



A God of One's Own

Ulrich Beck

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Religion's Capacity for Peace and
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In times like these, when the very existence of the social sciences and the humanities is under threat as seldom before, it is of vital importance to testify that without the creative discussions that took place in the framework of the research group investigating the nature of ‘reflexive modernization’, this adventurous excursion into the fascinating byways of the volcanic landscapes of religion would never have been possible. And the efforts of that research group were made possible in their turn only through the generous financial assistance of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. For that reason my heartfelt thanks are due to the DFG and to all those who helped to make this labour of co-operative sociological curiosity a reality.

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The Diary of a 'God of One's Own' Etty Hillesum: An Unsociological Introduction

Is it possible to begin a book with a confession of failure? Yes, it is possible and, in this instance, essential, even though the irony implicit in the question is unmistakable, since the question contains its own answer. Nor is it an expression of arrogance (as some readers may perhaps surmise); it is not a frivolous game with one's own limitations and blind spots. No doubt, a certain metaphysical ingenuousness is needed to coin the glib phrase a 'God of one's own' and to 'expound' it (whatever that might mean). In principle, however, the sphere of religion relates to that of sociology like fire to the water that puts it out.

As a sociologist with a firm belief in the redemptive power of sociological enlightenment, I have the idiom of secularism in my blood. The premise of secularism – more specifically, the idea that with the advance of modernization, religion will automatically disappear – cannot simply be expunged from sociological thinking, not even if that prognosis were to be refuted by history. It is for this reason that the contents of religious beliefs, with their – relatively – autonomous force and reality, their visions of a different humanity and their power to make whole worlds tremble, are so rarely exposed in their full ambivalence to the gaze of sociology. Sociologists are more concerned to demonstrate that even though rain-dancing Indians produce no rain with their dance, they successfully 'interact', because their dance has the 'function' of contributing towards the 'integration' of the group. However, such an approach tells us absolutely nothing about the whys and the wherefores of the cultural productivity and destructiveness of religious belief.

In sociology such lacunae are regarded not as defects, but as proof of scientific integrity. The discipline concerns itself with only one half of such basic religious distinctions as that between creator and creation, eternity and time, the next world and this one. Even if sociologists do not deny the depth

and power of religious feelings, they refuse to accept that religious phenomena must be understood and explained in religious terms. Instead, they establish a '*methodological secularism*', according to which religious phenomena are primarily seen as having social causes and functions. And that is as it should be: it satisfies the sceptical scientific mind.

However, such a view is in conformity with the process of secularization. It makes visible its own leading idea: the de-mystification of the religious sphere. And it renders invisible and incomprehensible something that increasingly determines reality, namely the re-mystification of reality by religion. Hence it is not necessary to be religious but merely to think consistently in sociological terms to be subject to doubts about whether the a-religious or anti-religious tendency of sociological scepticism is best suited to decoding not just the religious significance of a 'God of one's own', but its social and political power as well. Thus the present book sets out on what is doubtless a vain quest for an alliance of fire and water – in the service of both: that is to say, of sociology's claims to knowledge and perhaps also of religion's own self-understanding.

Etty Hillesum

In her diary Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman from the Netherlands, left a record of the 'God of her own' she had sought and found. Her handwritten diary entries start in March 1941 and end in October 1943. At the beginning of her diary the young woman leads the life of an ordinary citizen, although her very existence is threatened by the racist delusions of National Socialism. As her outward life became increasingly confined, Etty Hillesum progressively turned her gaze inwards. She read Rilke, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, St Augustine and, again and again, the Bible. Slowly and almost imperceptibly, the conversation with herself turned into a conversation with God. Etty Hillesum even developed a special style for speaking to God. She talks to God as if talking to herself. She speaks to Him directly without a trace of self-consciousness. Self-discovery and the discovery of God, finding herself and finding God, inventing herself and inventing God – all merge naturally into one. Her 'own' God is not the God of the synagogues or the churches or the 'believers', as distinct from the 'unbelievers'. 'Her' God knows nothing of heresy, the Crusades, and the unspeakable cruelties

of the Inquisition, Reformation and Counter-Reformation, or of the mass murders of religiously motivated terrorism. Her God is free from theology and dogma; He is blind to history and, perhaps for that very reason, merciful and helpless. She says, 'When I pray, I never pray for myself, but always for others, or else I carry on a crazy or childlike or deadly serious dialogue with whatever is profoundest in me and which for simplicity's sake I call God' (Hillesum 1981: 165).

What is needed is the viewpoint of a sociology of religion that does justice to this subjective dimension of the religious – even if establishing such a yardstick makes failure unavoidable. Historians have discovered religious biographies and autobiographies and other works of testimony that have proved to be documents of extraordinary revelatory power, and so it may well be meaningful to allow one such work of testimony to speak for itself and then to interpret it.

11 July 1942, Saturday morning, 11 o'clock. We can really only speak of the ultimate and the deepest things of life if the words well up inside us as simply and naturally as water from a spring. And if God does not help me to go on, I shall have to help God. The whole surface of the earth is gradually turning into one vast prison camp from which few escape. It is a phase we have to get through. The Jews here are telling one another some weird stories: that in Germany people are being buried alive or exterminated by poison gas. What is the point of passing such stories on, even if they turn out to have some truth in them?

... I know that I shall cope with whatever happens, all by myself and that my heart will not be paralysed by the bitterness of it all, but that even the moments of deepest grief and black despair will leave fruitful traces in me and will finally make me stronger. I do not deceive myself about the actual situation and have even given up any pretence that I'm trying to help other people. I shall always strive to help God as best I can, and if I succeed in that, well, I shall be able to help others as well. But it would be wrong to have any heroic illusions about that either.

I wonder what I would really do if I held the summons to be deported to Germany in my hands and had to leave in a week's time. Just imagine that the summons came tomorrow, what would I do then? To begin with, I wouldn't tell a soul; I would retreat to the quietest corner of the house and try to gather all my physical and psychological energies together. I would have my hair cut short and I would throw my lipstick away. I would try to finish reading the Rilke letters that same week. I would have a pair of trousers and a jacket made out of the heavy coat material I have left over.

... I would take the Bible with me as well as the two slim volumes of *Letters to a Young Poet* – and *The Book of Hours*,¹ surely there would be room for them in a corner of my rucksack? I would not take any photos of my loved ones but shall keep the images of their faces and gestures in the most secret corners of my mind, so that they will always be with me. ... And even if I do not come out alive, how I die will say something about who I really am. It's no longer a question of keeping out of a particular situation, come what may, but rather with how I would conduct myself in any given situation and then go on living. ...

Sunday morning prayer. Dear God, these are terrible times. Last night was the first time I lay there sleeplessly in the dark with burning eyes, as scene

after scene of human suffering passed before me. I promise You one thing, God, just one small thing: I shall not let my fears for the morrow weigh heavy on today, but that does take some practice. Each day is sufficient unto itself. I shall help You not to abandon me, God, but I cannot vouch for it in advance. One thing alone is becoming ever clearer to me: You cannot help us, but we have to help You, and only in that way will we end up helping ourselves. The only thing that matters is to safeguard a piece of You in us, God. Perhaps we can help You to enter into the tormented hearts of other people. Dear God, You do not seem able to influence circumstances very much; they are just all part of the life we have. I do not hold You responsible. In the time to come You will call us to account. And almost every heartbeat tells me that You cannot help us, but that we must help You and defend Your dwelling place in our innermost being to the last. It is true that there are people, there really are people, who at the very last moment want to rescue their vacuum cleaner and their silverware, instead of safeguarding You, dear God. And there are people who want only to rescue their own bodies, although these are nothing more than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter feelings. And they say, 'I shan't let them get me into their clutches. But they forget that we are in no one's clutches if we are in Your arms. I am gradually starting to calm down again, God, thanks to this conversation with You. I shall soon have many conversations with You in the hope of preventing You from abandoning me. You will probably also have some lean times with me, God, times in which my faith fails to nourish You, but believe me, I shall always labour for You and remain faithful to You and I shall not drive You from my heart.

Dear God, I feel I have sufficient strength to endure great, heroic sufferings; what frightens me are the thousand little everyday cares that sometimes attack us like some noxious vermin. Well then, I'll just scratch myself a little in my despair and tell myself every day: I have taken care of today, the protective walls of a hospitable home still surround me like a familiar, well-worn item of clothing. I still have enough to eat for today and the bed with white sheets and warm blankets awaits me at night. So don't let me waste even a spark of energy worrying about my own petty material cares. Let me make use of every minute of the day and enjoy it, let me make it a fruitful day, a sturdy stone in the foundations on which to support the wretched, anxious days of the future.

The jasmine behind the house is quite bedraggled from the rain and the storms of recent days, the white blossoms are floating in the muddy black puddles on the low garage roof. But somewhere inside me the jasmine goes on blooming, as lush and delicate as ever. And its perfume wafts around the house in which You dwell within me, dear God. As You see, I take good care of You. I bring You not just my tears and my fears on this grey, stormy Sunday morning; I even bring You sweet-scented jasmine. I shall bring You all the flowers I find on my path, and there will be many of them. You shall be as comfortable as possible in my care. To give just one example, if I were to be shut up in some cell or other and a little cloud were to float past the barred window, I would bring You that cloud, dear God, at any rate, I would as long as I still had the strength. I cannot guarantee anything, but my intentions are the very best, as You can see. And now I shall surrender to this day. I shall meet many people today, and the many evil rumours and threats will press in on me like so many enemy soldiers storming an impregnable fortress. ...

I should like one day to be the chronicler of our fate. I must forge a new language for these events and store them within me for when I no longer have the opportunity to write anything down. My feelings will be dulled, but I shall spring back to life; I shall fall over and pick myself up again. Much later on, I shall perhaps succeed in finding a quiet space that belongs only to me and there I shall remain, even if it takes years, until life springs up in me again and the words come to me to enable me to bear witness to the things to which witness has to be borne. Four o'clock in the afternoon: the day has turned out quite differently from what I expected. ...

The misery is truly great and yet in the evenings, when the day has faded away behind me, I often run around beside the barbed wire with a spring in my step, and I find my heart overflowing – I can't help it, that is simply the way it is, I just cannot contain myself: there is something so great and splendid about life. Later on, we shall have to build a world all over again and we shall have to produce a small portion of love and kindness from within ourselves to counter every new crime and every new act of cruelty. We may indeed suffer, but we must not crack up. And if we survive this age intact, intact in body and soul, above all in soul, without bitterness, without hatred, then, once the war is over, we shall have the right to have our say. Perhaps I am an ambitious woman. I should like to have my say, however

small. ... One would like to be a plaster on many wounds. (Ibid.: 154, 155, 159–61, 178, 224)

Perhaps we are moved by the utter childlike earnestness of this individual, intimate, dialogical voice because Etty Hillesum expresses and embodies things that appear entirely incompatible. Instead of hatred for the persecutors, trust in her own God. She, even she, faces destruction, she suspects it; we know it. Nevertheless, she writes, 'And if we survive this age intact, intact in body and soul, above all in soul, without bitterness, without hatred, then, once the war is over, we shall have the right to have our say. Perhaps I am an ambitious woman. I should like to have my say, however small.'

Completely helpless in the face of catastrophe, she notes with the victim's lack of guile, but repudiating her role as victim, 'One would like to be a plaster on many wounds.' Caught up in an utterly hopeless situation, she denies that the victims' situation is hopeless and restores their dignity of action. '... we shall have to produce a small portion of love and kindness from within ourselves to counter every new crime and every new act of cruelty. We may indeed suffer, but we must not crack up' (ibid.: 224).

Etty Hillesum was Jewish but she grew up in a family in which Jewishness played no role at all. It was as a Jewess that she was deported to a concentration camp and killed, but she did not accept Jewish identity. Nor, however, did she convert to Christianity. Etty Hillesum experienced and practised a radical version of a God of her own choosing. No synagogue, no church, no religious community. Was Etty Hillesum a non-Jew in her lifetime and a Jew in her death?

Even when imprisoned in the camp, Etty was present without belonging. The metaphor she uses to describe her situation is 'shipwreck'. Drowning people jostle each other to grab hold of a piece of driftwood in the endless expanse of the ocean.

And then it is everyone for themselves, push the others away and let them drown. All that is so unworthy and I don't care for pushing anyway. I suppose I am the kind of person who would rather drift along in the ocean on my back, with my eyes raised towards heaven, and then gradually go under in humble resignation. (Ibid.: 169–70)

This condition of 'not belonging' is, as Natan Sznajder writes, what turned the Jews into Europe's cosmopolitans, but also into the defenceless victims of the Nazis. 'European Jews were simultaneously assimilated, orthodox, Jewish and non-Jewish' (Sznajder 2008: 96). And it was precisely Etty Hillesum's not belonging that collided with the ontological malevolence of the anti-Semitic mentality and the resolve of the anti-Semitic state to eradicate these transnational Jewish cultures and societies at the heart of Germany and Europe.

What is the message that Etty Hillesum's diary can convey to us today? Is the good Jewess the non-Jewess who, in a kind of exaggerated eagerness to love her enemy, forgave her German mass murderers for acts that were unforgivable? 'I should like to enter all the camps of Europe, to be present on every front. I have no wish to be in so-called safety, I want to be present, and I want to create a little brotherhood between so-called enemies everywhere where I am' (Hillesum 1981: 213). Etty Hillesum does not just utter these deeply controversial words about 'creating a brotherhood between so-called enemies'; she embodies them right down to their ultimate logical consequences – without her being in a position to know 'what' was happening and 'what' she was forgiving. Is it these words that make Etty Hillesum's voice in her diary so moving for many readers and so problematic for others?

'There is no poet in me; there is only a small part of God in me that could grow into a poet' (ibid.: 214). The calm statements in her diary, which set out to ascertain the sources of her own life 'in a world that has been savagely turned upside down', go in search of readers, kindle life, startle, disturb and bring joy. Almost involuntarily or incidentally, Etty Hillesum succeeds in making a universal truth visible through her own introspection and her reflections on herself. 'Style is God.' This saying of Gottfried Benn's acquires a literal force in her writing. The style cultivated by Etty Hillesum in her diaries does not act as a substitute for God (as Benn meant to say). It is nearer the mark to say that Etty Hillesum speaks to God in her diary as if to herself. Her style creates the impression of the reader's direct participation in a prayer that is conducted as a dialogue in the mute presence of a helpless God. 'When I pray, I never pray for myself, always for others.' These 'others' include her tormentors, the 'gloomy young military policeman' who said to her on one of the transport nights, 'On a

night like this I lose five pounds' (ibid.: 224); but also the mother who said to her child, 'And if you don't eat up your pudding, you will have to go on the transport without your Mummy' (ibid.: 225). 'I feel,' Etty Hillesum writes, 'as if by paying close attention I can bring out the best and deepest in people, they open themselves to me, every person is a story in himself, one that life itself tells me' (ibid.: 216).

And that precisely is the secret of her diary style. Readers do not feel that they are merely listeners; through reading they are drawn as narrators into Etty Hillesum's dialogue with herself. They narrate their lives to themselves, and therefore to Etty Hillesum, and also to God. Thus, the very inwardness of the diary contrives to generate something of a public sphere. In the process, all traces of a striving for literary effects are erased. Etty Hillesum succeeds in a marvellous way in creating a work of both authenticity and transgression. The element of transgression is her language, this immediacy of transcendence. These unpretentious sentences, the flow of dialogue with herself and with God, make it possible to immerse one's own life in the space of the other – lessons in style in which the inner and the outer become one.

A God of one's own is not an omnipotent God. He is a God who has become impotent and homeless in an apocalyptic age. He is a God who, if He is not to perish, stands in need of the human beings who have repudiated Him. Why did God create man? Because He wanted to be acknowledged – this view is expressed in the Qur'an but is not confined to it. Perhaps we should add: because humanity in its helplessness must rescue God in His helplessness and preserve Him within itself.

Blessed are those who are resigned to their fate, who have forgotten the possibility of being other. 'Happiness strikes where all is hopeless' (Kermani 2005: 76). 'There must be something else since the mind would be unable to despair of the horror, were it not for the fact that it cherishes the idea of a different colour whose scattered traces remain present in the negative totality, as Adorno maintains' (ibid.: 74). People suffer not because they have lost hope, but because they are unable to give up hoping. It is the people who hope who are tortured.

For all its simplicity, Etty Hillesum's diary is a document which expresses a cry of despair and a monstrous accusation – not least because, as far as we

can judge from the external facts, her life ended in utter desolation. According to a Red Cross report, Etty Hillesum was murdered in Auschwitz on 30 November 1943. Her trust in a good God died with her. 'If a God has created this world,' Schopenhauer writes, 'I should not like to be Him: its misery would break my heart.'²

Etty Hillesum's diary is the imaginary site at which the horror of human history unfolds. Those who experience an apocalyptic terror will reject a positive dialectics of history of whatever kind and will defend their refusal to acknowledge that life has meaning. Etty Hillesum, however, neither complains nor accuses. Not even her executioners. She discovers solace and dignity (not safety!) in the intimacy of her relationship with her own helpless God in which God Himself becomes the questioner who has no answers.

I neither can, nor would I wish to, write a theology of a God of one's own. Such a theology would have to place in the centre of its concerns this connection between knowledge of the human self and knowledge about the presence of God in one's own life, as well as the connection between the love of another – the 'religious other', the 'national other', the 'neighbour', the 'enemy' – and the love of God, and the connection between the helpless self and the helpless God of one's own choosing. What this shows is that the basis of religion is that both things – the God of one's own and a life of one's own – are unfathomable mysteries. Only the tragic has a lasting reality.

When I walk along the streets Your world gives me much to think about, though it can't really be called thinking. It is more like the attempt to apprehend it with an entirely new sense. I sometimes imagine myself surveying the present age as if it were an historical epoch whose beginning and end I can see and which I can 'assign' to its proper place in history as a whole. And this is why I am so grateful that I am not in the least embittered or full of hate, but that I feel a great tranquillity, which is not the same thing as indifference. I feel that I can even understand the present situation to a certain extent, strange though that may sound! ... The most depressing thing is that hardly any of the people I work with have managed to broaden their mental horizon. Nor do they really suffer. They hate and their optimism blinds them to the reality of their own situation. They constantly intrigue and are led by their ambitions to defend their own little positions. The whole thing is a giant pigsty and there are moments when I feel discouraged and just lay my head down on the typewriter and feel like saying, I can't take any more of this. But life goes on and I keep learning more and more about people. (Hillesum 1981: 170–1)

How can she possibly fail to meet hatred with hatred, violence with violence, aggression with aggression? In her quest for the 'great simplicity' and for 'deeper humanity' in her diaries, what makes Etty Hillesum shine out is undoubtedly connected with her own character, with her particular qualities. But the reality is that Etty Hillesum's dignity derives from a higher source, one she shares with all human beings. In everything she says and does we see something of humankind as a whole. It is the connection between her particular existence and the *universal* individual, the *universal* God of one's own, that struggles to express itself in her diaries. What is admirable and even sacred is the human race, which finds expression with her voice and her experience. This exemplary religious individualism refutes every suspicion of an ego cult because it achieves self-transcendence.

Dear Etty, you could not have had any inkling of what you had done when you and many like you placed your life in the hands of a God of your own choosing. A 'God of one's own' can only be made practicable, liveable, hope-able, conceivable, when He becomes something of 'one's own'; in other words, when God, the world and humanity cease to be thought of as a unity, and when 'religious belief' is banished from the public sphere and

turned in on itself. This separation, which marks the distinction between religion and religiosity, is something you have carried out in quite a radical fashion; you have taken God into your own hands. Previously people were either Catholics or Protestants or Jews (or atheists or heretics). They were born into an 'official' religion, made their choices according to the demands of that religion, conceived children and brought them up in the spirit of the religion they were born into. They went to war with weapons blessed by the church, even though there were Catholics, Protestants or Jews fighting on the side of the enemy. In a world morally devastated by the madness of terrorism, you chose to ask for something more, over and above the collective religiosity that constantly preached conformity. You acted just as if one could assume responsibility for one's own life, including its religious dimension. A highly risky idea, fraught with consequences! You accepted the idea of the ego (in the meaning it has in Fichte and Sartre), in its full, merciless freedom together with the responsibility it entails and a God of one's own. This was to give rise to a minor infinity which would make hope, love and life possible even in the midst of the destruction of humankind. This idea overturns the order of faith that has survived for millennia through every vicissitude. The individual who doubts and decides becomes the church, the guardian of God and faith – while in contrast the church itself becomes a heresy.

Every religion has been conversant with the dialogue between the pious and 'their' God (Kermani 2005). And in the same way, the cosmic journey of the soul in search of God is a persistent refrain in world literature. We may think of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Attar's *Book of Adversity*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Faust* Part Two, Thomas Mann's depiction of Joseph's ascension to heaven or Gerhart Hauptmann's *Great Dream*. The gaze of the historian of literature or religion perceives here an entire tapestry, a kind of meta-comedy, albeit one full of bogeymen, of the journeys of people's souls yearning for God, as they roam through different epochs, languages, imaginations and religions. Even so, the narrative of a God of one's own has broken the ecclesiastical spell and liberated people from dogmas, liturgies and exegeses, while constituting a practical form of dialogue with a humanized fellow-God who is both individualized and standardized. This mundane form of dialogue is based on mutuality and has perhaps even been democratized, while remaining ultimately mysterious. Whereas, previously, religion preached insuperable opposition to the

worldly and this opposition was held to be sacrosanct, it is now pressed into service as an all-inclusive phenomenon. There is no longer a religious code which enables us to peer behind all the mirrors of one's own God. And needless to say, we inevitably find ourselves confronting the question: What is specifically 'one's own' about the 'God of one's own'? Is the 'God of one's own' a God at all, or simply the idolization of whatever happens to be one's own? What characterizes the God of one's own above all is the many things He is not: He is not a label, not proof of one's underdog status, not party to any double morality, and, above all, not an absolute who has always stood for one thing. The God of one's own is as capable of being divided up and reassembled as the individual him- or herself; He is the guarantor of the independence of both the individual and of God.

Dear Etty, the fact is that your unaffected dealings with your own God frequently involved you in a kind of love-relationship. Indeed, as a reader, I am sometimes uncertain whether you are talking to your human or divine lover. And you sometimes become entangled in the *paradox of freedom* in love.³ Just as we wish to take possession of the freedom of the person we love, so too do we wish to take possession of the freedom of our own God. Needless to say, this cannot be achieved by the exercise of power; such hubris is unthinkable. In the case of 'our own' God, a person who desires to be loved does not seek to subjugate God, to shape Him in accordance with human notions of being loved. He or she does not yearn for a Godlike love-automaton. Even if this were practicable and appropriate, it would mean no more than treating one's own personal God as a mechanical aid to living that could be wheeled out for every conceivable purpose – an ultimately humiliating relationship for both parties. It follows that the person who loves does not wish to possess the beloved God as one owns an object. He or she goes in search of a special kind of ownership. He or she desires to own God's freedom as a form of freedom.

Of course, if we think of God's freedom as something other than a love-machine that fulfils all wishes, and instead take it seriously, this opens the door to divine indifference, rejection and ignorance. Why should God love humanity if he is supposed to be as free as those who love Him? Can we make a home for our 'own' God and protect Him from a world that is about to destroy itself by allowing Him the freedom of non-love, or, even more radically, of hatred? Perhaps human beings are all-too human in their

dealings with their own God! They wish to be loved by this godly freedom and at the same time to demand that this freedom as such should cease to exist. They want God's freedom to decide of its own free will to become love – not merely at the start of the adventure but at every moment. We wish to chain our personal God to our own desires, traumas, hysterias, fears and hopes, and at the same time, we want to keep these chains in our own hands. In that case, how are we to escape the temptation of debasing our own God, changing Him into a tame, cuddly God?

I could extend this discussion over many pages. But here is something that you will not have thought possible, Etty. Your story of a God of your own has become utterly commonplace, banal and trivial. It has been devalued by endless repetition. No distinction is made any longer between God and idols. We move in a world of multi-faith quotations whose source and meaning we do not know. Only rarely do we detect the faint breath of the alien past with which we used to decorate the interior of 'our own God'. I would single out only a catalogue destined for the New Age market – for the God of our own choosing has become venal. In this catalogue we discover advertisements which praise the power of crystals, offer to teach you how to embrace birch trees in order to release spiritual energies, or undertake to reveal where you have to go and which forms you need to fill in if you wish to be reborn. Needless to say, all these voyages into the unknown depths of the soul have their price. And it comes as no surprise to learn that just as there are erotic fairs, there are also esoteric fairs which promise to gratify every religious need – as long as you are prepared to take at face value and pay in ready cash for the products of the growing world industry serving para-religious needs and promising heaven on earth.

A life of one's own, a room of one's own, a God of one's own

A God of one's own might well be the template for a life or a space of one's own. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf writes: 'But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction – what has that to do with a room of one's own?' (Woolf 1984: 5). And she replies: 'All I could do was to offer you an opinion on one minor point – a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. ...' A woman

who can shut the door behind her has the opportunity to break with convention. A lock on the door means the freedom to develop one's own ideas.

The struggle for a 'life of one's own' and a 'room of one's own' involves more than the spatial organization of everyday life. It involves control and subversion, the shaking off of internal and external constraints. A room of one's own means independence, in other words, (prohibited) reading matter, laziness, masturbation, boredom, self-questioning, testing one's own qualities in privacy, and the ability to launch oneself on spiritual odysseys in search of a 'God of one's own'. It is here and in this way that the incalculable nature of social life begins. What is at stake is the ability to create and secure an *inner* space as the premise of a life of one's own.

Anyone who discovers his or her own life and goes in search of the reasons for it and the mysteries underlying it falls into a bottomless pit. More precisely, that life appears as the intersection of two infinite lines, one internal and the other external. The *individual* is precisely not indivisible – as Nietzsche insisted – but rather is divisible, a *dividuum*. As an intermediate condition in the course of an infinite divisibility, he or she cannot serve as a unit. It is quite unclear whether an individual has, or should have, one life or several, one identity or many.

This kind of multiplicity and alterity in one's own life arises with the fragmentation of modernity. This is also the source of the compulsion to give an account of oneself and others in all sorts of situations, plausible and implausible. The reflexive ego is the *detective in oneself*; more precisely, the eternal detective, who cannot resist investigating and reporting on himself. He opens files and prepares answers. These answers amount to an official master key (more recently with psychological and sociological underpinnings). Confronted with the inquisitorial compulsion with which the ego accompanies the ego every step of the way, interrogating its every motive and anticipating its every action, collecting and collating its traces and prospects, religiosity, organized church faith, finds itself forced constantly to justify itself.

To put the matter differently and more fundamentally: If it is true that a life of one's own is another name for the *contingent* and *reflexive* nature of that life, what form of individually internalized, practical and natural religiosity

and spirituality remains open? Two options present themselves here. The first appeals to the *intractable*, unbending nature of any given religion, both historically and individually, and hence accepts the closed system of church, God and individual. This option denies the reality of religious plurality, repudiates modernity, denies individualization and, in the light of the irrevocable historical pressure in favour of individual religious commitment and choice, takes refuge in dogmas of faith that are incompatible with individualized experiences and ambivalent feelings. The decision to believe (or not to believe) that is required of individuals faced with the plurality, comparability and availability of religions, heresies and forms of atheism, expects – as Peter L. Berger provocatively puts it – an attitude of self-deception on the part of individualized individuals. This is Sartre's *mauvaise foi*: in other words, the denial of one's ability to choose and one's own responsibility.

This option fails to acknowledge the religious origins of individualization in Christianity. Individualization and the manifold confusions this leads to on every side is misinterpreted as an individual process to be ascribed to individual excesses – the frothy hunger for experience, inflated expectations, manic egoism and the declining readiness to see things through, to fit in and to make sacrifices. But that is erroneous. For in reality the religious forms assumed by the ‘God of one's own choosing’ symbolize the *victory* of church doctrines according to which the subjective freedom of belief and conscience is indispensable.

In contrast, the second option recognizes the empirical and historical fact that the social forms of a new religiosity, namely the religiosity of the ‘God of one's own’, correspond to the social forms of a space of one's own and a life of one's own. In the European context of an individualized modernity there is no longer any religious faith that has failed to pass through the eye of the needle of the reflexivity of one's own life, experience and self-knowledge (exceptions here merely confirm the rule). Individuals use their religious experiences to construct their individual religious shelter, their ‘sacred canopy’.⁴ Individuals make decisions about their faith, and no longer merely or primarily defer to their origins and/or the religious organization they were born into. This does not spell the end of religion, however, but only signifies the entry into the self-contradictory narrative of

‘secular religiosity’ which it is our task to decode. We can begin with a few examples by way of illustration.

Religious individualization and committed churchgoing are not mutually exclusive but may well reinforce each other. In the tentative search for the connections between a reflective religious belief and a personal relationship with God, individualization may force us to choose, and thus to compare, migrate or to flirt with heresy, atheism or conversion. Religious individualism is another term for doubt, the brother of faith whose narratives thread their way through the history of religion from St Augustine's *Confessions* – always relevant and now once again highly topical – down to Mother Theresa's confession that she was almost driven to despair by God's silence. Individualism is a *contingent* process, and for that reason it is *highly ambivalent* in its consequences; and this is to be explained not by the conceptual fuzziness of theory but by the complex nature of the real world.

Individualization does not preclude the unquestioning belief that is innocent of all knowledge of the abyss. Equally, however, it may lead just as readily to the committed defence of the old Latin Mass, which sees itself as the vanguard of the church, as to its critique. We shall have to assume that a conventional relation to religion is atypical for the different forms assumed by a subjectively desired, ‘individualized’ church membership. What we find instead is an unreflective, traditional religiousness combined with an instrumental pragmatism in people's recourse to churchgoing at times of crisis, illness and death, etc., ‘above all among the great mass of people who remain at a certain distance from the church, who are reluctant to leave it altogether but who are also unwilling to commit themselves fully’ (Pollack 1996: 83).

Thus at the start of the twenty-first century we come back to the question raised by Ernst Troeltsch a hundred years ago, but this time in a new, more radical form: To what extent will a Christianity that has undergone an inner renewal be able to open its mind to the individualization specific to the modern age so as to gain a new religious vitality? One theme of fundamental importance for such a question would centrally concern the departure of ‘Gods of one's own choosing’ from churches in Europe and the United States, as well as many other parts of the world caught up in such changes. Would such departures persist or would a ‘more flexible church’

(Troeltsch 1913)⁵ be able to create a new, higher synthesis of subjective piety and institutional organization that might reverse this trend?

Needless to say, as Etty Hillesum's diary convincingly shows, the conflicts triggered by symbolic distinctions and the monopolistic claims to supremacy that hold sway in the universe of priestly religions are of no importance in the world of individualized faith movements. In contrast, the institutionalized religions have two faces. Faith, the very thing that is supposed to guarantee a common humanity that rises above all national and ethnic divisions, opens up religious chasms between one individual and another, and, more specifically, between believers and non-believers. This casts doubt on the ability of the religions to bring about peace.

The road to peace is a lengthy process, it lasts to this day. The religious creeds have not left it behind; it is a task that still confronts them. The Peace of Westphalia offers important lessons in this respect. At that time, the Christian denominations were forced to inquire into the roots of their capacity for peace. The truth today is the same as it always has been: whoever desires to establish peace must himself be peaceable. (Kamphaus 2007: 7)

Even the plausible riposte of the West – the rule of law as the solution to the violent proclivities of religion – is effective only in the framework of the nation-state. It fails to grasp the specific reality, namely the universal religious and social nature of the dynamics of conflict. For the test of liberty of conscience is whether it is extended to include the liberty of those who hold different beliefs, not least their right to give up all beliefs and even to hold beliefs in contempt. Thus the world has a chance of surviving only if the many faiths that believe in only one God succeed in civilizing themselves, if they abjure the use of violence as an aid to missionary activities, and if they are prepared to commit themselves to supporting the principle of mutual tolerance between religions.

But is not such a hope nothing short of ludicrous?

Notes

¹ [Two books by Rainer Maria Rilke (Trans).]

- ² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Handschriftlicher Nachlass*, vol. iii, p. 57 (quotation taken from Kermani 2005: 190).
- ³ Which Jean-Paul Sartre (2003) outlined in the case of the earthly religion of love (see also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).
- ⁴ To cite the famous formula of Peter Berger (1969), to whose book I am also indebted for the following idea.
- ⁵ Interestingly, Troeltsch regards individualization as a general process that changes the social foundations both of ‘the social constitution of nations’ and ‘of the churches’.

Christ's disciples face great challenges and the approach of grave crises. These crises may perhaps affect nations in general, but they certainly affect the churches. Our view is that we should hold things together as far as possible. We need to equip ourselves with the religious confession of a personally upright personality who acts from a vital inner impulse, while on the other hand, we must develop a genuine desire to cultivate the community of the corpus mysticum Christi with which we feel united in love. (Troeltsch 1913: 133; quoted from Graf 2004: 178; see also Joas 2007b: 22ff.)

2

The Return of the Gods and the Crisis of European Modernity

A Sociological Introduction

The topic of a God of one's own introduced in the previous chapter cannot be treated in a vacuum. For it is simply one of a large number of threads in an almost impenetrable tangle of religious trends and counter-trends whose substance and meaning are based on a bewildering mixture of conceptual clarifications, empirical findings and theoretical postures. This introductory sociological chapter sets out to consider the individualization of religion in its relation to the religious revival of the beginning of the twenty-first century and to the looming crisis both in the European monopoly of secular modernity and in the European understanding of it.

Disagreements between the religions and the civilizing of world society

Farewell to secularization?

The return of the religions at the beginning of the twenty-first century breaks with the conventional wisdom that has prevailed for the past two hundred years up to the 1970s.¹ The Enlightenment liberated humanity from God and enabled it to achieve autonomy in every sphere of activity. Religious belief is atavistic, a product of bad conscience. Europeans look down with contempt on all those who are still religious or have become religious once again. It is an essential part of the image of modern, enlightened Europeans that they have overcome pre-modern superstition. Europe is the key to secularization.

The further and faster the modernization process has advanced, the more obvious the disempowerment of the gods has become – in other words, what we have witnessed with growing clarity is the victory of scientific and technical rationality and the demolition of the structures underpinning the