their rites and ceremonies".[3] The Romans, indeed, perceived the emergence of Christianity as a malign form of what we will term a disruption of tradition. Balagangadhara suggests that to the Romans the Christians had no tradition, and therefore, in a real sense no *religio*, hence their ascription of "atheism" to the new cult; this, in turn, propelled the Christians in the direction of asserting the antiquity and universality of their theistic *beliefs*, and the creation of the modern Western notion of a "religion".[4] Certainly to the Emperor Julian, who sought to restore paganism in the fourth century CE, the Christians, or "Galilaeans" as he contemptuously termed them, had impiously broken with the venerable traditions of their age, having "turned aside from the gods to corpses and relics".[5] The Christians returned the compliment, dubbing Julian "the Apostate".

As Richard King has argued, the differing etymologies of the word "religion" can be traced to historical struggles over control of meaning, with the earlier Ciceronian understanding of religion as re-reading being chal-

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[2] Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods* (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 152-153.

[3] S.N. Balagangadhara, *'The Heathen in His Blindness…' Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*, 2nd edition (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2005), p. 42.

[4] *Ibidem*, pp. 31-64.

[5] *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 135.

lenged by Christianity (notably the writer Lactantius) in the third century CE, which proposed "re-binding" to promote a notion of orthodox belief in a true God (humans "bound" to God), against the earlier "pagan" and more pluralistic notion of varying traditions.[6] This focus on the etymology thus provides a useful distance from dominant modern conceptions of religion, or more accurately "religions" – belief systems centred on a family of transcendent concepts: the sacred, the holy, the divine, and so forth. The etymology, to this reader, is suggestive of the human context in which these belief systems emerged, without necessarily engaging in a reductive manner which seeks to disparage or deny the transcendent elements. It is to follow in Feuerbach's footsteps, who, although committed to an atheist perspective (with its reductive dangers), sought in his analysis of 'the true or anthropological essence of religion' to understand what type of human conversation was contained in religious traditions.

We do however have to be careful when speaking about "religion" that we don't succumb to an untenable universalism. Certainly Ernst Bloch speaks as if religion is an unproblematic historical given, once one understands its linkage to a ubiquitous utopian impulse – "where hope is, religion is".[7] From this perspective whilst religious traditions might be complex and varied, the underlying phenomenon of "religion" is an historical universal. Religious discourse, however, including the concept of "religious" discourse itself, has to be rooted in the historically shifting modalities of human conversation; one cannot assume that "religion" is a human cultural universal.

The etymology of religion, as we have seen, also suggests possible connections with the phenomenon of memory. Some initial remarks on the vocabulary of memory are therefore in order. There are a wide range of memory words, many used synonymously. I would like to concentrate on the active side of memory, and, somewhat hesitantly, suggest the following distinctions:

1) *Recalling*. This activity lies on the furthest frontier of memory. It is the point where consciousness acknowledges material which seems to have emerged on its own volition; those memory traces which

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[6] Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the mystic East'* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 36.

[7] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 1193.

seem to have pushed themselves forward – in St Augustine's words, the things that "come spilling from the memory, thrusting themselves upon us"[8] .

2) *Recollection*. This is a more active and conscious searching for memories, and an initial assemblage of these traces into more complex unities. Recalling can occur in the midst of recollection. Indeed Augustine's reference to memories spilling out occurs in his analysis of a process of recollection: these memories arise "when what we want is something quite different, as much as to say 'Perhaps we are what you want to remember?'".[9]
3) *Remembering*. This seems to involve a strong epistemological claim – "I remember" is a statement that these traces are authentic representations of something pre-existing. This ambition to establish temporal truth is at the heart of Paul Ricoeur's recent study, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Although he deploys his own taxonomy (or phenomenology) of memory, his central conviction is that "we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it".[10]
4) *Recognition*. This involves the working through of memories, reflecting on their significance, finding resonances. This seems to be the point where utopian work is likely to be done – a re-cognition, the creation of something new out of the old. This is the activity Bloch is drawn to in his, not entirely helpful distinction between the potentially utopian *anagnorisis* (recognition) and the epistemologically conservative *anamnesis* (recollection).[11]

Neurobiology has distinguished "procedural memory" (the memory of how to do things) from "declarative memory" (the memory of named things), and within "declarative memory" has further distinguished "episodic memory"

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8 St Augustine, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 214.

9 *Ibidem*.

10 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 7.

11 Michael Landmann, "Talking with Ernst Bloch: Korcula, 1968", *Telos* 25, 1975, pp. 178-179.

(personal memories) from "semantic memory" (general memories of the world).[12] Religious memory clearly owes a good deal of its material to this semantic memory. In the historical transfer from oral to written culture there were fears that this would seriously impair memory, as writing legitimated a widespread forgetting of specifics; Plato has Socrates cite the remarks of a King of Egypt on the dangers of writing: "Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful".[13] But as Rose has argued, writing can be construed as a form of "artificial memory" which is "profoundly liberatory, transforming both what we need to and what we are able to remember".[14] The religious texts of the world are thus an incredibly rich source of material available for collective appropriation, interpretation and development; and, as shown by the example of Ernst Bloch, they can be powerful repositories of utopian material.[15]

Shared memories are an important form of social binding, and religious memory has been a particularly potent form of social memory; re-ligion is therefore intimately related to fundamental memory concepts. Many religious memories are of moments when memory is disrupted, when the old, at least partially, begins to be forgotten as something new is ushered in. Frequently the narration in religious memory focuses on the innovative religious figure who reveals a truth previously unknown or unrecognised which revolutionises human perceptions of reality and its potential. The memory of these deeply subversive acts, concepts and imagery linger on in the dogma of conservative creeds which seek to de-temporalise and de-utopianise this material into eternal truths. The tradition of the disrupted tradition thus lives on – a gold-bearing seam of utopia, to use Ernst Bloch's metaphor. Furthermore, in the memory of the subversive religious act lies the exemplar not merely of the selective appropriation of earlier traditions but the introduction of genuine novelty, the utopian space of genuine creation.

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[12] See Steven Rose, *The Making of Memory: From Molecules to Mind* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 137-138.

[13] Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 96; see also Harald Weinrich, *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 20.

[14] Steven Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 387-388.

[15] Ernst Bloch, *op. cit.*, pp. 1183-1311.

The process of secularisation needs to be considered when delving into these matters. The privatisation of religion has undoubtedly led to an attenuation of a sense of the social in religion, and an attendant undertheorisation of the role of memory in religion. William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) is often seen as an example of an individualist treatment of religion. In fact it would be more accurate to say that James is uninterested in the social dimension in religion rather than denying its existence. James defined religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine".[16] Charles Taylor locates James' analysis in a Protestant tradition, and contrasts it with an alternative collective conception of religion which points to the social dimension in the individual response. He illustrates this with his experience of sitting at home watching the local hockey team triumph on television: "the sense of my joy here is framed by my understanding that thousands of fans all over the city, some gathered at the rinkside, others also in their living rooms, are sharing in this moment of exultation."[17] In effect he echoes Durkheim's claim that "religion must be something eminently collective".[18] What Taylor doesn't explore here is the vital element of shared memory in this collective response – the triumph of the local team is located in, and derives emotional intensity from, the memory of earlier defeats and victories, and of the pains and pleasures associated with supporting the team over time.

Margalit's concept of "shared memory" seems appropriate here.[19] The various supporters of Taylor's Hockey team have experienced the performances of their team in differing locations and times, and through intercommunication have built up certain shared notions of the past of their team. Margalit distinguishes this from "common memory" which is "a simple aggre-

[16] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1985), p. 31.

[17] Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 28.

[18] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 46.

[19] Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 50-52.

gate"[20] of individual memories, lacking the vital mediating factor of communication. The term "shared" perhaps also suggests a voluntaristic, non-coercive form of integration, distinguishable from oppressive forms of integration from above – a distinction of particular salience in any analysis of the emergence of religious traditions. Furthermore this type of concept of collective memory therefore need not involve the dissolution of the memorizing individual. Ricoeur is surely right in distinguishing between the highly defensible thesis that "no one ever remembers alone" and the indefensible thesis that "we are not an authentic subject of the attribution of memories".[21] This latter thesis is theoretically confused and, at least potentially, politically pernicious.

Both James and Durkheim agree in locating part of the definition of religion in terms of the object religion addresses – for James it is the "divine", and for Durkheim the "sacred". This reflects a differentiation which is neither temporally nor spatially ubiquitous. Furthermore over-restrictive western models of the "religious" have produced fundamental misreadings of non-western phenomena (misreadings abetted by indigenous elements); the modern pattern of discrete creeds and faiths (the so-called "world religions") represents but one possible development in the human conversation.[22] The phenomenon of religion, therefore, is not an unproblematic universal, but a category heavily marked by the project of one tradition – the western Christian – which has set the definition of what a religion is and, aided, for different reasons, by non-western indigenous forces, has created out of a mass of local traditions a set of faiths based, like the Christian, on texts, priests, etc. Indeed one might note here in passing Bloch's privileging of the Judaeo-Christian tradition as the cutting edge of religious development; with Christianity the very apex of the history of religion.[23] In short, anyone using religion as a resource or a space for the utopian needs to be aware that not merely "religions" carry deep ideological baggage, but the very category of "religion" itself.

One should also note the assault of rationalism on memory that began to gather pace in the seventeenth century. As Harald Weinrich has argued,

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 51.
[21] Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
[22] See King, *Orientalism and Religion*.
[23] Ernst Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 1193.

rationalist and Enlightenment philosophers saw the ancient and medieval veneration of memory as indicative of a defence of thoughtless prejudice, but now memory had to be put firmly in its place under the sovereignty of reason: "In the works of many Enlightenment authors… one can speak of a genuine war between reason and memory that will be clearly decided in favour of reason and to the disadvantage of memory".[24] This, in turn, had implications for utopianism, for as in earlier periods, the utopian was clearly marked by the ideological and intellectual struggles of the time. Thus rationalist themes in utopias began to emerge (Bacon's *New Atlantis* comes to mind), and against it the critique of "abstract speculation", which looked to the resources of tradition and memory as a bulwark (as in Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution), and generated its own utopian visions in the process.

In reality all points of the ideological spectrum had recourse to the resources of historical memory.[25] Liberal constitutionalism, for example, in both America and France drew on the classicism of antiquity in their attempts to reshape political institutions. Maurice Halbwachs in one of his explorations of "collective memory" analysed the way in which the new bourgeois functionaries in the French *ancien regime* had to acquire noble titles to associate themselves with the legitimating traditions of the old nobility – though their ultimate goal was the overcoming of this order: "In this way the new structure was elaborated in the shadow of the old… It is upon a foundation of remembrances that contemporary institutions were constructed".[26] It was this bourgeois reliance on the symbols and imagery of the past that exercised Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: Luther's adoption of the mask of St Paul, the Roundhead's use of the Old Testament in the English Civil War, The French Revolution's deployment of ancient Rome, and the 1848 revolutionaries appropriation of the French Revolution, all attemp-

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[24] Weinrich, *Lethe*, p. 73.

[25] Gregory Claeys brings out the immense complexity of themes and influences in British utopias of the eighteenth century in *Utopias of the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 1971.

[26] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 125.

ting to present a "new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language".[27] Significantly Marx uses the language of memory when he draws an analogy between the bourgeois rifling of the past and the acquisition of a new language, claiming that someone only acquires fluency in a new language when they cease to translate the new language back into their old tongue, when, therefore, this person "forgets his native tongue".[28] The proletariat in their coming revolution cannot follow the lead of the bourgeoisie in this respect, for "the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future".[29]

Religious memory provided a particularly powerful source of utopian vision. A notable example is the impact of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563). The heart of this historical and apocalyptic work, which gained the popular title of "Foxe's Book of Martyrs", gave graphic accounts of the torments and agonising deaths of English and Scottish Protestants, particularly during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, accounts augmented by harrowing woodcut drawings of these events, which greatly added to the popular appeal of the book. This work, frequently re-published (including in cheap instalments) over the subsequent centuries, became deeply embedded in the Protestant imagination, not only in England, where it made a powerful contribution to a sense of English identity, but, following the accession of the Scottish King James to the English throne in 1603, to a sense of a British identity, defined in contradistinction to European Catholicism.[30] One scholar has even argued that "virtually all English utopian thought prior to 1660, and even much utopian thought prior to 1800, found its bedrock in John Foxe"[31], and notes, for example, that the only non-scriptural citation in the work of the radical Digger, Winstanley, is Foxe. There is a certain irony here in that,

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[27] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 11 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), p. 104.

[28] *Ibidem*.

[29] *Ibidem*, p. 106.

[30] See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 285; also Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: 1992), pp. 25-28.

[31] Arthur Williamson, "Review of Robert Applebaum, *Literature and Utopian Politics in Seventeenth-Century England*", H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews, October 2003. URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=215951070961366.

according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest pejorative use of the word utopia in English appears in Foxe's "Book of Martyrs"![32]

Some valuable reflections on the theme of this paper can be found in Danièl Hervieu-Léger's 1993 work *La Religion pour Mémoire* (published in English in 2000 as *Religion as a Chain of Memory*). Hervieu-Léger's sensitivity to the complex historical and spatial patterns of religious belief and behaviour makes her unwilling to try and find some universal concept of transcendental belief, such as the sacred, to unite such diversity. But nor is she willing to simply fall back on a simple description of this plethora of material. Instead she focuses on the process of religious belief, the way people believe, and in particular the basis of legitimation of those beliefs. The fundamental legitimating factor for Hervieu-Léger is a memory-based tradition. This understanding of religion connects back to ancient conceptions of *religio*. She posits a "chain of belief",[33] a form of collective memory linking generations of believers into a self-conscious community. This need not become a conservative backward-looking process, for religious innovation can be achieved through developing a utopianism grounded in, but not subordinated to, the dynamic historic traditions of a religion:

> Utopia serves to create in a renewed way an alternative imagined continuity: a continuity reaching back further than the one that suits the social conventions of the present, a continuity which reaches more nearly the foundation that feeds the consciousness of the chain, a continuity with a past that is blessed and beneficent, and which stands in opposition to the misfortunes, the dangers and the uncertainties of the present.[34]

The problem for Hervieu-Léger is that long-term economic, technological, social and cultural changes have undermined "societies of memory" and

[32] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, vol. 29 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p. 370 ("I do not… think, that… there is any such fourth place of Purgatory at all (unless it be in M. Mores Utopia)"). I am grateful to an unpublished paper by Toby Widdicombe for this reference.

[33] Danièl Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 123.

[34] *Ibidem*, pp. 144-145.

therefore threaten the very oxygen of chains of belief.[35] Her hope lies in "attempts… to remobilize and recreate memory"[36] in the utopian space still available in modern societies.

Historically there has always been a plurality of memory communities. This has been both a strength and a weakness. The collective memory of groups enabled people to transcend particularity in the name of particularity – individuals were integrated by *our* memory. Nation building rested on this capacity. The obvious dangers in this process can be seen by returning to our earlier John Foxe example. The shared memory of Protestant martyrdom played well in predominantly Protestant England, Scotland and Wales, but with the coerced integration of overwhelmingly Catholic Ireland into the United Kingdom, the integrated Protestant memory of the larger island not only found little resonance in the smaller, but was experienced as deeply oppressive. The results are well known – centuries of conflict, and, given the partial success of the Reformation in the north of the island, the partition of Ireland and ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland. There is also an important ethical question here – do the ethical claims of members of our own community override those of non-members? Contemporary defenders of liberal nationalism, such as David Miller, answer this question in the affirmative – when one has to choose between helping members and non-members, members have a priority.[37] Avishai Margalit in *The Ethics of Memory* tackles this problem in an interesting manner. He distinguishes thick relations between individuals from thin relations, and essentially grounds the distinction in the presence or absence of collective memory. Thick relations are between group members, and "memory is the cement that holds thick relations together".[38] Thin relations on the other hand are between less immediately related individuals – individuals who do not have a genuinely shared memory. On this basis, Margalit determines that thick relations are the realm of ethics, and thin relations the realm of morality: "morality is long on geography and short on memory. Ethics is typically short on geography and long on me-

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 123.
[36] *Ibidem*, p. 143.
[37] David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).
[38] Avishai Margalit, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

mory".[39] This is a potentially useful distinction in that it recognises the different types of obligation involved in dealing with differing relationships, nor does it *necessarily* imply a hierarchy of obligations, with the ethical trumping the moral in hard cases. I stress *necessarily* because Margalit himself, in deploying this distinction does end up with a position not dissimilar to Miller's, in that he argues that when confronted with two people drowning, one of which is one's wife, one's "obligation… is not to be impartial", but rather to save one's wife.[40] He is clearly aware of problems with this stance, since he adds: "picking between the two, rather than choosing his wife, might be justified", but he continues, "it would be ethically cursed",[41] which doesn't sound like a contest of equals.

For Margalit morality is couched in principles, but ethics "depends on comparisons to paradigmatic cases"[42]. Significantly he turns to the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan as a paradigmatic story of an Ethically reprehensible absence of care for neighbours, and of a moral act from a stranger. In this respect Margalit signals an undoubted trend in modern social and political thought – a trend I have discussed elsewhere under the term post-secularism – that is the wish to reconfigure the relationship between the religious and the secular which whilst defending the achievements of the secular wishes to develop a more nuanced approach to the religious.

The theme of forgetting has a relevance to these issues. The secular privatisation of religion has to say the least made religion somewhat of a public embarrassment. Richard Rorty's defence of Jeffersonian secularism gives a sense of the climate of pressure surrounding religion in the West. Public discussion of religion, he argues, violates the liberal deal between the Enlightenment and religion, and threatens to contaminate the inclusive conversations of a liberal society. "The main reason religion needs to be privatised is that… it is a conversation-stopper". To provide, what he considers, an analogous example he cites the hypothetical case of a person in a gathering of professionals who suddenly says: "Reading pornography is about the only pleasure I get out of life these days"; 'the ensuing silence' Rorty comments

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[39] *Ibidem*.

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 88.

[41] *Ibidem*.

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 38.

"masks the group's inclination to say, 'So what? We weren't discussing your private life; we were discussing public policy. Don't bother us with matters that are not our concern'".[43] In this sort of context it is perhaps not surprising that religion becomes marginalised to the point of invisibility in the public realm. An interesting example is provided by Charles Taylor's essay "A Catholic Modernity?". Taylor, a long-standing Roman Catholic, in the preamble to this piece, says that he is going to discuss "some issues that have been at the center of my concern for decades" but, he continues: "they have been reflected in my philosophical work, but not in the same form as I raise them this afternoon, because of the nature of philosophical discourse (as I see it, anyway), which has to try to persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments".[44] In other words philosophical discussion in the public realm has had to strip itself of any religious particularity to count as proper discourse. It is as if there has been a form of repressive forgetting of religion in the public realm; perhaps the post-secular turn is a return of the repressed?

[43] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin 1999), p. 171.

[44] Charles Taylor, 'A Catholic Modernity?', in James L. Heft (ed), *A Catholic Modernity?* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1999.