

SECULARISM

The Hidden Origins
of Disbelief

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One:

Issues in Secularism and Culture

In this chapter we begin our exploration of the secular mind and how it has placed itself beyond any discourse of the spirit in secularism's overarching cultural dominance. The word 'spiritual' is broadly rejected by the secular mind, and in secular Western culture, permitted only to poets whose aesthetic vocabulary requires the use of old-fashioned and vaguely provocative terms. However, at least a place-holder definition of spirituality is required here, so we start by saying that it is simply to do with a *profound connectedness*. Crucial to the understanding of spirituality is the idea that it is multiple, not one; that there exists spiritual difference, spiritual pluralism, a variety of spiritual impulse. Its detailed articulation is kept for Chapter Two, and in Chapter Three we will show how it also delineated through the manifestation of its opposite: a debilitating sense of alienation.

We are particularly interested to show here how contemporary Western culture reflects the assumptions, the shibboleths, of secularism. A shibboleth is a culturally received but unexamined assumption that is both a requirement of membership and outmoded: the group clings to it for identity but forgets its original meaning. Professor Mike Tucker of Brighton University puts it well:

ours is the first culture to proclaim with hubristic certainty that history and politics together constitute the sole ground of our being, and that any sense of the 'vertical' or 'cosmic' dimension in life is but a reactionary remnant from the irrationalities of pre-Enlightenment thought.¹

Tucker is right about politics: it is secularism's first cultural reality, and we will show that political thinkers, in particular Marx, are amongst the prime architects of the secular mind. Marx effectively denied the spiritual or religious interiority of the mind when he said of the human essence: 'In its reality it is the ensemble of the social

relations.² We can call this strand of thought a *social* secularism. Tucker is also right to highlight the Enlightenment as the point in Western development that led to the secular mind. We suggest that contemporary Western culture is born out of a trauma which came to a head in the Enlightenment, one that has made words like 'spiritual' problematic. We will also explore psychology in this chapter as a key part of the secular mind, a *psychological* secularism. We also have new insights from it to bear on our problem here, one of which is the idea of 'cathexis', which the Chambers dictionary defines as 'a charge of mental energy attached to an idea or object'. Social secularism, due to Marx, and psychological secularism, due to Freud, have a third and over-riding partner: scientific secularism. The association of secularism with science goes deep: the conventional view is that the mechanistic view of the universe originating in Newton – once applied to the world of living things through Darwinism – made secularism inevitable. This is the greatest shibboleth of the secular mind.

The words 'religion' and 'spirituality' have different emotional charges for different groups. For the committed secularist the word 'religion' represents everything they reject, while 'spiritual' may be just as bad or merely cause embarrassment. For the committed religionist the word 'religion' conveys the deepest, best and most important aspects of their life and community. However the word 'spiritual' may be suspect, and is often used to dismiss narcissistic New Age self-preoccupation. For the New Ager, 'religion' is often the bathwater they reject in favour of the baby of 'spirituality'. Hence, because of these cultural complexities, we cannot simply adopt the formula 'religion bad, spiritual good', which some commentators use. Instead a critical approach is taken which stresses that both organised religion and self-directed spirituality answer deep and genuine human needs, but not avoiding criticism of either where justified.

The question in this chapter is not so much *why* secularism dominates contemporary culture – that question is pursued over the following chapters – but *how* it does so. This chapter provides an anatomy of the secular mind as it is currently portrayed through aspects of culture that include the arts, science, philosophy, language, psychology and neurophysiology. However the attack, for such it is, is only against the *shibboleths* of secularism, its negative and weak points, its unthinking dismissal of the spiritual. Its strengths – which undergo regular re-evaluation and testing in democratic societies – include the core values of pluralism and democratic freedoms forged

in the Enlightenment. It is easy to be cynical about these, especially when a simplistic attempt to impose them on others devalues their currency, but the easy route of cynicism is not taken here.

1.1 Secularism, Atheism and Scientism

Secularism, atheism and scientism are related ideas that are central to the modern mind, and only to some degree mitigated within the cluster of ideas known as 'postmodernism'. Their presence within mainstream Western culture represents the barrier to the spiritual life. 'Secularism' as a term became significant in the mid-nineteenth century, with the establishment of the National Secular Society in the UK, along with many grass-roots organisations affiliated to it. These secular societies were anticlerical, anti-religious and mostly working-class (though often led by middle-class activists and thinkers). Similar forces were at work in the US at this period, though its history of non-conformist religiosity meant that the debates played out differently there.

'Atheism' is a term that became important in Europe in the seventeenth century as a term of the utmost censure, but has lost its capacity to shock in twenty-first century Western culture. 'Scientism' means a narrowly scientific world-view, one which insists on empirical science as the sole arbiter of meaning. We will explore the history of scientism in some detail, in order to show that while science and religion are not at all incompatible, *scientism* is an implacable opponent of spirituality and religion. We can understand the term 'secularism' to include atheism, scientism and also what we understand by humanism, a term indicating the Enlightenment re-orientation away from religion towards human-centred values. For the committed secularist the secular world-view is hard to analyse from the vantage point of complete immersion: hence a considerable historical exposition is required. For the committed religionist secularism simply stands for a limiting cultural milieu that might be a mild irritant, or, in the case of traditional Jews, Christians and Moslems, a threat to an entire way of life. For the less thoughtful New Ager the question might be: what secularism? This is because New Agers are not taken seriously enough by secularist thinkers to be much criticised, and also because New Agers live in a cultural bubble of their own. The very term implies and encourages an ignorance of previous ages, including recent history, preferring instead to imagine a utopian near-future.

Secularism contains a spectrum of views, from a benign tolerance

of religion to what we can call a *vituperative* atheism – that is an atheism which is unexpectedly angry. The tolerant end of the spectrum expresses itself in the democratic rights to self-expression and freedom of worship. The vituperative end of the spectrum, while upholding those rights as inalienable, avails itself of those rights to shower contempt upon old religion, indignant that such ‘irrationalities’ survive into the modern era.

Secularism and Statehood

Since the end of the cold war and the end of the capitalist-communist divide as the defining global schism, a new ideological battleground has emerged: between the West and Islamic fundamentalism. This is presented as the struggle between the ideologies of the secular state and the ideologies of the *presecular* state: between democracy and ‘theocracy’. Communist countries used to represent the earlier ideological ‘other’ to secular Western democracies, but with the collapse of the old Soviet Union the spreading adoption of democracy and capitalism is eroding that contrast: it is the Islamic world that has come into sharp relief now as the ‘other’. Its theocratic objections to the twin secular gods of democracy and capitalism are nowhere understood in the secular world, as the attempt by the US to impose them on Iraq demonstrated.

The status and involvement of a presecular religion with its secular government varies, and the different ways in which the US, Britain, France and Turkey have approached this is instructive. The US has constitutionally separated state and religion, deriving this approach from its history as a haven for the non-conformist of all persuasions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the surface the UK may look like the US in all practical applications of the law, but never got round to the legal separation of church and state (known formally as disestablishment). In fact this remains one of the founding goals of the Secular Society of Great Britain, as we shall see.

The Guardian newspaper (itself a useful benchmark of contemporary secularism) revealed in a 2006 poll that 63% of the British people are not religious at all.³ But statistics for the year 2001 suggest that 79% of Americans, 72% of Britons, and 70% of Canadians are nominally or fully Christians.⁴ Clearly such statistics are unreliable indicators of the extent of secularism, relying on simplistic questions to elicit responses. In addition these figures hide very big differences in the history and role of Christianity in each nation. In the US election year of 2004, liberal US commentators grumbled that George W. Bush

(the incumbent Republican contender) was running a theocracy, and that it was easier for candidates to profess 'freethinking' tendencies at the founding of America. British journalist Alexander Chancellor suggested that 'In Britain, flaunting religious faith is a political liability; in America, it is a political necessity.' His article, in *The Guardian*, was a tongue in cheek appeal to the Democrat candidate, John Kerry, to talk up his religious credentials.⁵ The *Guardian* represents the contradictions of secular left-wing Britain: it wanted to see a Democrat victory in the US election, but was ambivalent on the necessity for Kerry to speak on religion.

France's revolt against religion, in the Revolution of 1789, was more violent and bitter than in most other European countries, but since then it has become host to one of the largest Muslim populations in Europe. These factors combine to make the issue of the headscarf worn by Muslim women a site of bitter contention, leading to attempts at legislation to ban its wearing by school pupils that are mostly absent in the UK and the US by comparison. (The ban finally entered French law in 2004.)

Turkey's recent history represents a struggle between a 90% Muslim population and its secular government, a balancing act that has been fraught with difficulties since its inception by Atatürk in the 1920s. The wearing of the Muslim headscarf has been equally a difficult issue for Turkey, particularly within the Universities where thousands of students have been banned for wearing it. However a vital difference between Turkey and Iraq remains: Turkey is America's model for a secular Islamic state, but Turkey's secularism was not imposed by military force from outside. Rather it was the result of a visionary Turkish leader working within a Europe-oriented political climate (which culminated in 2005 in the acceptance of its application to join the European Union).

The secular world guarantees the right to private religious beliefs and spiritual practices, and to private gatherings to celebrate shared ritual. It also guarantees the right to express disbelief and even hostility to religion, for example a 2001 letter to a British academic journal was headed 'In favour of religious hatred', and turned out to be a plea from an Oxford chemist to encourage the hatred of religion itself (perhaps now less acceptable since the passing of new British legislation on religion).⁶ It was a reaction to the events of 11 September. There is no doubt that Peter Atkins, the author of this letter, speaks for a small, but vocal minority in the Western world, a group that we have characterised with the term 'vituperative atheist'. A number of scientists fall into this camp, along with other

liberals. One from the literary world is Gore Vidal (prolific American novelist, playwright and essayist), who says for example 'I favour an all-out war on the monotheists', and 'The great unmentionable evil at the centre of our culture is monotheism.' Such writers have a range of motives for their attacks on religion, but one is tempted to wonder at the extremity of their language, given the muted *public* face of religion prior to 11 September. (Speculation that vituperative atheism is a reaction to a collective experience well in the past is presented in section 3.3, *The Spiritual Wounds of the West*.)

Secularism in the Twentieth Century

The National Secular Society is an organisation explicitly formed to promote and protect secularism in Britain (the American equivalent is the Council for Secular Humanism). Charles Bradlaugh, a notorious atheist of the Victorian period, helped to establish the National Secular Society in 1866 as an organisation opposed to Christian dogma. Its present General Principles are as follows:

Secularism affirms that this life is the only one of which we have any knowledge and human effort should be directed wholly towards its improvement.

Affirming that morality is social in origin and application, Secularism aims at promoting the happiness and well-being of mankind. Secularism demands the complete separation of Church and State and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations.

Secularism affirms that progress is possible only on the basis of equal freedom of speech and publication; that the free criticism of institutions and ideas is essential to a civilised state.

It asserts that supernaturalism is based upon ignorance and assails it as the historic enemy of progress.

It seeks to spread education, to promote the fraternity of all peoples as a means of advancing universal peace to further common cultural interests and to develop the freedom and dignity of mankind.

To remove an impediment to these objectives, we demand the complete separation of Church and State and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations.⁷

In fact, the goals of the National Secular Society represent much that is laudable, and a rejection, not of the spiritual life as we will broadly paint it, but of a particular culturally embodied form of a particular religion – Christianity – in a particular country, with

an alleged adherence to an afterlife and a narrow conception of the supernatural. Gore Vidal is more outspoken on the subject of religion:

Now to the root of the matter. The great unmentionable evil at the centre of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three antihuman religions have evolved – Judaism, Christianity, Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal – God is the omnipotent father – hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates. The sky-god is a jealous god, of course. He requires total obedience from everyone on earth, as he is in place not for just one tribe but for all creation. Those who would reject him must be converted or killed for their own good. Ultimately, totalitarianism is the only sort of politics that can truly serve the sky-god's purpose.⁸

Vidal is explicitly attacking *monotheism*, rather than religion in general, and associating it with all that is totalitarian in Western society. Polly Toynbee, a British journalist with an attitude to religion comparable to Vidal's, writes on current affairs in the *Guardian*, and is a supporter of the National Secular Society. The following is a typical quote from her:

The only good religion is a moribund religion: only when the faithful are weak are they tolerant and peaceful. The horrible history of Christianity shows that whenever religion grabs temporal power it turns lethal. Those who believe theirs is the only way, truth and light will kill to create their heavens on earth if they get the chance. Tolerance only thrives when religion is banished to the private sphere.⁹

Toynbee's analysis is similar to that of Marx, but in the intervening century and a half it seems that our contact with the East has not brought any counter-examples into contemporary consciousness. To say that 'whenever religion grabs temporal power it turns lethal', is to have at one's disposal only one example: monotheism. The counter-examples of Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism as mostly non-lethal are rarely commented upon. Nor do examples of absolutism and lethal *temporal* power quite unrelated to religion seem to change the equation: it is a common proposition that far more have died in the name of Marxism than in the name of religion. The US academic R. J. Rummel estimates that 110 million citizens were murdered by their own communist regimes

so far, excluding those who died in war.¹⁰ After the publication of new biographies of Mao Tse-Tung, Rummel has revised the figure upwards to include the millions who died in the Great Famine of 1958-1961, because these now seem clearly avoidable. Having said all this it is clear that the National Secular Society, Vidal and Toynbee are all defending an essential principle, established in the Enlightenment and enshrined in the US Constitution: that religion should be separated from state, that it rightly belongs to the private sphere. Their arguments are atheist and secular, but our argument is from a spiritual perspective: given the variety of spiritual impulse that we will be arguing for the existence of, how could any single state religion provide for that? The secular framework of human rights provides exactly the guarantees of freedom necessary for spiritual pluralism and the celebration of spiritual difference; it is contemporary *culture* that promotes scepticism of it.

Scientism

Newton, effectively the founder of modern science, was a deeply religious man. So is Sir John Polkinghorne, a long-time quantum physicist at Cambridge, more recently an ordained Anglican priest and recipient in 2002 of the million-dollar Templeton prize for the advancement of religion. We shall argue that religion (when interpreted more broadly than a narrow Christian monotheism) and science are not contradictory, as these two examples (and dozens more amongst prominent scientists) show. The perceived hostility is due to nothing in science itself, but to what we are calling 'scientism' – the attempted arrogation to science of all domains of human experience. Scientism is a cluster of issues argued for very often by those who don't understand the science, though also by trained scientists who don't understand religion (we look at the examples of Daniel Dennett, Francis Crick and Richard Dawkins in section 3.1.1 *Science and the Century of Alienation*).

A key feature of scientism includes a rejection of the subjective, emotional and spiritual dimensions of experience and a reduction of values to *usefulness*. 'What Use is Religion?' is the title of an essay by biologist Richard Dawkins in the *Humanist* (a journal published by the Council for Secular Humanism in the US).¹¹ Dawkins considers that a medieval cathedral for example is an 'affront to Darwinism', in that it does nothing to ensure the survival of the species, the *only* criteria for action he will allow. This form of reductionism – a diminishing of criteria to the simplest and most basic – works well as a tool in science, but becomes an absurdity when applied to the breadth of

human experience. The postmodernist philosopher Lyotard regrets 'performativity' as the driving force in society, meaning the continued appeal to a narrow material usefulness.¹² Dawkins's 'Darwinian performativity' must be the ultimate example of this.

Scientism as a world-view says that we are analytical beings (interested only in the *explanations* of things), and denies that we are feeling beings, emotional beings, communal beings, aesthetic beings and spiritual beings (and why should even this list be exhaustive?). We shall explore this diminishing of self; also the 'psychologising' of self (through analytical psychology) and the 'neurologising' of self (through brain science). *Science* however is not the issue: neither experimental science nor its Pandora's Box of technological fallout is what is opposed here, rather it is the curious habit within the last three hundred years of taking science as the first arbiter and sole mirror of human nature.

In the 1920s Carl Gustav Jung visited New Mexico and reported the following revelation in his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

I asked him [a Pueblo Indian] why he thought the whites were all mad.

'They say that they think with their heads', he replied.

'Why of course. What do you think with?' I asked him in surprise.

'We think here', he said, indicating his heart.

I fell into a long meditation. For the first time in my life, so it seemed to me, someone had drawn for me a picture of the real white man.¹³

Jung was propelled by this into a long post-colonial reverie about the Western subjugation of native peoples by Christianity (going back to Roman times), and on the imbalance within the 'white man': the dominance of his intellectual function. It is only recently however that new ideas of 'emotional intelligence' or EQ are emerging. These have been popularised by Daniel Goleman¹⁴ and others as an adjunct to intelligence quotient (IQ). Further still, authors Dana Zohar and Brian Marshall are suggesting that we take 'spiritual intelligence' or SQ seriously.¹⁵ This debate, which is playing out in business management (Zohar and Marshall are business consultants when they are not Oxford academics), points to what we will identify as a 'cultural autism' of the West: a preoccupation with the intellect at the expense of feeling. (Business culture is not typical of the mainstream however.) Thomas Berry, a Roman Catholic theologian

and environmental thinker, considers that ‘we find ourselves in an autistic situation’ that cuts Western people off from Nature.¹⁵

We are suggesting that Western culture is over-intellectualised, to the point of it suffering a mild Asperger’s syndrome. This is a point on what is known as the autism spectrum, a range of conditions where a person cannot emotionally engage with another. Hence we will use the somewhat colourful expression ‘cultural autism’ to flag up the aspect of Western culture which is rationalistic, reductionistic and leads to what is known as scientism – the tendency to explain away emotion and spirituality in mechanistic, often Darwinian terms.

1.2 *Secularism and Contemporary Culture*

Given the large proportion of the population reckoned to be Christian in the US and the UK, and the growing realisation that the rest of the world is more religious still, why the perception that we live in an intensely secular society? The answer is culture. It is the outpourings of Western culture – film, TV, radio, newspapers, novels, theatre and so on – that portray an unrelentingly secular world, and which up to relatively recently have ignored the religiousness of the non-Western majority of the globe. Of course there are many interesting exceptions, but they prove the rule both in their scarcity and in the secular assumptions that usually frame them. Most media have a ‘God slot’, but these effectively comprise a media ghetto echoing the cultural ghetto that religion occupies. The same holds for ‘God channels’ – televangelism. Contemporary Western culture is intensely secular when compared to either seventeenth century or earlier Western culture, or, for example, to the Islamic world. Whatever the true picture of religion in Western society, its scarce and sceptical portrayal in Western culture creates the impression of an intensely secular worldview. (Muslims for example must form their impression of Western society to a large extent on this basis, so it is not surprising that the more religious are led to reject it outright.) That Western culture largely rejects religion is clear, but what makes culture worth examining in detail in this respect is its potential for articulating the contours of that rejection.

We now look at four examples from recent Western culture: a novel by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*; a film, *Monty Python’s The Life of Brian*; an episode of a US TV series *The Simpsons*; and another novel, *Thinks . . .* by David Lodge. *Nausea* was first published in 1938, much earlier

than the other examples, and can be considered as being amongst the first truly atheistic novels of the twentieth century, describing an alienation prefigured in more romantic writers such as Thomas Hardy, John Steinbeck and C.S. Forester. The sense of alienation appears in their novels as a vague nihilism, in fictional characters that would have been at home in the nineteenth century, whereas Sartre's anti-hero, Antoine Roquentin, is a truly twentieth-century invention. *The Life of Brian* (1979) is a satire on the life of Jesus, and attempts to deal with the issue of religious gullibility, as a growing crowd of followers gather round the unlikely figure of confused Jewish revolutionary Brian. In an episode of *The Simpsons* called 'The Joy of Sect' (1998), issues of religious groups such as the Heaven's Gate cult, whose members committed mass suicide in 1997, are explored. Finally we look at a twenty-first century novel, David Lodge's *Thinks . . .*, which explores a very contemporary topic, cognitive science, and its relation to the arts.

Sartre's *Nausea*

Nausea was Jean-Paul Sartre's first novel, started in 1930. It conveys a secularism that is perhaps typically and existentially French. It was enormously influential, and its existential legacy is seen after WW2 as far afield as in the plays of Harold Pinter, in novels like *American Psycho* (Bret Easton Ellis), or the nature writings of Annie Dillard. While 'The Joy of Sect' and *Monty Python and the Life of Brian* show a secular concern with the spiritual that is shallow and driven by a quick eye for the comic, *Nausea* is atheist to the core, and driven by quite different agendas.

Sartre's existentialism lived within his philosophy alongside an equally demanding partner: Marxism. We shall see that the cold atheism of Sartre was heralded in Marx nearly a hundred years previous, and from that perspective *Nausea* is not so radical. Nevertheless no work in fiction before *Nausea* had told the world what the future would look like, stripped of all the values of the past except one: honesty. (These values were agonised over but not yet completely abandoned by Nietzsche for example.) This was a new honesty however, deriving philosophically from the principles of phenomenology, elevated by Heidegger as *authenticity*, and in keeping with the clinical nature of scientific enquiry. This honesty was an imperative to oneself, and completely incompatible with the prescriptive morality of religion, at least as it was handed down in the West. Sartre himself grew up without a father, and, like many European intellectuals and artists of his time, was traumatised by

WW1, leading to a complete revolt against the traditions of authority and power that had started it. He saw only hypocrisy in the institutions and ideals of his father's generation, and became part of the wholesale revolt against them.

Sartre's *Nausea* is permeated with an atheism that neither engages with religion, nor even takes the time to dismiss it: the question simply isn't on the horizon. Yet, paradoxically, the novel contains within it reflections and experiences that touch directly on the mystical. In reality, the factor that led to its resonances with the spiritual life was the taking of a hallucinogenic drug. Sartre was persuaded in 1935 by a doctor friend, working in a sanatorium for the mentally ill, to inject himself with mescaline.¹⁶ Sartre had a bad trip on the drug, out of which he completed *Nausea*, and in this experience anticipated Aldous Huxley's famous experiments by two decades. Huxley popularised the possible link between drugs and mystical experience in his novel *The Doors of Perception*, but few have noticed this link in *Nausea*, couched as it is in the language, familiar to us now, of existentialism. What marks the novel as so significant for the spiritual life of the twentieth century is that it presents us with an almost pathological *inversion* of mysticism, an indictment both of the secular mindset and of the use of drugs for spiritual purposes. In this passage its protagonist finds himself 'stranded in the present':

I looked anxiously around me: the present, nothing but the present. Light and solid pieces of furniture, encrusted in their present, a table, a bed, a wardrobe with a mirror and me. The true nature of the present revealed itself: it was that which exists, and all that which was not present did not exist. The past did not exist. Not at all, neither in things nor even in my thoughts. True, I had realised a long time before that my past had escaped me. But until then I had believed that it had simply gone out of my range.¹⁷

The quality of being in the present, though never part of mainstream religious heritage, is nevertheless a central theme in the writings of the world's mystics, and is always presented, firstly as a difficult goal to attain, and secondly as blissful. It is difficult because of the workings of the mind, which is continuously active in the sites of past and future (as memory and imagination). Sartre's experience with mescaline is typical in that it, and many other psychotropic substances, has the effect in a few moments that years of meditation are designed to bring about: the stilling of the mind and the entering

into the silence of the present moment. The novel reaches a climax when its protagonist, Roquentin, sits on a park bench and is faced by the terrifying 'nowness' or 'suchness' of the trees, in particular the root of a chestnut tree. There are many parallels in mystical writing conveying mystical realisation in such settings, and many attempts to convey in writing the profundity of that moment. The term 'tathata' is used in Buddhism for example to convey this spiritual quality in moments of attention to ordinary things, moments that are sought after, and usually the product of a committed spiritual practice (meditation). Sartre gives us potentially one of the greatest descriptions of that moment in Western mystical literature, except that is presented to us as merely pathological and the existential antithesis to mysticism.

That Sartre's psychical response to mescaline was to produce a bad trip, where Huxley's generally produced good trips, can be speculated upon. What is interesting is that despite the fact that Sartre had read the mystics (according to Simone de Beauvoir)¹⁸ he could not make the link that Huxley did between his experience on drugs and that of the mystics, perhaps solely because of its unpleasantness. Yet of the two it is Sartre that has had a profound impact on Western thought, Huxley variously dismissed as a snob or romantic.

Monty Python and the Life of Brian

The film *Monty Python and the Life of Brian* was made in 1979, directed by Terry Jones and co-written by Graham Chapman and John Cleese. It was made exactly one hundred years after Dostoyevsky wrote his classic novel *Brothers Karamazov* in which he included a story about Jesus returning in the time of the Spanish Inquisition and being crucified again. Whereas Dostoyevsky was genuinely concerned to probe the spiritual realities behind both Jesus and the Inquisition, the Monty Python film is pure satire. It starts with Brian's mother, Mrs Cohen, receiving three unexpected guests at the birthplace of her son in a stable: the Wise Men bringing their gifts. These are promptly reclaimed when they realise that they should be paying homage at the stable over the road. Brian as a young adult and his mother are then seen listening to a sermon by Jesus where he tells the crowd: 'Blessed are the meek.' Getting bored, Mrs Cohen takes her son off to a stoning, and we follow the camera to Reg, leader of the Judean People's Front muttering sarcastically: 'Blessed is just about everyone with a vested interest in the status quo.' (This conforms to a popular Marxist dismissal of Jesus as failing to rise as revolutionary leader.)

The film continues in this satirical vein, targeting some typical

British institutions such as the Trades Unions and public school education, though its principle target is of course Christianity. Brian joins the Judean People's Front and is soon in trouble with the Roman authorities. The film at this point perfectly illustrates Freud's 'narcissism of minor difference': the Judean People's Front spends more time fighting its rivals, the People's Front of Judea, than the Romans.¹⁹ In a narrow escape Brian finds himself forced to preach to cover his identity, and mouths some trite religious platitudes. A crowd gathers, and despite his best efforts to get rid of them they follow him, with an apparently endless appetite for such instruction. The more he protests his incompetence as Messiah, the more the crowd adore him, leading up to this exchange, fondly etched into the memory of a generation that grew up with Monty Python:

Brian: I'm not the Messiah! Will you please listen? I am not the Messiah, do you understand?! Honestly!

Girl: Only the true Messiah denies His divinity.

Brian: What?! Well, what sort of chance does that give me? All right! I am the Messiah!

Followers: He is! He is the Messiah!

Brian: Now, fuck off!

[silence]

Arthur: How shall we fuck off, O Lord?

Britain at the time of the film's release was ripe for this gleeful, naughty irreligiousness, with only a few lone voices, such as broadcaster and journalist Malcolm Muggeridge voicing disapproval (he called it 'This squalid little film'). Its reception in the US was less enthusiastic, and screenings were picketed by religious groups. Its dominant theme, as we shall see with the 'The Joy of Sect', is of gullibility, and there is no doubt that the Monty Python team explored this with comic genius. It focuses on the weaknesses of followers rather than on the exploitativeness of leaders, its central secular assumption being that there can be no genuine 'seeking' or genuine relationship between spiritual aspirant and teacher. The makers of the film could not understand the offence given to people of Malcolm Muggeridge's generation or outlook, having in their own eyes merely tapped a rich vein of comic potential. The atheism implicit in the film is casual, unconsidered and culturally received: we can usefully call it a 'Monty Python atheism', in contrast to the vituperative atheism of Vidal, Atkins and Toynbee.

Other modern films have been made on the subject of Jesus, including *The Last Temptation of Christ* directed by Martin Scorsese,

1988. Such films take a more serious look at the phenomenon of a cult leader involving rather different, but still quintessentially secular, assumptions: that Jesus was or could or should have been a political leader, and that sex is a cure for all this nonsense. D. H. Lawrence wrote a short story called the *Escaped Cock* where a Jesus figure, surviving crucifixion, also wanders off and abandons pretensions at religious leadership in favour of sex. Jesus, as is the case with other founders of religion, becomes either the cultural property of a stagnant Church, or is the cultural property of secular revision with its Freudian or Marxist analysis.

'The Joy of Sect'

'The Joy of Sect' episode of *The Simpsons* responds specifically to the issue of religious cults, and involves the family joining up, signing over their property to a sect, and reduced to slave labour picking lima beans. In *The Simpsons* religion is generally examined through the character of Ned Flanders, the Simpsons' neighbour and born-again Christian. It is indicative of the mainstream cultural perception of the spiritual life in the US that religion is fundamentalist Christian, or there lies the only alternative: weird religious sects. For example, the Heaven's Gate cult members committed mass suicide in March 1997, in Del Mar, California. The 39 victims apparently believed they were going to join a starship hiding behind the Hale-Bopp comet, which was to carry them to a better life, to the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. The flying saucer in which the cult leader escapes in 'The Joy of Sect' may be a reference to this, or the story might have drawn on the cult of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (referenced via the 'Leader' in a Rolls Royce), or the Church of Scientology (referenced by 'brainwashing'). Scientology is a cult founded by science fiction author L. Ron Hubbard and, interestingly, actress Nancy Cartwright, voice of Bart Simpson, is known to be a Scientologist, which may have constrained the satire.

'The Joy of Sect' is typical of popular culture in its approach to the spiritual. Homer Simpson is not smart enough in the first place to resist the lure of the cult's promises, but on the other hand this does not mean he accepts the cult's spiritual premise either. In fact the cult's 'spirituality' is shown to be entirely bogus, and is used only as a device for exploitation. Homer is rescued when his more resourceful wife, Marge, offers him beer, which brings him to his senses. 'Beer' can be taken here as symbolic of the life of the senses, so the implication is that the spiritual, even if it were genuine, involves renunciation of the pleasures of the world. In short the programme, while ostensibly exploring 'issues' around cult membership, was

content to conform to two widely held secular shibboleths: firstly that cults peddle pseudo-spirituality for the sake of exploitation, and secondly that spirituality itself equates with self-denial.

Thinks . . .

Thinks . . . is a novel by David Lodge, Honorary Professor of Modern English Literature at Birmingham University. *Thinks . . .* is a 'two cultures' novel about consciousness, pitting male cognitive scientist Ralph Messenger against female creative writer Helen Reed. Their developing affair allows Lodge to examine the new claims of science to investigate consciousness, the field he believes to be traditionally the domain of the reflective arts such as literature. Helen resents Messenger's scientism: 'Hasn't science already appropriated enough of reality? Must it lay claim to the intangible invisible essential self as well?'²⁰ This is Lodge's basic secular assumption: that the 'intangible invisible essential self' is the 'province of the arts, especially literature, and most especially the novel.'²¹ Why is it not also the province of religion and spirituality? Lodge's novel updates the two cultures debate between science and the arts initiated by C.P. Snow in 1959, which are represented in the novel by a cognitive scientist known throughout by his surname, and a novelist known by her first name. Messenger is director of the Centre for Cognitive Science at a fictional British University, and Helen wonders whether the mirror-glass used for the walls of the Centre represents the vanity of cognitive scientists.²²

Of our four examples, Lodge's novel best charts the contemporary contours of the 'Guardian-reading' secular mind, including as it does a far-reaching investigation of the 'intangible invisible essential self', an investigation which cannot allow that this might be the domain of the *spiritual*. Roquentin in *Nausea* concludes that fame is his only possibility for an entry into eternity; so does Messenger in *Thinks . . .* 'Anyway, I hope to leave a permanent mark on the history of cognitive science before I go. Just as you must hope to do in literature. That's a kind of life after death. The only kind.'²³ Helen is a lapsed Roman Catholic, but religion is presented throughout the book in the most conventionally secular terms: as a massive mistake. In other words it shares with *Nausea* a now-classical casual atheism, one that was ground-breaking in the 1930s, but seemingly incontrovertible at the start of the twenty-first century, and which we can conveniently call 'Monty Python' atheism.

1.3 Philosophy and Secularism

There is no doubt that Western philosophy has contributed to shaping the secular mind. Sartre can be taken to represent the secularism of most twentieth-century philosophers, even when they belong to radically different schools of thought. But, when taking a longer view of the history of Western philosophy – on the alert to the possibility that earlier philosophers may have held far from secular views – it becomes obvious that philosophy in earlier times served deeply religious purposes. It will become a central issue in later chapters to explore how philosophy so shifted its ground within the modern period: this transition is crucial to the origins of the secular mind.

Western philosophy is considered to have three important periods: Ancient Greek, Scholastic, and Modern (which includes Postmodernism). In religious terms we could say that the Greek period is pre-Christian, the Scholastic is Christian and the Modern is post-Christian. We will develop over several chapters the idea that some Greek, Scholastic and early Modern philosophers were actually deeply spiritual thinkers, but whose spirituality was not easily accommodated within Christianity. We will term their spirituality ‘non-devotional’ (to be explained in detail in Chapter Two), and will suggest that it aligns itself better to Buddhism and other Eastern traditions, than to Christianity. Hence we adopt for some key Western philosophers this term: ‘the lost buddhas of the West.’

The term ‘Buddha’ was originally a generic one in India, meaning an ‘enlightened one’, and only gradually became exclusively associated with *the* Buddha. We are using the term ‘lost buddha’ for these philosophers to suggest two things: firstly that their spirituality is similar to the Buddha’s (though in no way derived from it), and secondly that they have become lost to Western history – particularly to the secular mind – as mere philosophers. The ‘lost buddhas of the West’ might include Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plotinus, Nicholas of Cusa, and, more controversially, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, and some of the German idealists. Not all of them by any stretch of the imagination rank with the Buddha, but the comparisons for Socrates and Plotinus hold well, and the others may be considered to be minor lost buddhas. Once we begin to see these philosophers in this light, we also see that many other philosophers share with them at least a nascent non-devotional spirituality, though lost to the secular viewpoint.

Ancient Greek philosophy, as our list of lost buddhas suggests,

was particularly strong in its non-devotional spirituality. In contrast the Scholastic period was located in a fervently devotional context, the pious mysticism of the late Middle Ages. The Modern period grew out of and rejected the devotional context, and hence it is also useful to say that Greek philosophy was not a theology (at least not in the Christian sense); during the Scholastic period philosophy *was* theology; and that subsequent to the Scholastic period theology and philosophy diverge. Theology becomes an intellectual ghetto, isolated from mainstream thought, a discourse that flies below the philosophical and cultural radar of the West. Scholastic philosophy is usually ignored by the secular mind: indeed the period from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries is dismissed as philosophically barren, for example by Bertrand Russell. For the atheist, rationalist secularist the arrival of the Enlightenment philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries heralds the end of religion and the dawn of the age of reason. We shall attempt to show that this is a fiction: one of the shibboleths of the secular mind. Most of the philosophers of this period were deeply religious.

The fact that we will need to turn to the East to provide us with a suitable vocabulary for a non-devotional spirituality gives rise to the question: what about Eastern philosophy? Does it have a parallel development leading to the modern era? No, is the simple answer, and perhaps even simpler is the proposition that the East has no philosophy at all, not in the modern Western sense at least. This is to say that it has never been secularised, either in the Greek style or in the modern/postmodern idiom, until Western influence began to dominate. Yet the term 'Eastern philosophy' is a common one and is normally assumed to include Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian writings. What separates by far the bulk of it from Western philosophy however is that, like the Scholastic writings, Eastern philosophy is always embedded in a religion, and its proponents have been practitioners of that religion. *Eastern 'philosophy' is nearly always grounded in spiritual practice.*

The historical antipathy between the Christian theological mind and the Greek philosophical mind is an important factor in all of Western history: this can be understood as a creative tension between the *Hebraic* (Judaeo-Christian) and the *Hellenic*, one that forged the Western mind. It is also the tension between a largely devotional monotheistic spirituality and a non-devotional, potentially esoteric and pluralistic spirituality. We can take two terrible murders as iconic of this division: the first of Hypatia in 415 CE and the second of Giordano Bruno in 1600 CE. Hypatia was the head of a Neoplatonist

school in Alexandria, famous for her learning and also her beauty, but was horribly murdered by a fanatical Christian mob that associated learning and science with 'paganism'. The subsidiary daughter library of the great Library of Alexandria in the Temple of Sarapis had already been sacked by such mobs in 391 CE. (Alexandria went into decline as a centre of scholarly activity with the death of Hypatia and the loss of the Library.) Christian mobs were responsible for vandalism against art as well: countless art treasures of the ancient world were defaced or destroyed by the early Christians, including many of the sculptures of the Parthenon (this is an issue of *iconoclasm*, to be dealt with later on).

Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in the year 1600 by a system that had formalised the early Christian mob violence: the Inquisition. His crime, like Hypatia's, was to be interested in what we will call the esoteric (in the ancient world science and the esoteric were intermingled). His philosophy would be unrecognisable to modern-day philosophers, but his free-thinking and dreadful fate has made him a hero to many secularists who reject religion. That Christianity should have developed an early and ongoing visceral distrust of the scientist/philosopher/intellectual is a crucial factor in Christianity's downfall, as we shall demonstrate. But, we will suggest that the murders of Hypatia and Bruno are symptomatic of the antipathy of Christianity not so much to philosophy and science as to *non-devotional spirituality*.

In the modern / postmodern period there emerges a consistent theme at the heart of what is otherwise a bewildering array of speculative systems. Philosophy in the Scholastic period was to the glory of 'God' and to the glory of the earthly reflection of his divinity, as shown in the divine order of Nature and society. Philosophy in the modern / postmodern period has increasingly taken on the role of subversion: to challenge the accepted order, to question the divine origin of laws, to question the traditional power structures of society and to question the very roots of such assumptions in language itself. If Kant begins the dismantling of the certainties that were carried through into the Enlightenment from the Scholastic era; if Nietzsche takes a hammer to these fractured structures (in his own words he 'philosophises with a hammer'); then twentieth-century philosophers appear to be grinding the rubble into ever smaller fragments. The progressive dismantling of the older structures of knowledge and power leaves a 'flatland' of postmodern thought (as it is often claimed). But something of vital importance has been lost in this trajectory: the spiritual.

1.4 The Role of Language

The role of language in spiritual life is complex. Three aspects are briefly touched upon here: first the universal insight of the mystics that the essence of the spiritual life is located *beyond* language; second, that philosophy has traditionally over-emphasised the intellect as a *linguistic* entity (culminating in what is known as the ‘linguistic turn’); and third, the way in which words take on a life of their own.

To mention again the ‘mystics’ at this point is to use a word with different connotations for different groups. For the secularist it has little currency; for the religionist it may signify the core of their religion or alternatively a largely heretical group of non-conformists; while for the shallow end of the New Age it means crystals, tarot cards and past-life reading. When De Beauvoir recorded that Jean-Paul Sartre ‘read the mystics’ she meant Christian mystics – Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart. Mystics can be regarded as specialists in religion, while priests can usually be regarded as functionaries. At times priests have been mystics – Eckhart is a good example – but the roles of priest in a community are usually too demanding to allow the depth of contemplation required of the mystic.

But to say as we did above that mystics have ‘universal’ insights is already to take sides in a continuing debate as to whether the differences in the way that mystics present their experience merely masks that universality, or whether their traditions and cultural contexts determine those experiences in the first place. These two viewpoints are usually referred to as the ‘perennialist’ and the ‘contextualist’ positions respectively. The term ‘perennialist’ derives from what is known as the Perennial Philosophy, which term was popularised by Aldous Huxley in his book of the same name, an annotated compilation of mystical writings. He introduces it with this statement:

Philosophia Perennis – the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing; the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in each of the higher religions.²⁴

Huxley notes that few of the extracts in *The Perennial Philosophy* are in

fact by professional philosophers, confirming that the contemporary philosopher has an entirely secular role, in contrast to their closer affinity to the mystic in earlier times. We can as a first approximation use the term 'perennial philosophy' and the term 'Neoplatonism' interchangeably, as both approach the spiritual life in terms of spiritual *knowledge*, rather than devotion. (Neoplatonism is discussed further in section 4.2.2.) However, the point about the perennialist position is that mystics, whether of the devotional or non-devotional type, are speaking about essentially the same experience of mystical union, a *given* of the human condition across the centuries and continents. This experience is held to be beyond language, but in order to share it with others recourse has to be made to the spoken or written word, inevitably inferior to the condition described. The contextualists on the other hand argue that there is no universal mystical experience, and that the differences in mystical accounts show that they derive from cultural conditions and expectations. Hence a Christian mystic might see visions of Christ, while a Hindu mystic might see visions of Krishna, and so on. (Note also that Huxley's perennialism conflates different types of spirituality that we shall carefully disaggregate in Chapter Two.)

The contextualist position emerged in the 1970s as a direct result of postmodern thinking in philosophy about language. In its milder form it proposes merely that whatever the experience of the mystic, their reports are expressed in, or at least highly coloured by, the religious (or secular) language of the day. The more extreme position denies that mystics have experiences that are universally valid in the first place, and that all we have are *texts* that are open to whatever interpretation we choose to give them. Scholar of mysticism Steven Katz sums up the contextualist approach:

It is my view, argued in detail elsewhere, that mystical reports do not merely indicate the postexperiential description of an unreportable experience in the language closest to hand. Rather, the experiences themselves are inescapably shaped by prior linguistic influences such that the lived experience conforms to a preexistent pattern that has been learned, then intended, and then actualised in the experiential reality of the mystic.²⁵

To understand why Katz should focus on *language* as the inescapable prior influence rather than tradition or culture in a broader sense, we need to look at the 'linguistic turn', mentioned above. However we should add here that this book adopts the opposite position to Katz, though it does not support a naïve perennialism either.

The Linguistic Turn

The deconstructionists in postmodern philosophy, such as Jacques Derrida, drew on early ideas about language from Ferdinand de Saussure and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The linguistic turn can simply mean the greater emphasis or even the sole emphasis placed on language as the topic of study for contemporary philosophy. At its extreme however it suggests that our *entire* experience is constructed out of language. The origins of this go back to Saussure's ideas on words defined in terms of each other, 'a sliding chain of signifiers' terminating in no referent, or real-world object. This idea derives in turn from Kant, who famously denied that we could know the 'thing in itself' – we know only our mediated perceptions and the constructs we read into them. Another way to put it is in a denial of the 'given', a formulation pursued by philosopher Richard Rorty in his well-known *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. For Rorty, the 'mirror' is the myth of a mind that can accurately represent the world, and he proposes a philosophy that does without this mirror. Accurate representation for Rorty is 'simply an automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us do what we want to do.'²⁶ Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* also denied that words refer to things, rather that they should be understood in the context of a 'language game', with arbitrary rules or relationships between the symbols. Wittgenstein explicitly attacks St Augustine's model of language, the common-sense notion that words refer to things in the world, and are learned by the repetition of association between words and things.²⁷ The perennialist position relies on the Augustinian model, only the 'things' referred to by the mystics are universal inner realities rather than physical objects. Hence the linguistic turn largely works against a real engagement with the spiritual, because it denies inner realities other than those constructed arbitrarily through language.

The motivations for the linguistic turn are part of the general postmodern outlook, involving a rejection of traditional monolithic systems of thought. If there is a 'given' world, waiting to be explored and understood, then this (classical) view presents two problems to the postmodern mind: who 'gave' it in the first place, and whose account of it should we trust? The first problem is a legacy of the creator-'God' and the second one a rejection of the certainties of religious and scientific authority. The apparently overriding necessity to reject received wisdom has created a new system of thought that allows each one of us to be our own authority, to interpret the world and texts as we see fit. We can understand postmodernism as an

expression of democratic and pluralistic impulses, yet it creates as many contradictions as it resolves. On the one hand the pluralistic impulse is central to our discussion, but on the other hand the denial that any account is closer to the 'truth' than any other would make the notion of discernment in the spiritual life redundant. More than that, it denies validity to an ancient and universal figure in human history: the seeker of truth. For Monty Python such a figure is merely delusional in its hunger for any trite religious platitude, while for *The Simpsons*, such a figure will inevitably succumb to exploitation unless rescued by secular values. Ridiculous claims of 'truth' deserve only parody, but the abandonment of the very possibility of distinguishing between truth and falsehood leads to a universal despair. The linguistic turn shares with the New Age a reluctance to make such distinctions – we call this the 'narcissism of difference denied'. While the New Age does so out of naivety, postmodernism does so out of sophistication.

In an extraordinary book called *Mysticism after Modernity* (1998) the British theologian Don Cupitt approaches mysticism entirely through the linguistic turn, coming to the absurd – and postmodernist – conclusion that mysticism is solely an act of writing. Cupitt usefully pursues the positive sides of the spiritual life through the idea of religious happiness, but his wholesale adoption of the secularist philosophy of language creates an impossible contradiction in his work. The anthropologist David Abram has suggested that European thought has traditionally sought a justification for elevating man above the animals, so, having lost 'God' and religion as this justification, it has turned to language instead.²⁸ Abram looks to the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as a better source of understanding about language, one that is rooted in the body and Nature. But any adoption of secular philosophical principles will at some point or other undermine the foundations of spirituality. Intellectuals who are otherwise convinced of the spiritual life cannot find, it seems, an alternative intellectual framework outside of Western philosophy and its fascination for *words*.

The Power of Words

Psychiatrists are well aware that particular words can hold emotional charge for their patients, due to painful associations. The technical term in psychoanalysis for the process whereby an event or word attains this charge is *cathexis*, as mentioned earlier. (Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio uses instead the term 'somatic marker' for this charge, to suggest its location in the body.²⁹) The same is true for whole societies,

that words hold emotional charge, relating to their usage in periods of collective trauma. Wittgenstein, in his ideas about language, proposed that the meaning of a word was its current usage. This is fair to a point, but has resulted in a loss of interest in etymology, that is in the origins and history of a word. But in any attempt to create a discussion around the spiritual life we are forced to use many words, often ancient, that carry emotional charge, and hence their history and etymology is important. An improvement on Wittgenstein's position would be to say that the meaning of a word, *for a particular user-community*, lies in its usage in that community. If the user community for a particular English word happens to be the whole English-speaking world, then the meaning of that English word is uncontested. 'Table' would be a good example. 'God' however is not, but we will leave the discussion of that most difficult of words for section 2.5 *The Problem of 'God'*.

Six emotionally charged words

In the spiritual life we have inherited words with emotional charge, born out of the collective trauma around religion in the West – charged because they are related to discrimination, persecution, torture and death. We will look at four words which are thus highly charged: 'idolatry', 'heretic', 'pagan' and 'heathen', and two more that are also problematic: 'pantheist' and 'syncretist'.

The word 'idolatry' is used throughout the English-speaking world in an entirely negative way, though a secularist or Eastern thinker would not guess this from the dictionary definition and etymology. It means to worship idols, and comes simply from the Greek for worship and idol. (Socrates was condemned to death partly because he was found guilty of *not* being properly idolatrous.) But to Jews, Christians and Moslems it is one of the most condemnatory terms that one can apply to a religionist: in the Hebrew language the term originally just meant 'strange worship'. But the secular world has inherited its usage in a way that *ought* to strike people as bizarre. Aldous Huxley, thinking and writing far from the Christian mainstream, used the term as a disparagement for the worship of material goods and other secular valuables.³⁰ The great American writer on Eastern thought, Alan Watts, used the term to condemn the absolutising of the concepts of 'God'.³¹ Karl Popper used it in his book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* to dismiss Hegel's theistic historicism.³² Most shocking perhaps is that Mahatma Gandhi, probably because of his Western education, also showed no hesitation in using the term 'idol-worshipper' to disparage.³³ The theologian Phillip Blond uses the term no less than 23 times in a recent book on postmodern

theology as a term of high and indignant condemnation.³⁴ Behind the simple etymology and neutral dictionary definition lies a history of appalling brutality and persecution, all hidden in and cathected to the word 'idolatry'. We will explore this more in section 3.3 *The Spiritual Wounds of the West*, but for now we can say that the transition to monotheism in the West was no mere evolution of spiritual thinking, but was accompanied by bloodthirsty repression of the earlier modes of religion, namely polytheism, Goddess worship and shamanism. The secular world is indifferent to the religious niceties implicit in the term 'idolatrous', but, like a child who hears a word always repeated with a certain negative feeling-tone, has simply adopted it to convey condemnation.

Spiritual development took place in India just as much as in the Middle East, but for some reason it was rarely accompanied by violence or denigration of earlier forms. The Western world in contrast inherited the savagery by which shamanism and polytheism were rejected in the Middle East, and it became the pattern for European Christianity. Hence the word 'idolatry' became for the Christian a word by which to smear and vilify those who did not follow the mainstream faith. Those tarred with the label could face excommunication, torture or death. It has been the experience of India however that idolatry *may* represent a primitive kind of faith, but that it can also be an expression of part of the *highest* and most transcendent spiritual genius, as for example in the great nineteenth century Indian mystic Ramakrishna. The *outward* form of religious expression was never a divisive issue in India (prior to the arrival of Islam) as it came to be in the West – after all, how can one judge another person's interiority? If one sees an individual, group, or whole society engaged in a religious practice that involves the creation and use of artefacts – for example a figure representing a deity or an aspect of a deity – then how can an outside observer judge their inner motivations? Or worse, call it an abomination and feel justified in violence towards such people? Hence we promote here the idea of idolatry as a *legitimate* mode of spiritual expression. To reclaim highly charged words for a neutral usage has, for example been attempted by black Afro-Caribbeans with the word 'nigger'. A less politically sensitive word undergoing rehabilitation is 'witch', through the efforts of feminist writer on Goddess religions, Starhawk. So why should someone not be proud to call themselves an idolater?

The word 'heretic' is linked with 'idolatry' in the pantheon of difficult religious words. Its etymology speaks volumes for its sorry history: it means 'to choose', from the Greek *hairesis*. 'To choose'

is precisely what the European history of religion did not allow, leading to the horrors of the Inquisition (explored in depth in section 3.3.1). Like 'idolatry' the word 'heretic' has unthinkingly fallen into contemporary secular usage, meaning someone who goes against the prevailing doctrine. Its negative charge in its use today possibly lies with the unconscious and automatic association that we have in Western culture between 'heretic' and 'burn'.

The words 'pagan' and 'heathen' are sometimes used in popular speech to dismiss someone as primitive or 'unbelieving'. But in religious terms they are closer to 'idolatrous' in their negative connotation – pre-Christian or non-Christian. Both words have an etymology deriving from 'countryside', which tells us a great deal about the development of religion in the West (pagan from *pagus*, Latin for countryside, and heathen from *Heide*, German for open country). We will suggest that city-dwellers were responsible for the shift from shamanic to polytheistic forms of religion, involving a more symbolic treatment of the spirits residing in Nature. Alongside this process evolved a certain contempt for the country-dweller, or at the least a gulf of comprehension, tinged perhaps with anxiety that the country and its mysterious ways were the source of urban sustenance (as they remain). David Abram points out that as far back as the fifth century BCE Plato dismissed what lay outside the city walls of Athens.³⁵

The word 'pantheist' may to the secular mind conjure up the quaint but not unreasonable idea that 'God' is in everything, but with little understanding of the negative connotations for the conventional Christian. It is only when one imaginatively immerses oneself in the Christian tradition of 'God' as a personal 'God', one who is separate from the world and can act in it, that one might form an intellectual appreciation of why 'pantheism' is unacceptable. But it is hard to feel the emotional charge associated with the word in Christian tradition, one that relies on its closeness to the terms pagan and heathen. Evelyn Underhill, author of the great work *Mysticism, The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, and otherwise mostly presenting a balanced view of Western mysticism, has this to say:

Unless safeguarded by limiting dogmas, the theory of Immanence, taken alone, is notoriously apt to degenerate into pantheism; and into those extravagant perversions of the doctrine of 'deification' in which the mystic holds his transfigured self to be identical with the Indwelling God.³⁶

Anyone brought up in a Buddhist, Hindu or Taoist tradition (to cite just a few Eastern systems) would be baffled by Underhill's statement:

why 'degenerate' for a move towards pantheism? Why 'perversion' for the mystical union with 'God'? Keith Ward, the Oxford theologian and author of *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, unconsciously confirms the unthinking Christian prejudice against pantheism when he says: 'It is very doubtful whether anyone has ever been a pantheist. It is one of those words that you apply to other people when you want to criticise their opinions without actually reading them.'³⁷ Ward doesn't consider that the use of such unexamined and culturally received terms of abuse is precisely the mechanism by which prejudice is spread, though in this case the user-community for the word and its surrounding prejudice is mostly the Christian one. We can only speculate that 'pantheist' provokes a visceral, anxiety about the shamanic or the mystical that mainstream monotheism has denied for millennia, and which must grip the mind of theologians with a negative cathexis.

Likewise, 'syncretism', which means an approach based on spiritual pluralism, might strike the modern mind as quite reasonable, but is in fact anathema to the traditional Christian. Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) was exiled for his attempts during the Renaissance to create a spiritual pluralism: his crime was 'syncretism'. But, when Caesar conquered Gaul, one of his first tasks was to find the correspondence between the gods of Rome and the gods of the conquered people: this is an earlier form of 'syncretism', obviously alien to Christianity.

But how shall we be able to articulate spiritual difference (necessary for the analysis in this book) with such a heritage of loaded words? We need to use the old vocabularies – as well as the new and those from the East – but have to be careful about words that carry negative emotional charge. This is often first communicated in the way that others *use* a word, not in a grammatical sense, but more to do with tone of voice, gesture and facial expression. It is also possible that the emotional charge lies in the collective unconscious, rather than with the personal history of an individual, a theme explored in section 3.3.5 *The Unexamined Collective Trauma of Western Religion*.

We can give a contemporary example of how a single word can cause problems through its emotional charge: in August 2000 vigilantes daubed 'paedo' on the house of a woman doctor in Wales.³⁸ There had been anti-paedophile riots in Portsmouth, far from Wales, but what had provoked the attack was that the woman was a *paediatrician* – as her nameplate spelled out. No doubt the initially frightening experience was resolved for both the doctor and the vigilantes, but the incident is a reminder that human behaviour over *words* has often been historically graver. We condemn the vigilantes for their ignorance, but is Keith Ward's use of the word 'pantheist' really less worrying?

1.5 Psychology, the Brain and Secularism

It can be argued that philosophy and in particular its more arcane recent developments such as the 'linguistic turn' have a somewhat remote influence on day-to-day secularism. More obvious in our everyday secular cultural exchange there lie quite separate strands of influence: the psychological, going back at least a century, and the neurological, a more recent development. It is in the work of Sigmund Freud that we find one of the most vigorous rejections of religion, and the most pervasive mechanistic influence on the contemporary secular worldview. Freud's psychoanalytical theories provide not only a detailed dismissal of religion through a psychological perspective, but also a new language of interiority that has quite replaced the religious language of old. Another way to put it is that Freud completed the removal of the religious 'self', and initiated its replacement by the psychological 'self'.

Freud and other early psychoanalysts like Jung made strenuous efforts to persuade themselves and others that the work they were doing was 'scientific'. Within academic psychology however their work was largely ignored and a quite different approach was taken: firstly in behavioural psychology and then in cognitive psychology (as in Lodge's novel). These are scientific in the more rigorous sense of conducting empirical research, meaning laboratory testing of various kinds, the assumption being that a person's *interiority* was not directly open to scrutiny. Instead one can observe behaviour in a variety of controlled circumstances (behavioural psychology) or one can investigate perception in a variety of controlled circumstances (cognitive psychology). Neuroscience has extended this using non-invasive methods for investigating changes in the brain that accompany perceptual and other kinds of experience.

Psychology

There are four main branches of psychology: first, the cognitive-behavioural strand; second, psychoanalytical or depth psychology; third, humanistic psychology; and fourth, transpersonal psychology. Humanistic psychology breaks with analytical and cognitive-behavioural psychology because it goes beyond the pathological, taking an interest in the psychology of well-being. Transpersonal psychology goes beyond the humanistic because it places an emphasis on spirituality. Of these four strands it is the psychoanalytical that has the most direct impact on culture, and therefore on the prevailing secularism. The ideas of Freud permeate

art, literature, poetry, theatre and film, while the ideas of Jung also readily enter popular culture through its productions, particularly mainstream cinema. Jung's theory of the archetypes, particularly of the hero archetype, influenced the American author Joseph Campbell, whose popular writings in turn influenced Hollywood through Christopher Vogler's classic text on screenwriting, *The Writer's Journey*. George Lucas, in the writing of the *Star Wars* films, consulted widely with Campbell for example. However, it is Freud's reworking of the Oedipus myth that appears again and again in American cultural production (some say even in its politics: as in the two Presidents Bush). And it is Freud's influence that is so deeply secular, in that it denies any interiority beyond the simplest drives of sex and death (*eros* and *thanatos*).

The great writer on philosophy, psychology and religion William James (1842-1910) had already separated out psychology and religion in his two major works; Freud went further and developed a psychological dismissal of religion as 'patently infantile'. Freud's work was anticipated in various ways in the nineteenth century, and was expanded upon enormously by his followers and fellow travellers, but his work is unique in its influence and its position as a cornerstone of the secular mind. His psychoanalytical theories are widely taught within cultural studies programmes, and underpin 'critical theory' through their reframing by French postmodernist Jacques Lacan and others. Whole generations of post-war humanities graduates have been exposed to these theories. The United States in particular exhibits a 'shrink culture' where novels, films and so on continuously draw on simple psychoanalytical staples, such as parent-child complexes, transference, and the language of ego. Fictional characters will often be in therapy, even if that is not particularly relevant to the plot: it is a simple fact of American social and cultural life.

We can comment here on one of Freud's best-known responses to the religious impulse. In the following extract Freud is writing about his friend Romain Rolland, the great French religious writer (whose work on Ramakrishna brought him to European attention), and Rolland's conception of the 'oceanic':

I had sent him my small book that treats religion as an illusion and he answered that he entirely agreed with my judgement upon religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the true source of religious sentiments. This, he says, consists in a particular feeling which he himself is never without, which he

finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, 'oceanic'. This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of religious energy which is seized upon by various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the grounds of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.

It is interesting to note that Rolland has taken care to use a non-theistic, non-devotional language in his response to Freud that he presumably hoped would fit with Freud's 'scientific' outlook, though it may also have come from his exposure to Indian religious thought. (We will see that Rolland's choice of terms, including 'eternity', 'unbounded', and 'oceanic', are universal to non-devotional mysticism across the world.) But Freud's response is summed up: 'I cannot discover this *oceanic* feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings.' From a Western theocentric tradition and viewpoint Freud is doubtful whether the 'oceanic' is the origin of religion, particularly as the term corresponds to nothing in his own experience. We can better articulate this by saying that 'oceanic' is a non-theistic or non-devotional conception, and hence does not fit so well with monotheism, as it does with non-theistic traditions like that of some Greeks (e.g. Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and Socrates) or Buddhism and other Eastern traditions. Freud speculates that 'it is a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the eternal world as a whole', which he then dismisses as an 'intellectual perception', perhaps because he had not come across anything like it in the Judaic tradition. We can only suggest here that Freud's spiritual instincts – such as they are – locate themselves in a rejected Judaic monotheism, and that he finds nothing spiritual in the Hellenic tradition which might use abstract words like 'eternity' or 'unbounded'.

Freud articulates the whole secular objection to *anything* spiritual, which is that the spiritual cannot be readily explained in terms of scientific, psychological, psychoanalytical, evolutionary or genetic *purpose*. At best it can be explained *away*, by the arguments made by Freud which are so familiar now, that the 'oceanic' and similar feelings are an inappropriate regression to an infantile state of unity with the mother. The following list (kindly provided by the online

Freud Museum) sums up the comprehensive onslaught against religion that Freud mounted within his writings:

- Religion is a 'universal obsessional ritual'.
- Religion is an attempt to master the Oedipus complex.
- Religion is the return of the repressed.
- Religion is a reaction to infantile helplessness.
- Religion echoes infantile states of 'bliss'.
- Religion is a mass delusion or paranoid wish-fulfilment.
- Religion is a way to hold groups together.³⁹

It is hard to find a more forceful and vivid rejection of religion in all the annals of secularism, a useful reminder of the arguments ranged against any renewal of the spiritual life at a broad cultural level. There is some truth in each accusation of course, but by focussing solely on the negative no quarter is given for the counterbalancing positive. In this listing Freud provides the secular mind with an articulation of its core narcissism: that of self-sufficiency. It doesn't need religion because religion is irrational, ritualised, Oedipal, delusional, paranoid, regressive, and so on. If Marx provides the social component of secularism and Darwinism provides its scientific component, then Freud provides its psychological component, later buttressed (culturally at least) by cognitive science.

However psychology and spirituality do find common ground in some New Age thinking, epitomised perhaps in the work of popular philosopher Ken Wilber. His first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, published in 1977, is one of a handful of seminal New Age works. He is known both as a pivotal thinker in transpersonal psychology and perhaps the most important philosopher of the New Age, with an extraordinary breadth of sources in both Eastern and Western spirituality. He is also the straight inheritor of the Western philosophical, scientific and Freudian tradition, adhering to principles of evolutionary thinking deriving from Darwin, and principles of developmental psychology deriving from Freud. Hence Wilber's psychology cannot ultimately escape its reductionist basis, one which inevitably leads to a psychologising of the self. The essence of the psychological self lies in a *mechanistic* understanding of the personality and its subjective experience. The psychological self, as a mechanical assemblage of internal entities such as complexes, exists only in relationship to other such selves, whereas the spiritual self is indivisible and exists in respect to spirits, 'God', or eternity. The psychological as a language of interiority has replaced the religious as a language of interiority, or, in the New Age setting, it becomes its gatekeeper.

The Neurologising of Self

The psychologising of self undertaken in the service of secularism is about a hundred years old. Much newer is what we identify as the 'neurologising' of self, a move to understand self in terms of the workings of the brain. The recent and growing status of the brain in secular culture is attested to in the vote of the US Congress to designate the last ten years of the twentieth century as 'The Decade of the Brain.'⁴⁰ We will see that biologist and Nobel Prize winner Frances Crick asserts that 'we are nothing but a pack of neurons', which sums up this trend. Neuroscience is in fact making extraordinary progress in mapping out the functions of the brain, now known to be more complex even in its *physiological* structure than the rest of the body put together.

Lodge's character Ralph Messenger in *Thinks . . .* epitomises the approach of the reductionist scientist. As conscious experience can be correlated with specific neuronal activity through non-invasive techniques, the conviction has grown that all human experience can be mapped out like this. Brain scientists suggest that we can discover the 'neural correlates' of the experience of pain, of the colour red, and even of consciousness itself. Neuroscientist and gifted popular science writer Antonio Damasio has written a series of books that describe the latest research in brain science, findings that look at what Ralph Messengers' creative writing antagonist and lover, Helen Reed, regarded as the domain of the arts: *feelings*. His thesis is that feelings are the later mental correlates of prior bodily events he terms emotions, a process that relies on certain areas of the brain mapping out physical responses in the body.⁴¹ We saw above that Freud held that 'It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings', but science has moved on apparently. Molecular biologist Candace Pert goes a step further to show that the process is not just a matter of electrical circuitry – the neuronal system – but that the endocrinal system is involved through the production of neuropeptides.⁴² 'You are nothing but your peptides', is the latest message from science it seems.

Francis Crick says we are nothing but our neurons, Richard Dawkins says that we are nothing but our genes, others offer peptides: who knows what is next. This is pure scientism talking – the science itself does nothing more than offer accounts of *mechanism*, but scientism as a worldview always reduces us to this. It is comforting of course to know that when the mechanism goes wrong there might be 'mechanics' with the knowledge and skill to fix it. But there is nothing in direct human experience that corresponds to neuron,

gene or peptide; we have no *experiential correlates* for these scientific concepts, to turn the scientific parlance on its head. (Even the science tells us that there are no nerve endings in the brain, so how could we experience neuron or peptide?) But the grip on the contemporary mind of mechanistic explanations is hard to prise apart: this is why we will look in detail at how we got here from the science and philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

New Age Science

The psychologising and neurologising of the self are typically secular strategies of understanding, but might psychology and neuroscience paradoxically also provide a new language of the spiritual? Certainly Ken Wilber and others in the transpersonal tradition think that psychology can take us there. Some even think that neuroscience will prove the validity of spiritual experience. One clear strategy emerging since the 1970s is to use science itself – whether of physics, biology or psychology – to prise open the claustrophobic constrictions of scientism. For example, neurologist and Zen practitioner James Austin has brought science and religion together in his book *Zen and the Brain*, where he argues that meditation and enlightenment in the Zen tradition can be properly understood through neuroscience.⁴³ Michael Persinger, a neuropsychologist at Canada's Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, has been investigating what he calls the 'God module' in the brain, a region that becomes stimulated during religious experience. Popularised as the 'God Spot', it has brought about opposing sets of responses: from the sceptics like Polly Toynbee, who can now dismiss religion on the grounds of a brain malfunction,⁴⁴ and from the religionists, who can now claim scientific evidence for the validity of religious experience – even for the existence of 'God'. This is a good example of a neutral science provoking radically opposing cultural receptions.

The Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) in the United States, and the Scientific and Medical Network (SMN) in the UK are examples of organisations largely pursuing this strategy of using science to fight against reductionism. Both include scientists of high international standing and New Age thinkers of the more serious type. Not surprisingly, it turns out that James Austin is associated with both organisations. His approach in *Zen and the Brain* is fundamentally different to Damasio's, despite working out of the same discipline: he takes a 'both and' line, accepting both the validity of Western neuroscience and the profound truths of a tradition that go back to the Buddha. Despite Austin's sincere respect for Zen, and his

commitment to meditation practice, his book, however, betrays his secular Western upbringing. On page one he says: 'Long ago in a distant land, a man's brain abruptly changed. . . . His transformation was so complete, enduring, and influential that he is still remembered as the Enlightened One.' In the preface he tells us that 'awakening, enlightenment, occurs only because the human brain undergoes substantial changes.' Yet his book presents no convincing evidence of this, that the Buddha and all those who undergo spiritual enlightenment have radically, or even marginally, changed brains. In this respect he is no different to Damasio, in adhering to what is rapidly becoming *the* secular shibboleth of the early twenty-first century: that we should understand who we are through understanding the brain.

But Austin's impulse to bring together religion and the brain is a departure from mainstream science, and is one we characterise as 'New Age Science'. It is New Age because it is motivated by a desire to integrate body and spirit into a single discourse, if not in actuality. Old religion, leading up to Descartes, separated the two, while secularism took only the material side of the 'Cartesian split' as valid. We can say that the New Age is characterised by the imperative to unite them. We have more to say later on about Descartes and his supposed central role in Western dualism, but here we just return to a more obvious New Age piece of science: Candace Pert's *Molecules of Emotion*. Her book of that name is in fact part autobiographical – of a woman struggling to make a mark in the male-dominated world of science – and part excellent exposition of her scientific discoveries for the lay reader. It is her appearance in the film *What the Bleep do We Know*, produced by effectively a cult organisation,⁴⁵ that has made Pert known to the wider New Age audience. Wittingly or unwittingly her discovery – that the body participates in brain states through the release of immuno-peptides – has made her an apparent keeper of the flame of that cherished New Age ideal: holism. To those desperate to find an integration between mind and body, the discovery that the brain is not after all a computer in total control, rather that 'intelligence' is equally corporeal, is manna from heaven. Of course it is welcome news to those who regret that both old religion and brain science have marginalised the life of the body, but an expanded reductionism is still a reductionism. Whether we reduce mind to brain alone, or to brain-plus-endocrine-system, Pert's discoveries do not help us understand 'mind' or whatever term we want to give to the subjective consciousness that physical science can never locate.

1.6 The Shibboleths of Secularism

We have suggested that a key characteristic of the secular mind, its key narcissism, is self-sufficiency. It is the assumption that the arts, politics and science, as conceived in reductionist, materialist terms, are sufficient to encompass all that is truly human. The Renaissance motto 'man is the measure of all things', picked up from Protagoras, seems to be the basis for this secular assumption, but the fact is that 'man' was conceived in those times primarily as a spiritual being, in relationship to an ultimate sacred entity, and reflecting of that divine nature. Man was potentially divine, and as the measure of all things he reflected what was sacred in creation. What the secular revolution of thought has achieved is the opposite: it managed firstly to posit the world as a machine, and then to conceive of man as made in its image. It is the narrowness of the secularist conception of a human being that has become the narcissism of self-sufficiency, a picture of the human being as a biological machine, bounded by its skin, disconnected from cosmos, and only made relational through society. Secular politics takes each person as an atomic unit, related through the means of economic production, conceived of through scientific materialism, and whose arts and culture must reflect that alienating vision. Scientific, social, and psychological secularisms form three pillars of the secular mind: Newton and Darwin stand for the scientific, Marx and Bentham for the social, and Freud and cognitive studies stand for the psychological. (More on Jeremy Bentham, the eighteenth-century Utilitarian philosopher, in later chapters.)

Sartre's *Nausea* is an early benchmark of modern secularism, yet it contains compelling descriptive passages reminiscent of the accounts by many mystics of their most valued experiences. How could Sartre get so close, yet completely miss this parallel? How did the Monty Python team in their scatter-gun satirising of all and everything, come to represent in the modern mind, not a schoolboy prank in respect to religion, but the essence of contemporary thinking on it? How was it possible, in a country as religious as America, for *The Simpsons* to represent religion as either fundamentalist or cultish, with no representation of the middle ground of true religion and of the religious happiness to be found there? How is it possible for a novelist like David Lodge to set out to defend the subjective realm of the arts from predation by the reductionism of cognitive science, but to fail so thoroughly? And which broader failure leads to what we are calling 'cultural autism'? The answer must be: these are all made

possible by the massive adoption within contemporary culture of the shibboleths of secularism, the denial of which would place one beyond contemporary discourse. But the price of these assumptions is a terrible loss, one that is glaringly obvious if one had the least acquaintance with history, and which loss demands a much more comprehensive explanation of the origins of the secular mind than the ones usually offered.

Let us list some of these principle assumptions, or shibboleths, of the secular mind that we have so far touched upon (in no particular order): religion is monolithic; religion equals 'God'; self arises socially; religion and science are incompatible; religion and critical thought are incompatible; only scientific knowledge is valid; all experience can be understood as brain activity; religion is against progress; religion is obsessed with the afterlife; religion is regressive and compensatory; spirituality means self-denial, and religion is the cause of war. How on earth do these assumptions survive without any serious challenge?

Secularists, if they are bothered to make the least enquiry into these assumptions amongst religionists, find religionists to be (understandably) defensive about the track record of religion. These defensive responses in turn tend to confirm secular assumptions. The most pernicious of all of these is that religion is monolithic, and is defined primarily as a belief in 'God'. The monotheist, aware of nearly three hundred years of atheist attack, is defensive of this central proposition, and entirely colludes in denying the possibility that spirituality is multifaceted and can be open to critical thinking. Monotheism, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular – with its single ultimate source of authority, the Pope – convey to the secular mind that Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is a fixed entity adhering to a single eternal account of religiosity. Hence the secularist is unaware of the history of religion as one of continuous change, experiment and variation. As suggested earlier, the priests of a religion, including the Pope, are usually mere functionaries (mostly conservative at that), and the specialists, those whose life of spiritual practice and enquiry make religion possible, are usually the mystics. It is these individuals who show so clearly how varied the spiritual impulse is, and in the next chapter we explore that variety in depth.