

Religion as Ordering Principle and Higher Law

Abstract The role of religion in creating a blueprint for human life is discussed. The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche is engaged in connection to contemporary modes of subjectivity which are atomized and narcissistic. This form of dysfunctional subjectivity has been the result of the process of disenchantment as analysed by sociologist Max Weber and has resulted in widespread *anomie* as predicted by Emile Durkheim.

Keywords Nietzsche · Dysfunctional subjectivity · Weber · Anomie · Emile durkheim

THE ANCHORING FUNCTION OF THE TRANSCENDENT

At the very heart of all religions is the idea of a higher order or law that transcends, and is woven into, everyday life. While traditions differ on the details of how to interpret this principle, all share a sense of larger pattern or ordering principle. Secularists and materialists may protest that we can live perfectly well without it. However, from a religious perspective, lacking a sense of the transcendent means falling into chaos and states of moral disorientation, or at best clinging to the fading outlines of religious and moral codes.

Sociologist Peter Berger (1969) described the key role of religion in creating a world view and sense of meaning in his work *The Sacred Canopy*. In this work, he argues that traditionally religion creates a *nomos*

that orders and relates, as opposed to chaos that fragments (20). A *telos* assures us that there is a sense of participating in a meaningful journey, no matter how challenging. The individual remains largely unconscious of much of this blueprint, which nevertheless forms the matrix of identity and “an embedded framework for valuation, and a mode of belonging and embodied social practice” (Butler 2009, 72).

From a religious point of view, the sacred is the founding order on which all else is built. As scholar of religion Mircea Eliade (1987) writes, the “revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation...to ‘found the world’ and to live in a real sense” (23). One of the characteristic functions of religious and philosophical traditions is a focus on first principles. Conceptions of law that exist and control the phenomena of the world lie in direct contrast to postmodern modes of thinking, which emphasizes only the creation of personal idiosyncratic world views.

First principles also include laws related to those that rule the natural world and the ordering of the seasons and the periodicity of day and night. In the Hindu tradition, the earliest scriptures of the *Rig Veda* refer to a similar principle as *rta*, which binds all within the order of creation (O’Flaherty 1981, 47). Systems of ritual, understanding of human health and ordering of society all relate back to these first principles. The well-being of both the individual and society is linked directly to alignment to the higher order of principles.

Codes of morality and ethics are also developed by religious traditions built out from their belief in a higher order. The philosophical heirs of philosophers like Frederic Nietzsche fail to account for the fact that most people are ill-equipped to develop their own morality. Morality is fundamentally based upon relationality, and so the idea of each individual creating their own is an exercise in futility that leaves society without a shared vision of the “good”, and at risk of plunging into modes of individualism destructive to both the person and the community as a whole.

Religion has also traditionally provided the individual with a sense of essential trust. Faith in a higher order principle allows for a sense of security at the most unconscious and basic level. Anthony Giddens has argued that in order for individuals to function, each must achieve a sense of trust in order for stable and continuous social relations to exist. Trust is tied to ontological security, and Giddens (1990) writes that for individuals who fail to establish what he calls basic trust the outcome “persistent existential anxiety” (100).

Religious and spiritual traditions place core principles at the centre ensuring that all other aspects of life revolve around a single understanding of a higher order—a point of orientation outside the self that provides a sense of security and safety. The Islamic understanding of submission and faith speaks directly to this sense of trust. The root meaning of the word *iman* (faith) is “to be at peace, to be safe” (Husain 1998, 284). Levin (2001) notes that a sense of faith in providence allows for attitudes of hopefulness and optimism even in the face of suffering (144).

A natural humility results from the perception of a higher ordering principle—the opposite of believing oneself to be in complete control—which recognizes the limits of a human condition. From this point of view, the idea of complete human control is a form of hubris. While most religious traditions recognize the need for individual effort, it is always undertaken with the understanding that there are complex forces beyond the self. Submission to a higher will is a central feature of the Abrahamic traditions and serves as a corrective to the overgrowth of the human ego.

One of the most vital contributions that religious belief makes to both mental and physical health is the concept of a higher principle and law. This sense of providential order offers a sense of a stable and meaningful existence. Evidence indicates that most human beings simply cannot thrive without this sense of a larger purpose and basic trust. While post-modernists may offer an intellectually interesting view of life, it would appear that for most people, fragmented and relativistic approaches are wholly inadequate.

The Category of the Sacred

At the beginning of the twentieth century, sociologist Max Weber (1946) predicted the Western world was moving towards becoming a completely rationalized society. Weber referred to this growing emphasis on reason, calculation and bureaucracy as the process of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) (7). He predicted that the imperialist forces of modernity would increasingly push all other aspects of human life, including the religious, to the margins.

Related to the larger loss of “enchantment” is the rejection of the concept of the sacred itself, which can only exist within the context of a religious world view. The rejection of the category of the sacred is part of a larger flattening out of human life that includes a trivialization of the

aesthetic and the imaginative, resulting in what Moore (1996) refers to as a “flat, pragmatic and literalized culture” (49).

From this point of view, religion, art and creativity have little or no place other than as a source of diversion. This lack of dimensionality in human life is a hallmark of our present culture, which Jameson refers to as the “depthlessness” of postmodernity and the creation “of a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum” (Jameson 2003a: 6).

The dimensionality of a given society has traditionally been derived from the category of the sacred. French sociologist Emile Durkheim (2008) described the division between sacred and profane, which he saw as intrinsic to all human societies (37). The sacred is a category that is inviolable, representing that which is most precious to a culture and society—the bedrock of its traditions and its philosophy. A religion, then, in his famous definition is a moral community based on a “unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things” (47).

The sacred realm is often understood through the teachings of mystics, shamans, seers and prophets. In his influential book, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Rudolf Otto argued that belief in the holy or the sacred is the fundamental a priori basis of all religious traditions and that there is “no religion in which it does not live as the real innermost core” (6). At the heart of each tradition is a truth beyond all intellectual conceptualization that makes a religious world view utterly different from a secular one and represents a “wholly different order” (Eliade 1987, 10). While morality and ethics are built out from this first truth, it is the numinous experience that forms the foundation of all spiritual traditions.

These traditions necessarily use metaphorical and poetic language in an attempt to describe this ineffable ground of being. One of the most famous examples of this type of poetic discourse of the sacred is Arjuna’s vision in the *Bhagavad Gita* in which the divine is described as being like the “light of a thousand suns” (Stoler Miller 1986, 99). Another example is the famously frustrating first line of Laozi (1988) from the *Tao Te Ching* which states that “the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao”. Paradox and symbolic language speak to the understanding that the sacred is beyond all forms of description.

The category of the sacred is one that is applied to both time and space. Sacred time is set apart as being qualitatively different from secular time. Typically religions create an order where certain days are understood as religiously set apart. These can include sabbaths, holy days and periods such as Ramadan, Diwali, Lent and Advent. These are times

that ideally are removed from all worldly concerns and are intended to encourage focus on contemplation and reflection, ceremony and celebration and allow time and space for important relationships with family, friends and community.

Writing about the cycles of the liturgical year of Christianity, Sister Joan Chittister (2009) notes that year after year the practices offer a sense of “what it entails to live beyond the immediate and into the significant dimension of human existence” (6). The individual, then, is consistently reminded to create time and space that allow for higher and transcendent values to move onto centre stage.

The erosion of the category of the sacred has profound implications for both public and private life. The conception of the sacred—the utterly set apart—is the basis for morality and moral action in the world. Many Indigenous traditions regard the earth itself as sacred. Wade Davis (2009) in his book *The Wayfinders* notes that the First Nations of northern British Columbia¹ believe that the headwaters of the Stikine, Skeena and the Nass rivers are sacred and forbid tampering with them in any way. As a result, these nations have come into conflict with the British Columbia and Canadian governments over the poisoning of the headwaters by international mining companies. Millennia of tradition have held this area inviolate; thus, protecting the water supply and the animal and human life of the region becomes a religious imperative.

Without a concept of the sacred, however, we are left without vocabulary to express outrage at those who have “reduced our planet to a commodity, a raw resource to be consumed at our whim” (119). With their disenchanting world view, those motivated entirely by profit have no sense of constraint on their activities. As Moore (1996) writes, “our arguments will be human ones when the issue is fundamentally a matter of theology; our use of the earth’s materials has to be done in a sacred manner, or we will have no deep guidance in knowing how to build and how to preserve” (26).

A belief in the sacred also changes approaches to space and religious places, whether a public place of worship or a home altar, which create a zone that is meant to encourage a focus on higher order values. These spaces are expressly created to foster contemplation, self-reflection and a

¹Nations including the Gitksan, Wet’suwet’en, Carrier, Sekani, Tsimshian, Nisga’a, Tahltan, Haisla and Tlingit.

sense of serenity. Religious spaces aim to create areas outside the logic of the market place and to foster what anthropologist Victor Turner (2011) calls *communitas*. This is a type of relationship that exists beyond social class and other markers of difference and requires radical acceptance of the other (131–165).

A remarkable contemporary example of the power of sacred space is illustrated in the case of a crime-ridden neighbourhood in Oakland, California. Driven to distraction by garbage dumping, drug dealing and sex trade outside his door, in 2009, Dan Stevenson bought and placed a statue of Buddha in an area that had become a de facto dumping ground. Stevenson, who is not a member of any religious group, chose the Buddha because he is “neutral”.

To Stevenson’s surprise, the area around the statue quickly became a shrine attracting approximately 70 people a day. The visitors came mostly from the Vietnamese community, who performed rituals and made offerings. As a result of the transformation of this public space, crime dropped by 82%, something no amount of policing had ever been able to achieve.² Going on instinct, in creating a public, sacred space, Stevenson was able to radically restructure relationships within his neighbourhood.

TUMBLING IN THE VOID: ANOMIE AND CONTEMPORARY LIFE

The 2013 film *Gravity* offers a disturbing image that can be read symbolically as a picture of the psychology of many people in our society. Early in the film, astronaut Ryan Stone loses her tether to the space station and is hurled out into space. For a period of time that feels like an eternity, she tumbles in the void as the viewer shares her panicked state of complete disorientation. Her colleague calls to her, telling her to find her balance, to look out for any points of reference to guide her so that he can find her bearings, but in her terror, she is unable to do so. Unable to find a still point, she cannot determine up from down.

As an allegory, the character’s disorientation reflects that of many in our increasingly secular society unable to find a footing or solid anchoring point. In fact, the astronaut with her complete disconnection from

²“He’s So Neutral”, podcast, *Criminal* Episode 115, <http://thisiscriminal.com/episode-15-hes-neutral/>, Deana Mitchell, “Buddha of Oakland,” *Oakland North*, October 21, 2014, <http://oaklandnorth.net/2014/10/21/buddha-of-oakland/>.

the earth, and other people, is one of the best images available to sum up the plight of many in contemporary society. Without firm footing, many are floating far above the sources of security, comfort and refuge.

In Svend Brinkman's *Stand Firm* (2017), the psychologist paints a portrait of the modern epidemic of instability and psychic alienation and interprets it as a natural response to the unbearable nature of constant acceleration and consumerism linking the sense of disorientation to the perception of a speeding up of life (2). Brinkman contrasts this predicament of "psychic speed" to the rare person who slows down—which seems almost out of place "in a culture characterized by manic development, and may be interpreted pathologically (diagnosed as clinically depressed)" (3).

Sociologist Emile Durkheim (2006) began sounding the alarm at the end of the nineteenth century regarding the waning power of religion in French society. In viewing society as a whole, he was already able to intuit where the decline in religious belief and practice might lead. Durkheim argued that a person who lacks a sense of meaning and purpose will often fall victim to a state of *anomie* (177). *Anomie*, while disastrous for the individual, often resulting in depression and anxiety, also has implications for society as a whole. A person in its grip is much less likely to contribute to his or her community, fulfil obligations and, *in extremis*, may become suicidal.

North Americans appear to be in particular danger of this type of psychic fragmentation. Living in a culture less grounded in tradition than older societies, which lend an inherent weight and sense of security, the tendency towards weightlessness is more marked. Lorne Dawson (2006) refers to anomic worldlessness as the "structural dilemma of modernity". According to Dawson, in contemporary society, individuals are left with a "constellation of limited instrumental roles" with no connecting thread between them (54).

As religion has always played a central part in mediating the individual to the larger world order, the understandable result of this disembedding process is a feeling of pervasive anxiety. Scrambling to make sense of what can appear like unrelated fragments is a hallmark of contemporary life for many people who now function in micro-worlds of their own making with little or no connection to society, community, the political order or religious belief.

The causes of this current cultural situation are complex and part of the larger historical record. Since emerging in seventeenth century, the

Enlightenment Project has increasingly been the ontological basis of Western culture. This narrative posited reason, science and instrumental logic as the basis for understanding and organizing society the creation of the discourse of the enlightenment.

Religion was a primary point of contention within this movement. The effort to move reason to the centre of political discourse for the philosophers of this movement necessitated the “the elimination or at least the reducing the power of those who claim to speak in the name of God” (Bartlett 2000, 14). In their championing of rationalism, empiricism and scepticism, these thinkers understood themselves as shining a light onto the “darkness of fanaticism” (McMahon 2001, 10). This view of religion as embodying superstition, fanaticism and supernaturalism remains a common attitude towards religion in the contemporary world.

In his work *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Zygmunt Bauman argues that the project of modernity specifically required the breaking down of traditional belief and loyalties. This according to the various spokespeople of the modern, including Marx and Nietzsche, meant rejecting any sense of history, “profaning the sacred” and “smashing the armour forged of the beliefs and loyalties which allowed solids to resist the liquefaction” (3).

The pre-eminent philosopher of a secular society is of course Friedrich Nietzsche. In his writing, Nietzsche took the enlightenment paradigm to its logical conclusion. Living through the turbulent social and political changes of the mid-nineteenth century, he recognized that the religious tradition that had been at the centre of European society could no longer hold. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, he saw this as a situation to be celebrated rather than lamented. Proclaiming the death of God in *The Gay Science* (1994), he also declared that “Christianity *as a morality* must also be destroyed” (127 italics in the original).

Controversy continues to swirl around the subject of exactly what Nietzsche meant by these declarations and need not be rehearsed here.³ There is no doubt, however, about his animus towards religion. Many of Nietzsche’s foundational premises place him utterly at odds with a religious world view, and as Ansell-Pearson (1994) writes, “he does not regard the human person as inviolable and human life as sacrosanct;

³ Nietzsche, *Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy*. 2002. Edited by Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich.

neither does he believe that all persons should be treated with equal respect as moral beings" (x).

Wedded to notions of progress modernity with its rationalist and largely nihilist underpinning created a cascade of events including the industrial revolution, the mass displacement of people due to colonization, emigration both voluntary and forced, and rapid urbanization and industrialization. Coalescing in the nineteenth century, the ideals of the enlightenment created a "gospel of science, technology and progress" (Bartlett 2000, 9), the outlines of which remain in place today.

By the First World War, the rapid development of technology had already outstripped the ability of culture to contain or make sense of it. As Eksteins writes, the decade after the Great War was typified by "cynicism about convention in all its forms and particularly about moral idealism that had kept busy the slaughterhouse of the Western Front" (Eksteins 1989, 258).

The Bolshevik Revolution, which followed on and emerged from the First World War, has been another key factor in the exile of religion. It is sobering to consider two examples of regimes which set out to create societies which rejected traditional religious values. The political regimes of Stalinist Communist and National Socialism were responsible between them for at least 14 million murders over the course of the twelve years between 1933 and 1945 (Snyder 2010, 406).

Within both these systems, the lives of those who were deemed "superfluous" for a wide variety of reasons including ethnic, religious, political beliefs, mental disability and sexual orientation could be murdered with impunity. Any thought of fellow feeling was within Stalinist Communism referred to as "bourgeois sentimentality" and Adolph Hitler rejected the value of compassion as a "Jewish invention". This is an echo of Nietzsche's (1994) contempt for what he referred to as "the value of pity" and which he believed was an outgrowth of a "slave morality" (7).

While the impact of changes of this magnitude seeps down into general culture very gradually, we are continuing to feel the reverberations of the senseless and brutalizing trench warfare of the First World War and the death camps of the Second World War. These events called into question the whole project of Western culture and the idea of tradition itself. They resulted, quite understandably, in the questioning of all forms of authority by a growing minority.

The twentieth century saw the development of existential movements that openly declared the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. Gordon (2015) makes a direct connection between the fact that existentialist philosopher Albert Camus lived through two world wars and the discovery of concentration camps to his philosophy (364). Jean Paul Sartre, building on the work of Nietzsche, attempted to develop an atheistic philosophy. In doing so, he recognized the problems related to this task as “the Death of God seems to entail the death of values, and of morality and lead to nihilism” (Gillespie 2016, 44). Camus working a similar furlough settles on the absurdity of human life as the centrepiece of his philosophy (Gordon 2015, 37). While these approaches began within a circle of the literary elite, they increasingly began to typify general modes of thought.

The postmodernists who followed close on the heels of the existentialists rushed to deal the final death blow and as O’Toole (2000) styles it to “dictate the obituary” of God (36). Not content with this, they were also central ideologues in developing philosophies that undermined any “unifying forces in public life such as national and religious identities, the state and civic commitments” (Katerburg 2000, 295). While it might not have been their intention, this urge to deconstruct all structure paved the way for the movement of an identity based on the status of consumer rather than citizen.

Postmodernists argued that all reality is constructed, and against what they called “Grand Theory”. As a result, the concepts of the sacred and higher law were their primary point of attack. The attitudes of a number of these European philosophers were partly the product of their loss of faith in the political project of Marxism. This loss of faith in the myths of enlightenment and the liberation of humanity through reason and revolution resulted in what Jameson calls a “crisis of narratives” (Jameson 2003b, xxii). As many of the postmodernists seemed to reject even the political as a mode of engagement, they were left with what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1985) calls “language games” (15).

One of the most trenchant commentaries on this situation in contemporary society remains Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). Lasch connects the disintegration of public life and sense of community with its impact on personality, which results in an inability to tolerate ambivalence typified by a character that is “chaotic and impulse ridden” (37). According to his analysis, the narcissist is rapidly becoming a common personality type in our culture. Without traditional values

rooted in community obligation, compassion and self-sacrifice for the common good, people are left only with “fantasies of wealth, beauty and omnipotence” (39).

In a society lacking religion’s traditional emphasis on relationality and sense of an overarching value system, it shouldn’t be surprising that we see what Twenge and Campbell (2009) call a “Narcissism Epidemic” (7). Deprived of substantive markers of identity such as religion, community and often even family, many people tumble in a void—in Berman’s words (1982) a “maelstrom of perpetual disintegration” (15). Many people are now raised without the orientation of religious or spiritual tradition and are left with only the purely personal as a point of reference.

In his book *Postmodernism: Culture and the Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Frederic Jameson notes that we have moved from the stage where alienation is the primary pathology into one where it is psychic fragmentation (14). A magazine article in *Macleans* discusses a wide spectrum of mental health and emotional issues among university students including feelings of hopelessness and depression (Lunau 2012). A 2016 Canadian survey has shown that one-third of adolescents in Ontario are suffering from psychological distress.⁴ Similar statistics are also being reported in the case of Britain.⁵

Without traditional anchors such as a sense of history, ties to community, involvement in politics or social programmes, we are shaped merely by the arbitrary forces of the market. In a related way, trends and fads become a typical feature of contemporary culture. Unsurprisingly, a constant search for stimulation and novelty is the hallmark of popular culture. This change has resulted in the shift from “rooting people in overlapping communities, with right and obligations, to a consumer ethic of therapeutic self-realization and personal development” (Katerburg 2000, 287).

Ross Poole (1991) is one of the few contemporary philosophers who has engaged seriously with this erosion of moral absolutes brought on in the wake of secularization and postmodernism. In his book *Morality and Modernity*, Poole addresses the impact of contemporary ontologies

⁴Ellen Brait, “One-third of Ontario adolescents report psychological distress”, *Globe and Mail*, Thursday, July 21, 2016.

⁵Daniel Boffey, “Leaked report reveals scale of crisis in England’s mental health services”. Damning confidential report reveals suicides are rising and 75% of those needing help are not receiving it”, *The Guardian*, Saturday, 13 February 2016.

on morality, arguing that “liberalism is a diluted nihilism” (89). If true, then liberalism simply has nothing to offer the creation of meaning and purpose vital to human societies. As Nietzsche (1994) wrote, “Nothing is true, everything is allowed” (118).

Understood within the larger sweep of this modernizing and secularizing process, various school of psychology emerged to attempt to fill some of the gaps left by the rejection of religion. However, the inability of psychology to substitute for the variety of religious functions was recognized by many psychologists themselves. Writing in 1958 about changes to the American character, Allen Wheelis wrote that in order for an individual to have a coherent sense of self “it depends upon stable values, and upon the conviction that one’s actions and values are harmoniously related. It is a sense of wholeness, of integration, of knowing what is right and what is wrong and of being able to choose” (19).

However, this is precisely what modernity and postmodernity have rendered impossible. Taking up this lack within psychotherapy, decades later William J. Doherty argues that by bracketing out a discourse of morality psychologists are left with an inadequate theory to help guide their patients. He advocates for forms of psychotherapy that take serious responsibility to others and to the larger community rather than simply concepts of self-development.

Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung was also one of the few to place an understanding of the sacred at the centre of his practice, and it was precisely for this reason that he was often marginalized within the study of psychology. Jung (1973) saw clearly that religious issues and concerns were closely related to psychological health and healing and could not be ignored in the analytical work. Arguing for the universal need for meaning he wrote:

Among all my patients in the second half of life – that is to say, over thirty five – there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost what the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook. (334)

This broader outlook, while helpful at any age, becomes crucial with age and the challenges that it brings.

The privileging of higher values over economics also runs directly counter to the common assumptions of late-capitalist society obsessed as it is with materialism and positivism, and a fetishization of choice and freedom. The heirs of Nietzsche, who call on each person to be their own God, have not really wrestled with what this implies in social, political and personal terms. As Jerry Mander (1991) states, “There are no boundaries, no rules, no set of standards by which to moderate these activities. No sense of right or wrong, no taboo; there’s only what will succeed in the market place” (187).

What we are left with as a guideline, then, is generally something approaching “if it is consenting adults no one should interfere”, or “if it makes the person feel good who am I to judge”. These clichés hardly rank as a sophisticated or even very useful life philosophy. The logical end of this approach is a narcissism and solipsism that fragments all ideals of the common good and shared responsibility and removes the grounds for any shared moral or ethical discourse.

This logic then also extends to the individual. One of the best examples of an anomic character depicted in popular culture is Will, the protagonist in the film *About a Boy* (2002), based on Nick Hornby’s (1996) best selling book of the same name. At the beginning of the film, Will is the ultimate Nietzschean—an island with no need of other people. In the first scene of the film, he categorically rejects Donne’s deeply religious vision of the spiritual solidarity of human beings found in his poem “No Man Is An Island”.

Instead, Will’s day is divided into what he describes as “units of pleasure”, which include listening to music, imbibing a variety of drugs and alcohol, and relationships with women that never go beyond the casual. The main character attends carefully to his appearance, which is as glossy and as superficially attractive as his magazine spread ready bachelor apartment. He floats above the mundane concerns of others buffered by his wealth and utterly dissociated from both himself and other people. Before his transformation, Will sees other human beings in purely instrumental terms, the pleasure that they can provide for him. “I am the star of the Will show,” he declares, “and everyone else makes guest appearances”.

This type of subjectivity, enclosed and atomized, utterly detached, is historically unprecedented and clearly exhibits symptoms of psychopathology, even from a secular point of view. Contemporary life, with its erosion of community, and submersion in technology, allows individuals

to live with the illusion that they are unconnected to either other human beings or their natural environment.

Fineman (2004) refers to this attitude as the “myth of autonomy”, which contributes to a noticeable lack of empathy for others or engagement with or concern for the larger world. Ironically, this approach to life flies in the face of what has actually been shown to result in happiness: meaningful work, satisfying relationships and spiritual belief.

Psychologist Bruce Alexander’s (2008) book the *Globalization of Addiction. A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* offers a sweeping analysis that takes in the history of displacement and dislocation caused by modernity. According to Alexander, a common response to the “strains of modern life and the fragmentation of identity” is a variety of malaises including addiction (193) .

In his book *The Hollow Tree. Fighting Addiction With Traditional Native Healing* (2006), Herb Nabigon describes his own recovery from alcoholism. This process was achieved through a return to his Indigenous culture and spirituality that had been stripped from him in residential schools. However, he makes clear that while First Nations have experienced catastrophic impacts of this stripping away of identity already the process is the same for all. As he writes, “The hollow tree is a metaphor for what Western culture has become, an empty shell with no substance” (vii).

At the base of psychological health, a sense of purpose is fundamental. In his famous work *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1988), Viktor Frankl argues that human beings are essentially creatures of meaning. Frankl, while agreeing with the Freudian and Adlerian ideas that the pleasure and power principles are important aspects of human life, believes that the struggle for meaning is the central concern of human beings. He writes, “only if one’s original concern with meaning fulfilment is frustrated is one either content with power or intent on pleasure” (35).

Research in psychology and religion reveals that those with a religious perspective are able to achieve a sense of “unity in the person, rescuing the psyche from inner turmoil and conflict” (Emmons 1999, 114). In the article “Meaning is Healthier Than Happiness”, Emily Esfahani Smith emphasizes the difference between the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* and happiness. Smith characterizes contemporary notions of happiness as hedonism where “difficult and taxing entanglements are avoided”. Her research revealed that, in fact, health was tightly tied to eudaimonic modes of well-being that were based upon the sense of living

a meaningful life. This overall sense was shown to have direct impacts upon physical and mental health.⁶

If, indeed, we know a tree by its fruit, then the bitterness of the fruit of this emptying of meaning from the world has become evident, and the fact that “anxiety disorders” are one of the malaises of our time is unsurprising. Lasch (1979) writes, “the new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety” (xvi). Achieving material stability which used to be a stepping stone has become the final destination of development and the prevailing focus of life for many people. Gaining and preserving material prosperity is now for many the central pivot of life.

Recognition of a higher order is foundational to a religious world view and orients human life towards first principles. The Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism⁷ places “right knowledge” as the first step on the path of development. While individuals rarely think consciously about their life philosophy, all human action springs from basic presuppositions about life and its purpose. As Mehta (2011) notes, habitual actions and beliefs come over time to seem “natural”. Yoga, for example, “is not an escape from action—on the contrary, it enables man to discover the right starting point of action” (11).

Of course, it is understood that all people inevitably fall out of alignment with the higher principles they have been taught. In the Christian tradition, this process of falling short has traditionally been referred to as sin. Sin can be understood as actions and beliefs that alienate people from others and from God (Stott 1986, 75). In the Hindu tradition, breaking of sacred law is believed to result in the creation of negative karma. Interestingly, many religions in our time are also moving towards the position, long held by many Indigenous peoples, that sin is also what alienates us from the natural order and leads to the destruction of the larger environment.

Belief in a higher or transcendent law, therefore, has profound implications for structuring both social systems and individual lives. It assumes

⁶See “Meaning is Healthier Than Happiness, Emily Esfahani Smith”, *The Atlantic*, August 1, 2013.

⁷The Noble Eightfold Path consists of: (1) Right View or Understanding, (2) Right Directed Thought, (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness, (8) Right Concentration in Peter Harvey, 1990, *An Introduction to Buddhism. Teachings, history and practices* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 68.

a principle of value that exists outside of and beyond the desires of particular groups or individuals. It moves beyond even the most ambitious and utopian of political programmes. Transcendent values require us to think beyond our own lifespans and place ethical and moral values above the short-term gain of the market.

A world view that incorporates higher order principles provides a powerful bulwark against the disintegrative forces of postmodernity and offers a point of ballast that shores up a sense of meaning and purpose. This anchoring provides a source of profound psychological stability through the many changes and challenges in a human life. The systems, guidelines and maps created over millennia by spiritual leaders also offer guidance to those attempting to create lives that are meaningful and respectful of the dignity of other living beings.

These values allow us to think deeply about problems in ways that go beyond mere crisis management and slipshod solutions that do not address deeper causes. For example, while political programmes and initiatives are very important, they tend to be ideologically driven in ways that can limit long-term planning for the good of the whole to five- or ten-year election cycles. The belief in a higher law offers a point of orientation that reaches beyond such short-term thinking.

On an individual level, the sense of a given order and purpose is a powerful antidote to apathy and anomie. This understanding stands in direct opposition to the bleak and despairing world view of thinkers like Nietzsche that places the will to power at the centre. This view also mitigates the statistical thinking that can make individual action seem pointless. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2005) emphasizes the belief in a providential order that operates within each individual life. He writes, “so each of us has our task, our unique gifts, our singular contribution to make” (82).

In what he calls “The Great Reversal”, political scientist David Tabachnick (2013) argues that contemporary society has inverted the classical model where virtue and first principles superseded empirical and mechanical systems of knowledge. Traditionally, for example, “technology is good only when subordinated by higher virtues such as ethics and politics” (33), but it is now presented as a good in itself. The underlying assumption being that somehow intelligence lies behind the proliferation of technology is a shibboleth of our time and an assumption that has us teetering on the precipice of “technological nihilism” (100).

It is unsurprising then to witness the breathless enthusiasm every time a new device is released onto the market as though somehow this

product will bring universal happiness in its wake. The many promises made by the creators of the various forms of social media have, instead, proven to be largely hollow and in many cases actually exacerbated feelings of alienation and isolation.

A sense of the sacred and higher law offers one of the cornerstones necessary for the creation of both individual and social health. This understanding binds the individual to their communities and to the natural environment and provides the deepest sense of personal meaning. Higher law makes compassion and care an obligation rather than a choice and knits each person into the web of a greater world picture or story. It provides solace in times of grief and pain and emphasizes the solidarity of all living things.

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