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978-0-521-56635-3 - The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'

Nicholas Lash

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These essays address the subject-matter of theology: is it the mystery of God, and everything there is considered in relation to that mystery as source, and life, and destiny? Or is it what we call 'religion' and 'religious belief': a district of experience and language and behaviour which individuals may inhabit if they feel so inclined, a region of diminishing plausibility and cognitive significance, a territory quite distinct from those we know as 'politics' and 'art', as 'science' and 'law' and 'economics'? The adoption of the latter view, beginning in the seventeenth century, became, with far-reaching consequences, a defining feature of the modern Western imagination.

But the 'modern' world is ending, and the consequent confusion also contains the possibility of discovering new forms of ancient wisdom which the 'modern' world obscured from view. These essays explore this suggestion in four directions: in regard to relations between Christianity and Hinduism (Part One contains the 1994 Teape Lectures); relations between theology and science; the secularity of Western culture, and questions of Christian hope.

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NICHOLAS LASH

*Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity,
University of Cambridge*



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[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi

PART ONE A MEETING-PLACE FOR TRUTH

1 The beginning and the end of 'religion'?	3
2 Prophecy and peace	26
3 Reality, wisdom and delight	49

PART TWO EMERGING FROM MODERNITY

4 Observation, revelation and the posterity of Noah	75
5 On what kinds of things there are	93
6 Contemplation, metaphor and real knowledge	112
7 When did the theologians lose interest in theology?	132
8 Anselm seeking	150
9 Creation, courtesy and contemplation	164
10 Hollow centres and holy places	183
11 Hoping against hope, or Abraham's dilemma	199
12 Eagles and sheep: Christianity and the public order beyond modernity	219

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56635-3 - The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Contents

13	Incarnation and determinate freedom	237
14	Beyond the end of history?	252
	<i>List of works cited</i>	265
	<i>Index</i>	279

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56635-3 - The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'

Nicholas Lash

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Not the beginning or the end of faith, or hope, or charity. Not the beginning or the end of prayer or proclamation, of the duty laid upon all humankind to work for peace, and justice, and the integrity of God's creation. But the view that 'religion' is the name of one particular district which we may inhabit if we feel so inclined, a region of diminishing plausibility and significance, a territory quite distinct from those we know as 'politics' and 'art', as 'science' and 'law' and 'economics'; *this* view of things, peculiar to modern Western culture, had a beginning, in the seventeenth century, and (if '*post-modern*' means anything at all) is now coming to an end.

The essays and lectures collected here explore this suggestion and its implications in four main directions. Whereas, however, the chapters in Part Two consider, in broad and general terms, questions concerning the relations between theology and the sciences (Chapters 4, 5, 6), the secularity of modern Western culture (Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10) and issues of hope or eschatology (Chapters 11, 12, 13, 14), Part One, consisting of the Teape Lectures that I gave in India in 1994, has a somewhat more specific focus, arising from the conditions of that lectureship.

That modern Western concepts of 'religion' are ill fitted to describe the traditions of the 'East' – of India, China, and Japan – is something of a commonplace by now. That these concepts distort the so-called traditions of the 'West' ('so-called' because neither Judaism, Christianity nor Islam took their rise in Europe) no less disastrously is a lesson that is proving more difficult to learn. Hence my suggestion that we

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Preface

try to understand the great traditions, not as 'religions' in the modern sense, but as *schools* whose pedagogy has, albeit differently in each case, the common twofold purpose of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire.

The Teape Lectures, which have now been in existence for some fifty years, were endowed by the Reverend W. M. Teape in memory of B. F. Westcott, his teacher in Cambridge and, later, his bishop, to promote dialogue between Christians and Hindus. According to Teape's will, the subject of the lectures is to be 'The Upanishads in the Catholic Church' (I rather think he had the Church of England primarily in mind!). In view of my family's long associations with India and, especially, in recognition of my uncle W. Q. Lash's lifelong dedication to Hindu-Christian relations, it was with particular pleasure that I accepted the invitation from the Teape Trustees to give the 1994 lectures.

The lectures were given in Calcutta, Delhi, Bangalore and Pune, and my wife and I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude for all the kindness shown to us by so many people, especially the Principal of Bishop's College, Calcutta, and the Principal of St Stephen's College, Delhi; by the President and faculty of Dharma Vidya Kshetram in Bangalore, and by the Sisters and Friends of the Christa Prema Seva Ashram in Pune.

Amongst many other people who have helped to make these essays less imperfect than they would otherwise have been, I am particularly grateful to Janette Gray, RSM, for her painstaking work on the bibliography and index, and to Jennifer O'Dell, Anna Marino and Ann West for preparation of the typescript. Finally, my thanks to Alex Wright of the Cambridge University Press for his encouragement and patience.

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'When did the theologians lose interest in theology?' in *Theology and Dialogue. Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, (ed.) Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

'Hoping against hope, or Abraham's dilemma' in *Modern Theology*, 10, 3 (1994), pp. 233–46.

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