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A Theological Age: A New Way of Looking at the History of the West

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Abstract: This paper argues that the current age is best understood as a theological age in that its normal approach to the world is one based on a high level of abstraction. Theology stands in contrast with piety, which derives much more from immediate experience and embodies common sense. The cultural and intellectual development of Europe and the West can be understood in terms of the interaction of two distinct modes of thinking and viewing the world, namely theology and piety, and the way in which theology has come to dominate Western culture to the detriment of piety. Hence, the dominance of Greek rationalism within the West has led to a one-sided culture that gives priority to rationalist modes of thought. There has been a continuing tradition of piety in the West, but its existence has tended to be somewhat fugitive as can be seen, for example, in Musil's depiction of the 'other condition' and in J S Mill's personal breakdown caused by an excess of theology. The implications of a theological approach for history are evident as historical developments are viewed through the rigid prisms of perspectives that either fragment the study of history into a series of disconnected narratives endowed with their unique telos or impose an all-encompassing narrative that erases differences as well as potentialities. In both cases, it is the theological mode of thought—which has dominated the West since the so-called birth of rationalism—that turns history into ideology. This paper contends that the current condition calls for a new history of philosophy that captures and responds to the crisis affecting the West's self-understanding and sense of purpose.

Keywords: theology; piety; rationalism; literacy; abstraction; modes of thought; history

1. Introduction

The last twenty years have witnessed several, apparently unprecedented, developments in what can best be described as the 'West'. Some of these such as 'cancel culture', a fixation on race, and expressions of extreme anger in the public sphere are well known and receive considerable media coverage. There are others, especially the increasing use of models and algorithms to simultaneously mimic and 'improve' the real world, that impinge less on the public mind. This evident 'hyper rationalism' is fuelled by the desire to creation 'perfection' in the face of an actual world that never rises to ideal perfection. An excellent example of this quest for perfection is the use of 'pitch correction' computer programmes to erase any 'flaws' in a recorded vocal performance. A 'perfect' performance is considered to be a more beautiful performance.

In the contemporary West, it is assumed that the desire to achieve perfection is a 'natural' human attribute. Hence, the objective of any activity is to make it as 'perfect' as possible and to avoid all human error. This means 'human-proofing' those activities and giving priority to an ideal model, generally constructed on mathematical principles, over the exercise of human judgement. The fundamental aim seems to be the elimination of human judgement altogether in favour of a 'perfect' world run by machines (think, for example, of driverless cars). Another aim may well be the 'perfection' of human beings, manifested in the return of eugenics, although in different—and often subtle or

surreptitious—forms. It was no accident that Yuval Noah Harari (2017) gave the title *Homo Deus* to the sequel to his book *Sapiens.*

It is not at all 'natural' to seek to perfect the world so that it conforms to some sort of rational and mathematical excellence. Other human cultures do not seek this goal. The drive towards what we term hyper rationalism or theology is a form of 'cultural patterning' (Hodgson 1993, pp. 126–73) that is particularly strong in Western civilisation. One can see it in philosophers and thinkers from Jeremy Bentham to Max Weber, but it is only in the past fifty years, with the development of tools—such as computers, that can model the ideal—that it has become an overwhelming cultural characteristic of the West.

In this paper, it will be argued that our age in the West, which owes its ultimate origins to Greek rationalism, is essentially an age of theology and that this may well be a key element of its many discontents, including political ones. While theology, as intended in this paper, is an excellent human accomplishment, its one-sided nature leads human beings away from the world of immediate experience and into the realm of abstract principles and logic. It is a good thing that some people pursue theology, but less good when large numbers of people come to see the world in largely theological terms, when the discourses generated by theology dominate and structure the relations between humans and between humans and the world. A purely theological vision of the world suppresses, in fact, other ways of relating to the world. At the same time, a total exclusion of theological views and understandings of the world may have similar negative consequences and become the source of misunderstandings. It follows that a philosophy of history that balances and brings together these two distinct modes of relating to reality—theology and piety—would be essential for understanding the journey of humankind through time and the meaning of temporal existence.

1.1. The Theological Mindset

If we are to have a proper historical understanding of the development of the West, we need to understand the roots of this phenomenon that dates back, we believe, to the very origins of the West and the form of intellectual understanding of the world that it created. Our argument is that this 'theology' came into being alongside what we term 'piety' or an orientation toward the world that comes out of immediate experience and interaction with the world.

The history of the West resembles a dance between theology and piety, with theology invariably in the lead. This paper sets out to establish the parameters of an interpretation of the development of the West based on the idea that theology and piety are crucial elements of its cultural patterning. It seeks to sketch out a form of genealogy that informs historiography based on these two key ideas.

This essay introduces two terms, 'theology' and 'piety', as a means of understanding the way in which that cultural complex, commonly known as Western civilisation, developed. 'Theology' and 'piety' are not meant in a specifically religious sense but rather indicate certain dispositions or orientations towards the world. As shall be seen, they represent different modes that human beings use to understand, relate, and orient themselves to the world. Their origins can be discerned empirically, as what we term 'theology' does not really emerge until the later Roman Empire with the coming of Neoplatonism. The modes of interaction of human beings with the world vary according to the environmental circumstances in which they are placed and the cultural and material tools they have at their disposal, including language. Hence, as we argue, the growth of a literate culture makes a huge difference to the ways in which human beings interact with their world. The argument of this essay is that the trajectory of the development of Western civilisation is illuminated if it is conceptualised in terms of the dance of theology and piety, and that the current state of that civilisation makes best sense if it is understood as the establishment of an effective hegemony of 'theology'. It will be argued that this hegemony would explain the West's preoccupation with history, intended as a series of human events and developments over time, and with the way history is understood and described.

As stated earlier, the term 'theology' is not to be understood with reference to its religious usage, but to a particular mode or attitude of the mind towards understanding the world of experience. Theology involves the construction of and the adherence to a mental model based on the perception and then consciousness that the mental creations of the mind are more real than the physical world, characterized by an inherent entropy, a messiness that makes the world ugly and unpleasant. A theological mindset creates a beautiful and ordered world by means of perfect forms describable in abstract mathematical terms, one that is essentially good because it is beautiful. This may sound very Platonic, and it may well be as Plato himself thought of the world in quasi-theological terms by positing a meta-verse, the *hyperuranion,* as the locus of the ideas, and the physical world as a pale, imperfect reflection of that perfect model. The dualisms that such a model inevitably produce are overcome by a process of universalization that is obtained by means of the institutionaliza-tion of language, as language is used to construct, order, and express the model. Beliefs and ideologies are *ipso facto* encoded in the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of language, in discourses "that sysmatically forms the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972, p. 49). This creates a closed system whereby any idea or understanding that does not fit the norms and semantics generated by the system is banished. It is, to use D'Alembert's conceptual distinction, the triumph of *l'esprit systématique* over *l'esprit de système.* It is evident that a theological mindset rejects or erases any particularism, and consequently it rejects the particularities generated by historical experience, the Heraclitean world of becoming, or as Heidegger (1962) would say, by *dasein* (i.e., 'being there' or 'being-in-the-world'), a concept that points to both its formal existence and essential state (Heidegger 1962, H54). Theology, as intended in this paper, is born out of the consciousness of its historicity and its tragic impermanence, and therefore is inimical to history which it ironically tries escaping from.

This ideal world is not only based in language. It can, and often does, include mathematics. Mathematics has a beautiful purity that entrances the mind and declares its superiority to the messy world of experience. Hence, Sabine Hossenfelder (2020) argues that contemporary theoretical physics is driven by the quest for an ideal form of beauty because physicists believe that the ideal formed in their mind *must* also exist in the real world, in what would seemingly be a perpetuation of Platonic realism—although even the real world fails to measure up to this beautiful ideal. This is the theological mindset par excellence. The theological mind is addicted to abstraction just as so many young people today are addicted to the digital world.

1.2. A Genealogy of Rationalism

Since time immemorial, human beings have sought to comprehend the meaning and purpose of life and the origins of the universe. Humans searching for meaning, purpose, comprehension, and origins do so through those faculties that are unique to humans, namely intuition, imagination, and reason. Art, artefacts, literature, beliefs, myths, and customs are all products of, and bear witness to, this longstanding human quest. In some of these creations, there is evidence of the human interaction with the world of experience. Others have become the lens through which that experience is construed, translated, or shaped, traces of which lie often dormant in the structures of language and discourse and continue to inform the way humans interact surreptitiously and cunningly with, understand, and fashion the world of experience. Over time, these products selectively combined to form what we call 'tradition'.

Cosmological and theogonic myths stand at the beginning of that long 'journey' which is referred to as the 'Western Tradition'. Such myths, albeit their poetic nature, represented reality in its perceived totality by means of intuitive analogies suggested by and suggestive of experience (Reale 1984, p. 48). They were thus the manifestation of a purely 'theoretic' or 'contemplative' interest or attitude and of the intuitive and imaginative faculty of humans that 're-presented' or expressed reality more than attempting to provide a logical explanation of it. Myth does not serve a pragmatic function but is the manifestation of the wonder or the awe human beings experience in the contemplation of nature and from

the natural human desire to make sense or to know. Such knowledge is intuitive and contemplative, free from the constraints of logic, born out of a sense of wonder (Plato 2004, 155c–d), and therefore, as Aristotle once claimed, myth can also be considered as a form of 'philosophy' (Aristotle 1933, 982b 18). Myth played the role that history will come to play, although myth referred to the timeless in the context of time and can be regarded as the epistemological metaphor that allowed to make sense of both the world of experience and of existence (Donald 1991, p. 214). Myth may have been what Giambattista Vico once referred to as 'Poetic Wisdom' that may have begun with "a metaphysics which, unlike the rational and abstract metaphysics of today's scholars, sprang from the senses and imagination of the first people" (Vico 2001, p. 144). In the age of poetic wisdom, man appears to have lived in harmony with nature, and culture was just that "finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process . . . on which human beings confer meaning and significance" (Weber 1949, p. 81).

The advent of logic and of rational thought, by filtering the world of experience through a particular prism of assumptions and rules that engenders a particular objective representation of it, neutralises the imagination and simultaneously generates a hiatus between thought and reality. It has had the effect of 'objectifying' the world of experience, of severing the natural ties between humans and nature, and of silencing the poetic voice of and evocative power inherent in myth. Thus, the gods no longer can roam the earth and mingle with human beings, no longer can they participate in the life of the world as they have been relegated to the realm of transcendence. Transcendence has produced theological discourse and theology has gradually come to replace the piety inherent in myth, just as the strict logic of prose has replaced the freedom and licence of poetry.

Marcel Gauchet argues that the transcendence underpinning the theological approach to the world came into being with the birth of the state. According to Gauchet (1997, pp. 34–37), it is the coming of the state that tears heaven and earth apart, thereby destroying the primal unity of what he terms 'religion'. The state creates 'theology' as part of its desire for order and structure on which its legitimacy greatly depends. This was possibly only by moving the divine onto a level beyond the physical and phenomenal world, the transcendental world. It was in this context that history emerged as a means to explain the meaning of and justify human existence (Voegelin 2001), and connect the empirical and transcendental worlds. Nevertheless, a work such as Hesiod's *Theogony* (Hesiod 2018), which can be defined as a proto-theological work, was created in what can only be described as a stateless society, a society which, through the creation of alphabetical writing, had begun to characterise the whole range of spiritual experiences, or what we have termed 'piety', into a more coherent system. This is a normal human practice, but the coming of writing provided the impetus for it to accelerate. The crucial point is that this practice took a different form in a cultural zone such as ancient Hellas, where there was a diffusion of alphabetical writing, and which was composed of a multitude of *poleis* as opposed to a more bureaucratic empire, such as those that had emerged in the Near East, where scribes had a monopoly over writing. Moreover, as Rosalind Thomas (1992, pp. 128–57) argues, the role of writing in Hellas varied from *polis* to *polis* with Athens creating many inscriptions for legal and other purposes and Sparta virtually none.

Although it is very difficult to know how our illiterate human ancestors knew and experienced the world, human beings have always related to the world in a variety of ways. These range from the application of skill to song and dance to the visual and plastic arts to poetry and rational prosaic argument. There can be no doubt that the coming of literacy gave an enormous impetus to what might be termed rational exposition besides, as has been argued by Jack Goody (1986), organising society. Writing allows for abstraction in a way that was not possible in a human world bound by the fluid oral transmission of thought and images (Ong [1982] 2002; Havelock 1981). Moreover, a world in which literacy reigns supreme removes the process of thinking from actual human beings and moves it into a new bloodless abstract realm in which ideas are disconnected from the person. Thought becomes 'disembodied' as it moves into that liminal space located at the

interface between writing and orality. Such a phenomenon is particularly visible within the context of religious activity and thought. Jack Goody (1986, p. 20) notes that the question of characterised complexity and the nature of literate activity is closely related to the increased autonomy of religious systems. A written religion, with a propertied church, can no longer be regarded as a reflection of or as homologous with other aspects of the social system, as part of a superstructure ordered in a straightforward way by the infrastructure of the political economy. Indeed, such a contention (like the opposite, idealist, pole) implies a vast oversimplification of the state of affairs even in oral culture, but in those with writing, there is ample evidence of an increase in autonomy, in independence.

He points out that once 'holy utterances' have become 'scriptures' and the original founding charisma has been transformed into the 'charisma of office', they become a conservative and enduring force despite political, social, and economic changes. Scriptures assume a normative character and act as "a yardstick for the difference between reality and potentiality, between what is and what should be, between existence and utopia" (Goody 1986, p. 20). It therefore follows that commentary on, and elaboration of, the holy word—a central aspect of 'theology'—is best understood as the product of a particular 'discursive practice'. It is "a place in which a tangled plurality—at once superposed and incomplete—of objects is formed and deformed, appears and disappears" (Foucault 1972, p. 48), and, as such, describing a highly rationalist and abstract approach to the world, far removed from piety and religious experience tout court. Spontaneity of spirit finds itself replaced by haracterized forms (O'Dea 1966, p. 51).

The disembodiment of thought has profound substantial implications for the mode, formation, and transmission of knowledge. In ancient oral cultures, the traditional means for transmitting knowledge and skills was through the master-disciple relationship. The medium of oral transmission involved real, physical interaction between the person teaching the skill or imparting a teaching and the one assimilating it. Real people produced real ideas and skills; those ideas were associated with those people. The principal protagonists often gave their names to the much-celebrated Platonic dialogues, in association with the particular ideas or concepts discussed in the dialogue. Such personal interactions or cultural practices did not cease with the coming of literacy, but, rather, the abstract and disembodied sets of ideas contained in written works challenged their authority. In the world of the ancient Greeks and Romans, schools of philosophy continued to flourish through the master-disciple relationship (Hadot 2002), and this was the case with Roman education. The Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca (1917, 41.12, 52.11), for instance, often recalls in his writings the qualities and teachings of his tutor Papirius Fabianus. However, over time, especially in the West, the notion of the personal transmission of skills and ideas has declined and diminished in value and has slowly been replaced by transmission through disembodied virtual means, a process accelerated first by the printing press and more recently by electronic devices.

Knowledge formation and the understanding of what constitutes knowledge are driven by the means of its transmission. This statement may seem to echo McLuhan's (1964) statement or maxim of "the medium is the message" and the different intensity of human participation media produce. In reality, the statement hints at and wishes to capture a process of far deeper ontological and epistemological significance. Much is lost when abstract transmission of ideas and skills begins to eliminate or supersede the personal and experiential element. It affects not only the epistemological dimensions of what knowledge is but also the ontological dimension of what constitutes reality and the meaning of being human. In personal interactions, human beings communicate in a whole range of ways that cannot be reduced to a 'recipe', like a set of techniques contained in a cookery book (Oakeshott 1991, p. 12). Real-world experience is transmitted along with ways of doing things, namely with practices. Theory and practice, or thinking and doing, once went hand in hand as the spoken word mediated the two realms. However, when abstract 'recipes' come to dominate personal relationships, what can be transmitted is also affected. Abstract transmission of knowledge comes to favour philosophical doctrines such as Cartesianism

that rigidly separates the mind and the body, and knowledge, as well as language, are unsurprisingly disconnected from the world of experience as they take on a life of their own. It is to no surprise that, as Schopenhauer (1969, pp. 149–63) once stated, the world can be considered as the product of the will and of subjective representation. In such an epistemological context, reality reduces to mere appearance. A metaphysics of the will comes to dominate it, and it is this metaphysics that, in the long run, structures an archetypal world in which the subject wishes to live.

The disembodiment of knowledge began with the decline in poetic imagination. Imagination is not representation, nor symbolism, nor ideology, as all these concepts involve a process of abstraction (Le Goff 1992, pp. 1–5). Imagination, and in particular poetic imagination, is the capacity to re-produce reality 'from within', namely from the position of being at one with the natural world so that experience is the result of emotion, which stimulates imagination, and not of intellection. Greek philosophy was born within the fold of poetic imagination. Homer's famous poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, stand at the beginning of that long intellectual journey which led to the development of the various branches of intellectual thought in the West. Homeric imagination can be haracterized by that search for harmony, proportion, and measure which will connote the quest for fundamental metaphysical principles by the pre-Socratic philosophers (Reale 1984, pp. 21–22). Werner Jaeger (1953, pp. 110–13) pointed out that in the Homeric *epos,* reality is presented in its totality, although in mythical form, and the anthropological and ontological question of the position of human beings in the universe is a theme that pervades both poems. This also explains why early philosophers wrote their works in verse rather than prose; there was, in fact, still a strong connection between the written word and its oral context. Language and knowledge were still 'embodied'. The flow or rhythm of classical Greek poetry, in fact, was marked by a succession of discrete phonetic units—long and short syllables—accompanying and mimicking the raising (*arsis*) and lowering (*thesis*) of the foot in dancing to and beating rhythm (Halporn et al. 1994). However, once writing and prose became the dominant medium and mode for the transmission of knowledge, either by default or by wilful choice, imagination gradually retreated into the background, often receiving bad reviews from the incipient rationalists of the day as the verses from the *haract* of Hesiod's *Theogony* (Hesiod 2018, vv. 25–28) seems to suggest:

> "Shepherds living in the fields, ignoble objects of scorn, just simply bellies! We know how to say many deceptive things while making them look like real things, but we also know how, whenever we wish, to announce things that are true."

From the fifth century, the increasing reliance on writing in the West continued unabated, affecting the transmission of knowledge, both synchronically and diachronically. The emergence of a literate society coincided with the growing use of money. Richard Seaford (2020) argues that the growth of what he terms 'monetisation' is central to the creation of haracteriz universal concepts that are the bread and butter of philosophy, and later theology. In a poetic society, the human mind works with particulars rather than the universal. This is evident when considering how Homer in the *Iliad* describes man as a composition of parts as "the early Greeks did not, either in their language or in the visual arts, grasp the body as a unit" (Snell 1982, p. 7). As a result, there was no clear distinction between body and soul. The Homeric conception of "*thymos*, *noos,* and *psyche* still depended to a large extent on an analogy with physical organs" (Snell 1982, p. 16). Hence, Seaford notes that there is no sense of a unified 'self' in Homer. The unity of the self awaits creation. He suggests that the universal notion of money plays a crucial role in this process. Following Luria (1976), there is a good argument that literacy plays a crucial role in moving the human mind from the particular to the universal, or from immediate experience to the abstract concept.

Rajiv Malhotra (2011) makes an interesting point regarding the difference between the West and 'dharmic civilisations.' Practices of contemplation that are central to the philosophy of these civilisations require a *guru* who can lead the student through the

required processes. The transmission of the *Vedas* occurred orally for a long period of time (Doniger 2009, pp. 104–7). One can learn Western philosophy in a purely abstract and disembodied fashion such as a twenty-four-part course that one can purchase and play on one's computer. This is an entirely different form of cognitive practice to that of dharmic civilisations.

Before moving on to analyse and discuss the theological nature of our times, it is necessary to provide a working definition of theology. In his *De Trinitate*, Boethius (1973, p. 9) defines theology as follows:

> "Theology does not deal with motion and is abstract and separable, for the Divine Substance is without either matter or motion. In Physics, then, we shall be bound to use scientific, in Mathematics systematical, in Theology, intellectual concepts; and in Theology we should not be diverted to play with imaginations, but rather apprehend that form which is pure form and no image, which is very being and the source of being."

Theology cannot tolerate the imagination because, as Boethius implies, its truth has a fixed truth, without 'matter or motion.' There can be no playfulness, which is characteristic of the imagination, and no ambiguity. Therefore, theology would appear to be the triumph of Parmenides' ontology that denies any temporal as well as spatial dimension to being so to preserve it from the dangers of non-being or nothingness. Reality, namely the 'world of appearances', is just *doxa*, opinion (Parmenides 1952, 28 B, especially fragment 8). Truth belongs to a different realm that transcends reality, namely the realm of the *nous*, the intellect. Hence, rationalism is both the victory of an atemporal and abstract approach to the universe and the dominance of particular literary genres, namely the treatise and the commentary.

As indicated earlier, in this paper theology does not refer to the discipline but is understood as a particular approach to understanding and interpreting the world of experience. The way of viewing theology as a framework of understanding is not new. Theology, in its Boethian formulation, in fact, is concerned with pure absolute being, and is far removed from the Heraclitean flux and change of everyday life as possible. In this sense, it can be haracterized as being beyond the world. Such a place is drained of all feeling, sensation, and colour. The individual is absorbed into the One. This is all very well if one wishes to live a life contemplating the divine. It is less helpful for those living lives in the everyday mundane world, something that Augustine understood when dealing with that seeker of divine perfection, Pelagius (Markus 1990, chp. 4).

According to a theological view, the true as well as the real become the highly abstract set of words far removed from immediate experience. There is nothing new in all of this. It goes back to Plato and the doctrine of 'Ideas' of which their earthly manifestation is but a pale reflection. It is at the centre of Western rationalism and the source of many political and social utopias that have often marked the history of Western civilisation (Popper 2011). This sort of doctrine has extraordinary appeal to intellectuals, to those who spend their days weaving ideas, symbols, and concepts into beautiful intricate structures, that often become the surreptitiously enduring 'edifices of thought'. The concerns of Plato had little to do with the great unwashed, the 'bellies' referred to by Hesiod (2018), who generally lived quite harsh and unpleasant lives and who had to solve immediate practical problems.

The Elements of Theology, written by the fifth century Platonic philosopher Proclus (Proclus 1963, p. 3), illustrates the abstract nature of theological speculation:

> "For suppose a manifold in no way participating unity. Neither the manifold as a whole nor any of its several parts will be one; each part will be a manifold of parts, and so to infinity; and of this infinity of parts each, once more, will be infinitely manifold."

Proclus thus stands in stark contrast to Hesiod (who he probably studied as part of his education). Hesiod (2018) in particular in *Works and Days,* is preoccupied with the

imperfections and evils, the messiness, of the world and of the need for sacrifices to the gods and to act in a moral fashion. It is an expression of piety.

Full blown theology, be it pagan or Christian, flies at the dusk of the Roman Empire, at a time when it has become rigid and bureaucratic, and decaying. It emerges out of Neoplatonism and its attempt to create a vision of the universe emanating from the One down to the Many. Out of this, the emperor Julian (Elm 2012) attempted to fashion a new form of Hellenism that, following (Iamblichus 2003; Shaw 2014), would fuse the abstruse doctrines of Neoplatonism with traditional religious practices, but one in which 'theology' had primacy. This heady religious brew had a long history ahead of it amongst Western intellectuals but failed as a popular religion. It is worth observing that Iamblichus was attracted to the mysteries of non-Hellenistic religions because he believed that Greek philosophy, including Plotinian Platonism, was to be rationalistic and, in its current form, lacked the necessary elements to enable practitioners to enter into the true nature of the universe. In many ways, Iamblichus' position prefigures that of the Traditionalists of the twentieth century who also believed that the rationalist West had lost touch with universal religion (Sedgwick 2004).

Christianity also imbibed a heady dose of Neoplatonism but managed to fuse it more effectively with popular religious practices that appealed to ordinary believers. In many ways, the creation of a balance between theology and more immediate religious experience was the secret of Christianity's success. Nevertheless, the growth of Christian theology and its use of abstract concepts led to conflict, wherever theology escaped the bounds of experience. Theological conflict split the Church of the late Roman Empire into three camps, Chalcedonian, and the two non-Chalcedonian churches. The differences had little to do with religious practice and everything to do with the meaning of particular abstract concepts. David Bradshaw, for instance, observes how the different translation and interpretation of the concepts of *ousia* and *energeia*, that is essence and energy, are key to understanding the split between Western and Eastern Christendom (Bradshaw 2007).

The theological mindset permeated all aspects of learning and led to the rise of what can be regarded as a 'spirit of systemisation'. Anthony Grafton and Williams (2006) have demonstrated that the need to create a more systematic approach to the study of scripture transformed the nature of the book and of written expression in the later Roman Empire. By analysing the works of Origen and Eusebius, they establish that there is a commonality connecting Origen's *Hexapla*, designed to collate different versions of the Bible, and Eusebius's *Chronicle* that sought to bring together different historical chronologies. This systematic spirit also informs the codification of Roman law by both Theodosius and Justinian. This 'bureaucratisation of the mind' fits nicely with both the emergence of a much more bureaucratic empire under Constantine and the emergence of Neoplatonism. These developments exemplify the growing dominance of the written text over oral traditions. The systematic spirit and theology, with a bureaucratic imperative always lurking inside of them, was the last great gift of the Romans to their European successors, be it in as simple a work as Cassiodorus' *Institutions* (Cassiodorus 2004) or the massive impact that Roman law would have on Christendom during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This spirit of systemization was supported by the gradual marginalisation and then ban of millenarian-eschatological thought and movements, as their emphasis on the temporal dimension of existence, and their idea of a 'theology of history', threatened the core tenets on which the system was founded (Reeves 1999).

One important aspect of the rise of the abstract model is the concurrent decline of poetry. Originally, as stated earlier, philosophy utilised the poetic mode. It is difficult to pin poetry down to a single fixed meaning or to reduce it to a dry abstract formula. Consider, for example this passage from Parmenides (1984, fragment 1. 1-4) who stands at the beginning of the revolution in thinking:

"The mares that carry me, as far as impulse might reach,

Were taking me, when they brought and placed me upon the much-speaking route

Of the goddess, that carries everywhere unscathed the man who knows;

the much-guided mares were carrying me."

Philologists of all ages have argued that Parmenides' language is obscure to the point of appearing arcane. The reason for this obscurity, in our opinion, lies in his attempt to formulate a new language in which and by which to express abstract, rational thought free from poetic modes and images. As abstract thought comes to dominate, so individuals become impatient with poetry, even to the point of hating it, primarily because of its playfulness and ambiguity. This is also evident in Plato's utopian thinking, who wished to banish the poets from his ideal polis. The tragic poet, opined Plato (2013, pp. 401–3), 'is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth.'

Here, at the very birth of the story of the West, we have an expression of the view that has come to dominate the modern Western mind. The poet is too close to experience and thereby too far removed from the 'Truth' understood as a highly abstract idea. Parmenides (1952, 8 vv. 1–21) pointed out that there were two ways—the way of truth and the way of opinion. The former leads to the contemplation of the truth through reason, the latter leads to error and irresolvable contradictions. Parmenides, before Aristotle, set what would become the cornerstone of Western logic, namely the principle of non-contradiction, which along with the principle of the excluded middle inevitably bridled poetic imagination. The philosopher, the ideal personality for Plato, is a bloodless figure who rises above the emotive opinion of poetry to the transcendental realm of ideas. The philosopher is a creature created with 'artificial intelligence'. Rationalist philosophical ideas are fixed, abstract, and rigid. They have many defects. They cannot accommodate ambiguity; they move in a universe in which everything is either/or in accordance with the Aristotelian principle of excluded middle (Derrida 1988, pp. 123–24). They cannot deal with change over time and the reality of lived experience in which things never remain the same. Finally, their mood is one of complete seriousness that precludes the possibility of playfulness, of the comic.

Theology involves a highly unusual relationship between human beings and the world once we consider it not just in terms of the knowledge it provides about the world but when we understand it as a mode of being in the world. The immediate world of experience of human beings is not particularly theological in nature; theology has little to do with feelings of piety that the world very often instils in us. We relate to that world and come to understand it in a variety of ways ranging from the artistic to the practical to the scientific to the theological. We could not do so without the imagination. The imagination enables human beings to look beyond the immediacy of the here and now and to imagine the world as other than how it seems. This capacity to relate to the world in a multiplicity of ways is necessary for human beings, as they need to be as adaptable as possible in a world marked by constant change.

Theology considers that this changing 'messy' world is not the 'really real' world. Consequently, every form of relating to that world that accepts temporality is, by definition, inferior to theology. Such an outlook creates a major issue: it is impossible to establish that the 'real world' accords with the 'really real' ideas that we have about it. Theology inverts or destroys the common-sense view of the world, which has an inherently oral matrix, by disregarding immediate experience in favour of the constructs of the human mind (Schaefer 1990). As Giambattista Vico (1953) claimed in his anti-Cartesian polemic, *verum est factum*, the mind can know only what it constructs. Abstraction is the epistemological path to truth, not experience.

The rule of abstraction governs many areas of human activity, including science. For example, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once observed that science generates a world in the image of reason and hence can often assume the connotations of an ideology as it situates itself above the subject and beyond the object becoming mere project (Bachelard 1951, pp. 75–84). Rupert Sheldrake (2013, pp. 84–108) has challenged the idea that there are fixed physical constants in the universe. He claims that measurements of the speed of light have varied over time but that scientists tend to reject these differences because the

rationalist universe constructed by science must have constants. The abstract model of the world, that has fixed constants built into it as a necessary feature, trumps the real world of experience and informs it with a fictitious regularity. Sheldrake argues that constants may not be so much 'necessary' parts of the universe, as 'habits' that the universe has adopted can vary over time. Consequently, we can never prove that fixed invariable constants are part of the real universe even if they are central to the model that we have constructed of it. Einstein's theory of relativity, as well as Gödel's theorem and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, shattered the traditional mechanistic dogmatism of scientific thought and marked the return of variables and hence of doubt, which challenged the possibility of developing closed and controllable systems of knowledge and of truth. It was probably to escape the curse of variability and uncertainty that science gradually lost its primacy and came to be subordinated to technology.

People try to bend experience to make it fit their ideas or models about the world. This is even true of thinkers who we assume are not particularly rationalist in their orientation, such as David Hume. Hume's moderation and sceptical disposition mask the fact that he is expressing the reasonable views of an Enlightenment gentleman who identifies 'miracles' as the sorts of things that only ignorant people unable to govern their emotions properly, be they Calvinists, Catholics, or Methodists, can possibly believe.

Miracles, along with other types of spiritual events may indeed happen, or at least be experienced, but the Enlightenment has provided us with lenses to ensure that we either never see miracles or rationalise them out of existence. The more the human mind is trapped by abstract concepts and models, the less attuned it becomes to 'immediate experience,' and the more likely it is to consider the real world to be those models and concepts that it, itself, creates.

Western culture has become increasingly theological over time, to the detriment of other modes of experience, including a spiritual orientation to the world based on immediate experience, or piety; and in so doing has come to believe excessively in its own intellectual creations and downgraded other modes of experience. Poetry, as a means of relating to the world, has declined as an element of Western culture. Abstraction has largely conquered art. The various philosophical systems or ideologies that emerged overtime, including Liberalism, Socialism, and Anarchism, have become templates that impose themselves on the world. Contemporary Western society consistently overvalues modes of understanding that are both universal and abstract, at the expense of modes of understanding that prize immediate experience.

2. Why Piety?

There are several historical instances where people of different religious beliefs happily lived together. One example are the various Christian groups in the seventh century Middle East. Despite the disapproval of the religious professionals in the groups, ordinary believers happily attended the festivals of other groups. Tannous (2019, chps. 3 and 4) argues, in fact, that the orthodoxy guarded by religious professionals, is a 'very unnatural thing' that can only be achieved over an extended period of time and with much hard work and education. One can argue that theology is also unnatural and, like orthodoxy, is a product of considerable elite control of the wider population (Tannous 2019, p. 349). An example of such control would be the way in which those who were marked out as 'Cathars' in southern France were targeted for extermination by 'orthodox' Catholics from northern France in the twelfth century (Pegg 2008). It is a sad reality that the orthodoxy imposed by theology in the form of assent to certain verbal propositions creates this strange beast called heresy. The word 'heresy'—from the Greek noun *airesis*—originally meant 'choice'. In Polybius (I BC), Josephus Flavius and, in particular in the New Testament, it came to denote a 'school', 'sect', or 'faction'. In the Western church, heresy virtually disappeared after the fifth century only to re-emerge in the eleventh century as the Church sought to sharpen both its intellectual and its legal capacities (Moore 2012).

Piety, in its classical definition, means 'dutifulness' and is thus not only connected with the virtues of justice and respect, but with the natural inclination of individuals to socialise and to sociability. The pious human being is just, and the virtues of respect and clemency mark the outward behaviour of a pious person. In the mythological repertoire of ancient Rome, the virtue characterising the Trojan hero, Aeneas, was *pietas* and it was not by chance that Virgil attributed this specific virtue to the man who was regarded as the founding father of the Roman nation, and an emperor, such as Augustus, made it one of his distinctive qualities (McLeish 1972, pp. 127–35). Inclusiveness, which distinguished Roman culture, can be largely attributed to this particular virtue that the Romans held in such high regard. Aeneas's piety manifested itself in his attitude towards his parents, his country, and his fellow men. In the *Aeneid,* it contrasts with the *violentia* of his enemy, Turnus (Hahn 1931, pp. 9–13). Piety involves respect and clemency and hence tolerance towards ideas and views which conflict with one's own. The problems start when the natural propensity to piety finds itself hijacked by the metaphysics of theological discourse. As the eighteenth-century publicist Voltaire (2000) once noted, "Euclid easily persuaded all men of the truths of geometry. Why was this easy to do? Because every single one of them is an obvious corollary of the axiom *Two and two make four*. It is not quite like that with the mixture of metaphysics and theology."

The reality is that the simple and natural emotional responses stimulated by piety do not lead individuals to denounce those different to them or encourage them to persecute and, perhaps, kill those who are different. Piety stimulated the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (n.d.) to state that he honoured "both ascetics and the householders of all religions". Theological violence only occurs when there are abstract ideas and concepts at stake.

The violence of medieval Christendom in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries emerged sometimes out of materialistic motives, as can be seen in the memoirs of Guibert of Nogent (1996), but could also become vicious when abstract religious ideas came into play. It suffices to think of the violence of the Albigensian Crusade (Moore 2007; Pegg 2008). Abstract ideas, because unanchored from the concreteness of things, appear as figments. Accounts of heresy, such as appear in Guibert (Guibert of Nogent 1996, pp. 195–98), are not empirical and descriptive but arise from a template prescribing what heretics believe. Brian Stock (1983, pp. 99–100) has argued that heresy arose in the context of the growth of a more literate society and a growing division between learned and popular cultures.

There appears to be a correlation between the spread of abstract ideas through the medium of printing, dogmatic assertiveness, and the growth of religious violence. If James Simpson (2019) is correct, Calvinism inspired in the minds of its adherents a form of spiritual rigidity that could border on madness. It is also interesting that the printing of books, and hence their mass production, did not become common until the nineteenth century in the Islamic world. Jihadism can be seen as having grown out of a much more literate Muslim population combined with the impact of rationalist revolutionary ideas from the West (Cook 2015, pp. 73–95).

Yet, there were many who stood horrified by this desire to place so much emphasis on theological assertion. For example, one finds in Thomas a Kempis (n.d.)' *The Imitation of Christ* the following:

Rest from inordinate desire of knowledge, for therein is found much distraction and deceit. Those who have knowledge desire to appear learned, and to be called wise. Many things there are to know which profiteth little or nothing to the soul. And foolish out of measure is he who attendeth upon other things rather than those which serve to his soul's health. Many words satisfy not the soul, but a good life refresheth the mind, and a pure conscience giveth great confidence towards God.

Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1852, p. 10) stated that 'Christ was *Vitæ Magister*, not *Scholæ*; and he is the best Christian whose heart beats with the truest pulse towards heaven; not he whose head spinneth out the finest cobwebs.' His contemporary John Smith (1660, pp. 3–4) expressed similar sentiments:

When the tree of knowledge is not planted by the tree of life, and sucks up not sap from thence, it may as well be fruitful with evil as with good, and bring forth bitter fruit as well as sweet. If we would indeed have our Knowledge thrive and flourish, we must water the tender plants of it with Holiness.

Smith and Cudworth expressed the views of the 'party of piety', of those who understood that knowledge must be nourished by that immediate experience in which we are all immersed. Or, as Montaigne (2002, p. 542) put it in a more sceptical fashion, 'I have seen in my time hundreds of craftsmen and ploughmen wiser and happier than University Rectors–and whom I would rather be like.'

A similar understanding informed Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (Browne 1972, p. 3):

"Neither doth herein my zeal so far make me forget the general charity I owe unto humanity, as rather to hate than pity Turks, Infidels, and (what is worse) Jews; rather contenting myself to enjoy that happy style, than maligning those who refuse so glorious a title."

Browne visibly exudes a spirit of tolerance rooted in 'charity'. He also represented a mood in English culture that emphasised the 'book of nature' as a means of understanding the divine. It appears to echo Nature's warning in Voltaire's *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763):

"I have planted in your hearts a seed of compassion to help you assist one another to get through life. do not smother that seed; do not corrupt it; know that it is divine, and do not substitute the wretched debates of schools for the voice of nature."

The spirit of charity enunciated by Browne, and by Voltaire, won quite a stunning victory. In England at the end of the seventeenth century when, despite the 'rage of party', the government stopped licensing printers, leading to the creation of a free press (Kemp 2012, pp. 47–68). A free press flourishes when there is 'charity', and charity, in turn, requires that ideas be rooted in that immediate experience out of which piety grows.

Browne (1972, pp. 16–17) argues

"Thus there are two books from whence I collect my divinity. Besides that written one of God, another of his servant, nature, that universal and publick manuscript, that lies expansed unto the eyes of all. Those that never saw him in the one have discovered him in the other."

This explains how important the naturalist parson, as exemplified by Gilbert White (2016), was in English culture. The book of Nature is also the book of piety. Just as it happened with early Christianity, it appears that the first modern liberal state flourished because it discovered a means for suppressing theology or, at least, ensuring that its own theology was somewhat rooted in piety and charity. For this reason, intellectuals from other European countries, including Nietzsche, often despised the English. What they could not appreciate were the dangers in their own theological mentality. Nor was it appreciated that the conditions of modern society created ideal conditions for the flourishing of the abstractions of theology, albeit with a secular-modern, rather than a religious-traditional, inflection.

From the aforementioned accounts of English authors, it appears that piety harmonises with early liberal thinking and creates the historical conditions for the flourishing of liberal institutions. Piety is a natural and free expression of the sentiment of spontaneous and dutiful respect for self and others, although it never becomes blind devotion. It thrives in a regime free from the constraints of dogma, of logic and of nstitutio, sanctioned practices. Piety is an expression of 'natural reason', namely reason which works outside a particular system of logic, and as such it is the product of self-reflective experience. The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher and utilitarian *ante diem*, Francis Hutcheson (1995), stated that people are endowed with a natural inclination to associate and to feel compassion and gratitude towards others. It appears that Liberal thinking, as theorized by its early

proponents, cannot operate within the constraints of institutionalized religion, thereby driving it to create a space—namely the secular—in which both liberal thinking and religion can coexist, as "a liberal secular society, by contrast with most previous societies, does not set itself any overall aim, other than that of assisting as fully as possible the actual aim of its members, and making these as concordant with each other as possible" (Munby 1963, p. 27). As a result, the hidden tension between religious liberals and religious conservatives in the United States, described by American sociologist Robert Wuthrow (1989), emerging in the last decades of the twentieth century, may well be construed as the product of the tension between liberal piety and traditional religion.

Both theology and piety, however, are not specific to Christianity. The de-Christianisation of Western societies has not spelt the end of theology but rather the transfer of theological attitudes into a non-Christian environment. Therefore, theology and piety are terms that describe attitudes to the world and continue to be useful, especially in the cultures of the West. Individuals still exhibit piety towards the world just as they act charitably, and they still think in an abstract theological way.

The rise of theology, understood as the wrapping up of experience in models and abstractions, is the most significant contemporary cultural development of the modern West. There are several reasons for this development. At one level, it constitutes the working out of deep cultural patterns within the West and the consequence of a series of what are almost axioms about the nature of the world. One of these axioms is the law of the excluded middle that favours an either/or approach to world, and an inability to deal with ambiguity. Another is the extraordinary tension in the West between 'being' and 'becoming', Parmenides and Heraclitus, or culture or history on one side and nature on the other, that can never be resolved. The *aut-aut* principle of logic has framed and still frames Western attitudes and thinking about the world.

Alongside these deep cultural patterns, it is possible to place significant social and institutional factors that have come to mould the environment within which the inhabitants of the modern West come to relate to the world. We would emphasise that the two most important of these factors are growing social complexity and the increasing hegemony of the universities. Universities are critically important for moulding the way in which people use their cognitive capacities leading to the suppression of the modes of thought that most people use to relate to the world (Shipman and Shipman 2006).

Just as literacy changed the cognitive capacities of human beings, so too have more recent technological developments. The overall tendency, we believe, is not only to shift the focus onto abstract models but also to make it seem that these models are the only way in which human beings can come to know the world. Iain McGilchrist (2009) has argued that this represents the victory of the left-hand side of the brain, but that strikes us as a little simplistic. Certainly, it downgrades all those modes of thought that McGilchrist associates with the right-hand side. The now dominant theological outlook that dominates large sections of contemporary culture submerges all of those aspects of 'immediate experience.' It is now more important to know the theory of a thing than the thing itself. Theories and models increasingly mediate one's experience of the world; they relegate immediate experience to an inferior form of knowing and experiencing the world. They replace it with algorithms and other forms of mathematical formulae that pretend to be experience. This extreme rationalism is to be found in such authors as Alex Pentland (2015) who would seek to re-make the world using big data and mathematical principles, and denounced by others, such as Cathy O'Neil (2017) who views big data as a means of enslavement. Algorithms are the contemporary manifestation of the Platonic Idea, the triumph of the theological mindset.

These changes have been coming for a long time. One thinks of the famous essay of T E Hulme (Hynes 1955, p. 27) in which he watches a musical procession while attending a philosophical conference in Bologna when the announcement is made that an eminent professor is about to give a lecture on 'Reality'. What reality should he choose? At last, as he cunningly puts it, 'to my lasting regret . . . I left the real world and entered that of

Reality.' It is evident that there is a bifurcation of experience, between the subjective reality of self-reflective experience and the objective reality of logic, as craftily described by Hulme. Such a bifurcation occurs in Robert Musil's understanding of what he terms the 'other condition', namely our inchoate relationship to the world that is left behind as we become more and more scientific and precise. This is what historian Arnold Gehlen once described as the *post-histoire* condition (Gehlen 1957), in which technology and science structure society and design human behaviour. The world left behind, however, does not totally disappear; in fact, it cannot disappear because it is part of our humanity and, we would argue, essential to our survival as human beings. It continues to permeate our feelings and thoughts. It often becomes a sounding board where the testing of new ideas occurs. So how do we deal with these apparently irreconcilable and incommensurable modes of thought?

This what Musil (1996, p. 833) says:

> "Bourgeois culture has reduced this other condition to the status of a dog fetching intuitions. There are hordes of people today who find fault with rationality and would like us to believe that in their wisest moments they were doing their thinking with the help of some special, suprarational faculty. That's the final public vestige of it all, itself totally rationalistic. What's left of the drained swamp is rubbish! And so, except for its uses in poetry, this old condition is excusable only in uneducated people in the first weeks of a love affair, as a temporary aberration, like green leaves that every so often sprout posthumously from the wood of beds and lecterns; but if it threatens to revert to its original luxuriant growth, it is unmercifully dug up and rooted out!"

'Reality' has become reality; even Hulme must forsake the joys of listening to a band to enter the dreary halls of a lecture theatre, and the only people allowed to enjoy immediate experience are 'uneducated people in the first weeks of a love affair.' Of course, Western culture has become even more rationalist and theological since the days of Hulme and Musil.

Jonathan Haidt (2012, pp. 137–40) has argued that philosophers, such as Jeremy Bentham and Immanuel Kant, were essentially autistic. This may have helped them to develop their ideas into precise abstractions. It also indicates something about the dangers that lurk in philosophical abstraction. Philosophy among the ancients consisted in achieving a certain state of being and the cultivation of a particular way of life. *Eudaimonia*, happiness, and the cultivation of those virtues regarded as essential for its attainment, was the goal of *philosophia*. As in Indian philosophy, which emphasises the development of one's spirituality, ancient Greek Orphism, which has been regarded as the early manifestation of Western philosophy, was concerned about the cultivation of the human spirit and the salvation of the soul (Reale 1984, pp. 26–29). Following the advent of the Milesian School and, later, of the Sophists, philosophical thought gradually set itself on a different course. One of the crucial elements of Western philosophy has become, in fact, the separation between philosophical knowledge and philosophical practice, namely the need for the philosopher to use philosophical knowledge in pursuit of a philosophical way of life. Theory has ceased to mean 'contemplation' and is used to refer to a system of abstract statements about some facet of 'reality'. In this regard, one can draw a straight line from Plato to Descartes and chronicle the relentless process that led to the division between mind and matter and to the erosion of common sense. Platonism and Cartesianism opened the door for the development of abstract thought because of the way in which they separated lived experience and the realm of ideas. One can see the effects of excessive abstraction in the case of the philosopher John Stuart Mill who suffered a nervous breakdown brought on by an excess of philosophy.

Mill described his experiences in some detail, including his upbringing:

> "My education, I thought, had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis, while the whole course of my intel-

lectual cultivation had made precocious and premature analysis the unvarying habit of my mind."

It is worth noting Mill's reference to the negative effects of the 'dissolving power of analysis' and the inadequacy of an education focused on the cognitive capacities of the mind as a way of developing a balanced human being.

Mill (n.d., pp. 186–87) declares that he was 'cured' of this depressive state by reading the poetry of Wordsworth:

"What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind was that they expressed not mere outward beauty but states of feeling—and of thought coloured by feeling—under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings that I was looking for. In them I seemed to draw from a spring of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which all human beings could share in; which had no connection with struggle or imperfection but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From those poems I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness when all the greater evils of life had been removed; and as I came under their influence I felt myself better and happier."

It was not just poetry; it was a particular kind of poetry that invoked and evoked 'states of feeling', or piety, that cured Mill. Mill learned the lesson that an individual, even an intellectual, cannot live by analysis and criticism alone, but also requires 'tranquil contemplation' along with 'sympathetic and imaginative pleasure'. The human soul requires balance. An excessive emphasis on theology destroys that balance. Only when the soul is able to draw on the resources provided by the practice of piety is a restoration of that balance possible. Even Thomas Aquinas experienced something similar to Mill that prompted him to abandon his work of systemisation of Christian theology (Davies 1993, p. 9). Logic alone therefore is insufficient and human beings must cultivate their spirit and poetic imagination. Prose is the realm of order and repetition, while poetry is the realm of liberty and creativity. Both are indispensable, and the post-modern malaise owes a lot to the failure to strike a balance between piety and theology.

3. The Advent of the Post-Historical and the End of the West?

In looking at the past through the theoretical framework outlined in this paper, it is evident that the history of the West has been characterised by the tension between the two paradigms that we labelled as theology and piety. It suffices to consider some of the so-called 'revolutions' or 'movements' of which the history of Western Civilisation is replete. Several of these revolutions or movements started as spontaneous expressions of piety and became theologies once their revolutionary ardour was harnessed by the ruling elites and new ideas and values were tamed and systemised within the extant structures of power. It suffices to mention in this regard the process by which the Franciscan movement in the thirteenth century or the Lutheran protest in the sixteenth century came to be institutionalised by religious or temporal authorities. Christianity itself began, in the I century, as a movement that challenged hegemonic orthodoxies, discourses, and institutions (Brent 2009) only to be brought within the fold of imperial power and thus transformed into a rigid theology that legitimated the power of the sovereign and limited and directed human thought and action. Analogously can be said of the much-celebrated French Revolution, the meaning and implications of which have been poorly understood and have been the object of intense revisionism since the 1970s (Furet 1981), and its ideals of liberty, equality, and brotherhood of humankind, which were translated and interpreted within the context of the post-Napoleonic restoration. The definition of the concept of *citoyenne* is how the piety inspiring the various 'voices' of the Revolution came to be disciplined and incorporated into the restored order of post-revolutionary society. The piety that could not be bridled through the processes of translation, interpretation, and systemisation, was violently suppressed, persecuted, or banned as subversive conspiracy

or dangerous heresy. The suppression of millenarian movements and of their perilously destabilizing ideas stands as the most notable exemplar of this tendency. Piety therefore has contributed to the history of the West as much as theology. It has provided those elements that allowed the theological mindset to define or reform itself in the battle for survival. After all, as the philosopher Heraclitus once stated, 'war is the father of all things', and it is undeniable that the struggle or tension between opposites or antagonistic forces has allowed the West to advance through time. Dichotomies are the defining feature of the West's self-definition and attitude towards the world of experience; they are the dynamic forces or entelechies that have propelled the West through time.

In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama (1992) argued that the end of the Cold War ideological polarity marked the 'end of history' as the *telos* represented by the triumph of liberal democracy in human society had been reached. Fukuyama's thesis was of course based on a particular philosophy of history, the foundations of which had been established during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and which found its ideological expression in the philosophical thought of Hegel and of Marx. The philosophical thinking that emerged from the Enlightenment was based on an inherent dichotomy, that between the spiritual and the physical worlds, between the world of ideas and the empirical world of experience, between the Cartesian res extensa and res cogitans, between reason and the imagination. It was the heir of that way of thinking that had emerged among the Eleatic philosophers in the sixth century BC and had perpetuated itself across the centuries shaping and channelling human discourse and action. It is understandable therefore that when the historical dialectics had dissolved with the triumph of one opposite over the other that Fukuyama would claim that it represented the end of history. However, this end was problematic as history—or more precisely a particular way of understanding history as the battleground of opposites in tension—had been, and is, a distinctive feature of Western Civilisation. The end of history would *ipso facto* mean the end of the West.

As Fukuyama and other scholars, such as Samuel Huntington (1997), tried finding ways of restarting history and formulating new theological or dogmatic paradigms by which to shape, drive, and interpret human experience, little did they realise that their attempts were thwarted by the growing pervasiveness of technology that was gradually eroding the value of old categories of thought and of action. The very idea of progress, of human advancement at the heart of historical thinking, was undermining their attempts. In discourse as well as in practice, technology had transformed progress into routine and as such the positivist discourse of progress could no longer drive any change, let alone inaugurate any new beginning. As German historian Arnold Gehlen (1957) had once stated, the West had jumped into the void of the 'post-histoire', the post historical. In this era of the 'post-histoire', one can replace historical understanding with a combination of data and algorithms, the accumulation of which constitutes a new ahistorical form of social organisation governed by 'social physics' (Pentland 2015), an almost pure form of theology.

The post-historical is characterised by the end of agonistic politics and of political debate, and the rise of a politics of consensus, inherently coercive, homologising, and intolerant towards dissent. It is therefore inimical to any particularism, such as state or nation, and instead embraces a universalism that favours global politics, the fabrication of mass myths, and cultural explanations for political facts (Žižek 1999). Consonant with a theological mindset, it silences unorthodox opinions or forms of resistance. As such, the post-historical introduces the post political. It is a rigid theological paradigm that leaves no space for free human thinking as everything is serialised, pre-packaged, and delivered as the mechanisms of neo-liberal economics have established the norms of living and hence of thinking. The way humans live is dictating the way they think. Humanity has overcome the metaphysics of existence heralded by Sartre and which had reversed the traditional metaphysics of essence, thus losing—or forsaking even—the possibility of the emergence of a new humanism, for the rule of *techne* has plunged humans into the normative vortex of repetition and routine, a state of inertia that in the long run will have the effect of stifling cultural and intellectual creativity.

As the West becomes increasingly a theological culture, the more the Western personality defines itself by a certain rigidity, as it relates to the world in an abstract and theoretical fashion. Thinking in a rigorous and analytical fashion is very important; the real concern is that this rigour will become too rigorous, infecting the human psyche, and diminishing its capacity for piety and charity. Philosophy is a process through which those engaged in it transform themselves to enhance their capacity for spiritual awareness. As the case of John Stuart Mill indicates, when that transformation is primarily rationalist and theological in nature, it can inflict a great deal of harm on the person. Mill only recovered because he was able to reanimate his piety through poetry. Another consequence of the rise of theology is the corresponding fall of play and playfulness. As Huizinga (1970, p. 218) argued, play in the West went into decline in the early nineteenth century. The theological mind is hard and rigid, tied together by the extraordinary strength of its gossamer cobwebs.

The modern university greatly contributes to entrenching rigid theological paradigms in society. The bureaucratic culture of the modern university, in fact, combined with its preferred intellectual mode of expression, the abstract model, encourages theology rather than piety. We live in an age that cultivates the theological soul, especially amongst its elites. The day of the amateur naturalist who goes out into the world collecting specimens is long past. In its place there are the abstract modellers staring intently at the screens of their computers in windowless rooms. Scientific modelling replaces empirical observation. In buildings behind closed doors, the crafting of reality becomes the project of the twenty-first century. Rules and regulations stymy and contain dissent. Through the taming and manipulation of 'academic opinion' by means of 'peer review' ensures the creation of consent. The triumph of theology over piety has enormous ramifications for contemporary culture and for the conduct of intellectual discussions. One ramification is that our political debates mirror the intellectual condition of those who conduct them, which is to say that the theological condition shapes them. Such debates exist increasingly in a world of ideas thrice removed from the world of immediate experience into the world of would-be philosopher kings. Empirical evidence and practical experience are no longer essential. Two things follow from this situation. One is that dogmatic assertion rather than subtle understanding, and nuance too often characterises such debates. The other is that such dogmatism leads to frustration because it is impossible to convince the other side leading to an enhanced emotionalism, similar to that which led to such abominations as the Albigensian Crusade.

The dominance of the theological condition intensifies the so-called culture wars based on identity politics. Following on from Thomas à Kempis, we can say that the thirst for abstract theological knowledge simultaneously encourages excessive pride and kills charity as the seeker after knowledge while it strives to impose one vision of the world on others. Another ramification is the cognitive gap that has grown up between the theological elite and the ordinary person. Stephen Hopgood's (2013, p. 14) argument about human rights demonstrates this very well:

A disconnect is growing up between global humanism with its law, courts, fundraising, and campaigns on the one hand, and local lived realities on the other. It is a disconnect between Human Rights and human rights.

'Human Rights' is a theological construct while 'human rights' is a basic human intuition, informed by piety. That everyone should be treated fairly, what might be termed 'rough justice', is a matter of 'common sense'. The irony is that 'Human Rights' often fails to deliver that justice.

This cognitive divide is, we believe, an important element in explaining contemporary populism. The intellectual elites that have grown up since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment have always had contempt for what they saw as the emotional views of their 'inferiors'. The growing dominance of the theological outlook of those elites, the numbers of whom have increased over the last couple of centuries, only exacerbates the situation. Ordinary people are less likely to think theologically and to place greater emphasis on immediate experience.

Contemporary elites, trapped as they are by their theological souls, cannot see the cobwebs that entangle them, believing instead that they have escaped from the darkness of the cage. What this means is that Plato's story of the cave, in many ways foundational for the rationalist culture of the West, requires significant reconsideration. Perhaps, those remaining in the cave reject those who return from the light because they instinctively know that, from their understanding of the world, what the enlightened offer them is deeply flawed.

4. Towards a New Philosophy of History

Foucault claims that the modern European man was a recent invention, one which was produced in the sixteenth century in the clefts of a fragmented language brought about by "the fundamental arrangements of knowledge" (Foucault 2002, p. 422). This may be certainly true as the fragmentation of knowledge opened up what we could refer to as "spaces of possibilities". It is however also true that the boundaries between various categories of knowledge and their specific discourses also increasingly involved a level of 'policing' or 'disciplining' that destroyed the possibility of using knowledge outside its designated domain. Normative imperatives of disciplinary knowledge bridled the innate human desire to know by dictating its trajectory and orienting its direction towards a future that is not much different from the present. This because reason is inextricably connected with language—it is not by chance that the Greeks used the same word, *logos*, to designate both reason and language—and hence thought is unable to escape what Gadamer (2004, p. 417) referred to as the inexplicable relation between word and thing, a relation that a theological *Weltanschauung* attempted to cement and enforce.

In times of cultural crises, often new philosophies of history have emerged to explain the causes of the contemporary human condition and to provide a way forward by reorganising meaning and instilling a sense of purpose. Chance is not a conceivable or comforting option in times such as these, hence historicism, namely the understanding that human happenings and experience are not the mere product of chance, provides a framework of meaning to the incessant world of the becoming that rigid and dogmatic theological paradigms try to freeze or obliterate. Theology, as defined in this paper, is inimical to history. Heralding the end of history means celebrating the static ideal model beyond the messiness and imperfection of the real world.

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