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Motif Theology, a Neglected Methodological Option

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At the symposium held by the Lund Theological Faculty on the centennial of Anders Nygren's birth, November 15, 1990, in addition to lectures on Anders Nygren as an exegete, a philosopher of religion, and an ethicist, a panel discussed what they regarded in Anders Nygren's theology as capable of further development.[1] This paper will seek to show that Nygren's method of motif research, a descriptive historical method, could as motif theology be developed constructively. Nygren did not attempt to move in this direction. He restricted himself to «bringing forth motifs from history,» and feared that moving further in a constructive direction could give the motif concept «in some measure an ontological coloration.»[2] In what follows the motif concept will be used constructively. The reader will have to determine whether this must have unacceptable metaphysical implications.

An important aspect of Nygren's theological method is that it affirms a twofold pluralism, a pluralism of contexts of meaning and a pluralism within the religious and ethical contexts of meaning. Nygren found contexts of meaning suggested by the ancient distinction between the true, the good, and the beautiful. To these three, the scientific, the ethical, and the aesthetic contexts of meaning, Nygren argued that religion should be added as also a distinct and autonomous context of meaning. Each of these contexts of meaning, according to Nygren, is defined by a basic question, presupposed in the language used in that context of meaning. Nygren formulated the following basic questions as: What is true? (scientific), What is good? (ethical), What is beautiful? (aesthetic).[3] As a question equally basic and inescapable defining the religious context of meaning, Nygren proposed, What is the eternal?, which he sought to show was presupposed not only in the language constituting the religious context of meaning, but in the scientific, ethical, and aesthetic contexts of meaning as well.[4]

In my discussion of these basic questions in *Nature and History*,[5] I point out that care must be taken in formulating the questions defining contexts of meaning, lest these questions are stated

[1] *Anders Nygren som teolog och filosof, Rapport från symposiet vid 100-årsdagen av hans födelse,* Religio 36, Lund 1991.

[2] Anders Nygren, «Reply to Interpreters and Critics,» *The Philosophy and Theology of Anders Nygren,* Charles W. Kegley, ed. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970, 356.

[3] In this paper the aesthetic context of meaning will not be discussed. See, however, Bernhard Erling, *Nature and History: A Study in Theological Methodology with Special Attention to the Method of Motif Research* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1960), 192–209, and «The Aesthetic Context of Meaning in the Thought of Anders Nygren,» *International Philosophical Quarterly,* 14 (1974), 101–113.

[4] Anders Nygren, *Filosofi och motivforskning* (Stockholm: SKD, 1940), 41; *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 42; *Religiöst apriori, dess filosofiska förutsättningar och teologiska konsekvenser* (Lund, 1921), 233–239.

[5] *Nature and History,* 33.

in such a way that relevant answers are excluded. This is especially important if there is pluralism in the answers given to the question constituting a given context of meaning. In the scientific context of meaning the adjective «true» need not imply one system of verification to the exclusion of other possible systems of verification. But in the ethical context of meaning the adjective «good» could appear to exclude a deontological ethics, where one would prefer to ask «What is right?» I have proposed, therefore, that the basic questions be formulated so as to identify functions constituting contexts of meaning, e.g., knowing and doing, instead of outcomes being sought, such as truth or goodness. There is a precedent for such an approach to the contexts of meaning in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he states: «All the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the following three questions: What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope?»[6] In these questions the scientific, the ethical, and the religious contexts of meaning are clearly recognizable.

In what follows Kant's formulation of the questions constituting the scientific, ethical, and religious contexts of meaning will be slightly rephrased as follows: What can I know?, What should/ought I/we do?, and What do/may I/we believe and hope? In the ethical question the two auxiliary verbs «should» and «ought» suggest possible differing understandings of moral obligation. In both the ethical and the religious questions, the pronouns «I» and «we» indicate that these questions can be asked individually as well as socially. In the religious question the verbs «believe» and «hope» call attention to the difference between the aspect of the answer to the religious question that refers to the past and present and the aspect that refers to the future, however distantly that future is projected. Believing and hoping differ from knowing in that believing is what one does as one comes to the limits of what can be known. Believing refers also to how what is known about the present and about the past is interpreted, insofar as different interpretative possibilities present themselves. Hope refers to the future, my future as an individual, the future of the human race, the future of the world.

It is evident that in defining the basic religious question as having to do with believing and hoping I am departing somewhat from Nygren's making ‹the category of the eternal› the fundamental category of religion. There is a greater likelihood, however, that, when possible ways of believing and hoping are examined, pluralism can be accepted, than when religion is defined as having to do with the quest for the eternal.

Defining the religious and ethical categorical questions in terms of functions (believing/hoping, doing), rather than outcomes (the eternal, the good), also implies that one need not seek to establish the validity of the contents of the religious and ethical contexts of meaning,[7] a matter about which Nygren was concerned in his early writings. One can also move more directly to the pluralism indicated in the data Nygren gathered in his development of the method of motif research, as it is set forth in *Agape and Eros*.

Nygren insisted that the autonomy of the contexts of meaning be clearly recognized. Only if they are autonomous, so that science is scientifically judged, the ethical is ethically judged, and the religious is religiously judged, do we have distinct contexts of meaning. What is important at this point is the distinction between the scientific context of meaning and the religious and ethical contexts of meaning. The religious and ethical contexts of meaning must not be made subject to the methods of verification appropriately used in the scientific context of meaning. Such methods of verification cannot be used because within the religious and ethical contexts of meaning one finds pluralism in the possible answers to the ethical and religious questions. There is no way that one can, as in the scientific context of meaning, determine by using rational or empirical methods which of the possible answers is the «true» answer, that should therefore be chosen. One of the answers

[6] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 635.

[7] Anders Nygren, *Meaning and Method: Prolegomena to a Scientific Philosophy of Religion and a Scientific Theology*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 273–278.

in a given individual's believing/hoping and in her/his sense of what should/ought to be done simply excludes the other possible answers. Nygren in his method of motif research called attention to and emphasized this second kind of pluralism, a pluralism within the religious and ethical contexts of meaning, which is to be added to the pluralism found in the contexts of meaning.

As a term to identify the differing options characterizing this pluralism, Nygren used the word «motif.» A motif designates that which is distinctive in a religious or ethical option, that which makes it possible to recognize it under different formulations and in widely separated geographical and historical contexts. Nygren wrote about three motifs, the eros, nomos, and agape motifs. In *Agape and Eros*, a survey of the history of Christian thought, he was chiefly concerned with the distinction between the Hellenistic eros motif and the New Testament agape motif, but he also gave some attention to the nomos motif, as found, due to Old Testament influence, in the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists.[8]

In his survey Nygren did not, however, go beyond the Reformation, and he did not continue this research in later writings. The task of completing such an examination up to the present remains and should be carried out. An attempt could also be made to determine how useful the method of motif research is in the study of other world religions.

When the historically given religions of the world are compared, some answers to the basic religious question are primarily individually oriented, while others are primarily socially oriented. Every individual must, of course, believe for herself/himself, just as she/he must be born or die for herself/himself. The believing and hoping can, however, be mainly oriented toward the meaning of life for the individual, or it can concern how the individual relates to other individuals. Given this polarity between individual and group orientations, there are three distinctively different ways in which the basic religious question, What do/may I/we believe and hope?, is answered in the major world religions. 1) There are answers that chiefly have to do with the value structure and human desire, either positively, by offering knowledge of the value structure and its culmination in the highest good and how human desire can be fulfilled, or negatively, advising the rooting out of all desire, since human desire cannot be fulfilled. 2) There are answers that set forth a structure of justice, a law to be obeyed, teaching that there are rewards for those who obey this law and punishments for those who do not. 3) There is also an answer to the religious question that bears witness to a self-giving, forgiving, and community forming love (agape love), in terms of which law is to be defined and the satisfaction of one's own desires and the desires of others guided. In these three different answers, the value structure and desire, justice and law, and agape love are the key terms. This is not to say that there is no place for justice and law in a religion primarily concerned about the value structure and desire, or for agape love in a religion primarily concerned about justice and law. The value structure and desire, justice and law, and agape love are what might be called component factors to be found in all of the religions. What is decisive is how these factors are related to each other. Each of these factors can be predominant over the other two. It is of the nature of faith, furthermore, to acknowledge and affirm such a predominance of one of these factors in relation to the others. In studying a particular religion one must determine whether the value structure and the desire it elicits, law prescribed in a system of justice and the consequences of obedience or disobedience, or agape love accepting and serving other persons has this predominant role. It is as one understands this that one begins to grasp the motif of that religion.

Some are troubled by the concept of a basic motif, at least as far as Christianity is concerned. They prefer to think of several motifs in the Christian faith (or in other faiths), and do not accept the notion that one motif, New Testament agape, should be recognized as the ordering principle in terms of which the Christian faith is to be understood. They fear that the predominance of agape love over the value structure, or the natural environment in which we live, will

[8] *Agape and Eros*, 27–34, 42, 53–56, 147–253, 254–288, 335–348.

reduce emphasis on the doctrine of creation and its affirmation of the goodness of the created world. They also argue that the doctrine of atonement requires that human beings, when confronted by the requirements of justice, be shown to be guilty. Stressing the predominance of agape love can weaken the law in its condemning role, which will affect the interpretation of how human beings can be reconciled both to God and to each other. These are valid concerns. Their importance can better be evaluated when the consequences of the predominance of either desire and the value structure, or justice and law, or agape love are spelled out in greater detail.

Let us consider what happens when the value structure and desire are predominant. One consequence is that desiring love becomes more important than self-giving, forgiving, caring love (agape). Indeed it is not certain that agape love has an essential place in a motif in which the value structure and desire are predominant. Agape love may be found in family groups, the love of parents for their children, the relation of friends, but it need not in this motif be a clue to the understanding of the world in which we live, nor need it be regarded as the highest good, crowning the value structure. Insofar as those in this motif practice caring love, they may be of the opinion that not everyone merits such love on their part. It is far too precious to be squandered on those who do not deserve it.

As far as justice is concerned it is recognized that some social structure is needed. It may be viewed, however, chiefly as instrumental, useful to human beings in their striving for values. It need have no other significance than this. Since social structure in the form of government may threaten individual freedom, those of this persuasion prefer as little government as possible.

We are quite familiar with the predominance of desire and and the value structure, for this is in large part the ideology of the free enterprise system. Those who advocate it argue that competition in the marketplace can provide the solution to every problem, not only in business but even in education and medical care. Insofar as there is concern for the welfare of others, those of this persuasion believe with Adam Smith that there is an invisible hand that brings forth from the self-interested striving of the many the greatest good of all. If it is thought that a religious motif should have a God, the God of this motif can be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: «[T]here is something which moves without being moved. ... God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God. ... [T]here is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things. ... The first principle or primary being is not movable either in itself or accidentally, but produces the primary eternal and single movement.»[9]

While Nygren would hold that in both Plato and Aristotle desiring love or eros are predominant, he does recognize a difference between these two philosophers. In Plato's thought there is a dualism between the vulgar eros and the heavenly eros, between sensual and spiritual love, whereas in Aristotle there is not the same dualism but a greater continuity between the lower and the higher levels of existence, as all that is is constantly drawn upward by the Unmoved Mover.[10] Religions in which desiring love is predominant often manifest Plato's dualism. While a few will unabashedly affirm sensual pleasure as their highest good, more will hold that faith has to do with the higher values. This can lead to ascetic practices, as one becomes more and more conscious of how the spirit must struggle with the flesh. In Buddhism this awareness of struggle with desire had already developed prior to Plato's time into a wholly negative attitude toward desire. The religious quest, as was suggested above, became a sustained effort to root out desire, since the world is such that human desires cannot be fulfilled.

What is the case when justice is predominant? The justice in question will then be intimately related to the structure of a particular social order. This will mean that the law involved is largely positive. The fact that it is positive need not mean that it is unnatural, violating human

9 Richard McKeon, ed., *Introduction to Aristotle* (New York: Modern Library, 1947) 284–287; *Metaphysics*, Bk 12, ch. 7, 1072a, 24–25; 1072b, 27–28; 1073a, 3–4; ch 8, 1073a, 23–25.

10 *Agape and Eros*, 51, 185–186.

nature. There is, however, no one pattern of human relationships prescribed by nature. At the same time there can be a large degree of consensus among various legal codes. Since this consensus is a *de facto* consensus, it can be expected to change, at times decreasing, at times increasing. In a given social order the degree of respect for law will not depend on whether that law's demands fall within the area of consensus, however, because the sense of obligation is more significantly determined by the group's total image of itself, from which the pattern of behavior required to maintain that image follows.

The predominance of justice over the value structure means that its permissible use is defined by law. The reason implicit in the value structure is subject to the law, the law is not subject to reason. A prescribed act is right because God, who is believed to be the author of the law, wills it; God does not will it because by appeal to some standard extraneous to the divine will the act can be shown to be right. The rationale that can be given for this attitude toward the value structure is that God created it and therefore may rightly determine its proper use.

The love over which justice is predominant includes both desiring love, which is subordinate because the value structure is subordinate, and interpersonal love, which in its character can approach agape love. The predominance of justice means that the law defines those persons who may be loved, as well as the extent of the love that is their due. Love thus becomes an aspect of the implementation of the system of rewards and punishments by which human behavior, whether good or bad, is requited. God in this motif loves the righteous and hates the unrighteous, and human beings in their loves and hates are expected to be governed by this divine example. If one loves a person who ought to be hated, this means that one shares the offense of that person and becomes oneself also an object of hate.[11] It does not follow, however, that there is no possibility of atonement when justice is predominant. The provision that is made tends to be granting the sinner the possibility of fulfilling certain requirements, such as offering sacrifices or performing penitential practices. If one set of commandments are broken, others may be obeyed in their stead. But if these commandments are also flaunted, the sinner is twice condemned.

It is evident that the law in and of itself does not exercise the ultimate power that the predominance of justice presupposes. Behind the law stands the sovereign will of God, that is expected to function so as to provide the sanctions justice requires. Power supporting the law may be of many kinds, including physical compulsion,[12] and can to a considerable extent be exercised on God's behalf by the society (Rom. 13:4). Insofar, however, as there are wrongdoings that escape the attention of the governing authorities, or the society is unable or finds it undesirable to enforce its laws, other sanctions must be sought. In some measure the power of God may be believed to function in the course of circumstance, as health or sickness, prosperity or adversity are interpreted as divine rewards or punishments, revealing the praise or blame of the individuals thus affected.[13]

If such rewards and punishments are not recognizable here and now, the power of God may be postulated as functioning to provide these sanctions either eschatologically in a coming age or in the eternal world of the afterlife. It is in this context that emphasis upon God's power as the creator or a remembrance of his mighty acts in the past becomes significant.[14] While it may not be possible to explain why God does not act now to establish the order of righteousness, it is believed that God in God's own good time will establish this order. Insofar as this appeal transcends present experience, no evidence can be presented to falsify it. It is, however, of interest that Richard L. Rubenstein does regard the destruction of European Jewry as an event of such ghastly proportions that it becomes impossible any longer to believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God.[15] What has been challenged is not God's power at some future

[11] Morris Raphael Cohen, *Reason and Law* (New York: Collier Books, 1961) 121–123.

[12] Cohen,, op. cit., 92–94.

[13] In the Old Testament Job represents a strong critique of such an interpretation of the course of human events. Cf. Lk. 13:1–5.

[14] Cf. Isa. 51:9–11.

time or in an afterlife to redress the balance. Rather God is indicted because there was no intervention to prevent a particular heinous instance of human wickedness. Because God did not intervene God is neither good nor powerful; for all practical purposes God does not exist.

One wonders whether evil can be quantified so that the limiting degree of evil that makes faith thereafter impossible can be defined. Ivan argues in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that the agonizing death of one innocent child can be too much.[16] If, however, one holds that even one such flagrant instance of injustice is enough to warrant rejection of the faith option in which justice is predominant, one has failed to understand this convictional alternative. Injustices encountered in this life can be severe trials of faith for the believer, but in the face of these trials the righteous one waits (cf. Pss. 37, 62, 130:5–6, Isa. 8:17, 40:31). When God does at last act, one is certain that God's activity will fully exemplify the requirements of justice, for one believes that what ought to be determines that which will be. Only if one can believe that at some future time or in the afterlife all injustices will be righted can life be meaningful according to this convictional orientation.[17]

The predominance of agape love has the following characteristics. Its predominance over desiring love and the value structure is similar to the predominance of justice in that both prescribe the proper use of the value structure. The nature of this proper use is more specifically defined, however, in that the value structure is to be used in the service of the fellow human being. When the value structure is so viewed it loses its absoluteness and becomes relative to human need. Since both physical and spiritual needs are to be satisfied, the distinction between higher and lower values is qualified by the constant summons to respond to the immediate needs of the nearest neighbor.[18]

When agape love is predominant over justice, agape love becomes the standard by which the meaning of justice is defined. Paul states that the person who loves another person has fulfilled the law (Rom. 13:8). Paul goes on to indicate that he is thinking of the law chiefly in negative terms, as forbidding doing wrong to a neighbor (Rom. 13:10). The command to love your neighbor as yourself implies, however, doing good as well. One's awareness of one's own needs is to be the guide by which one can be led to respond to the needs of one's neighbor.[19] Agape love so understood clearly requires a system of justice. Love is by no means antinomian or anarchic; it becomes instead the principle on the basis of which a system of law, or, rather, several possible systems of law, can be established. A just society, accordingly, is a society in which all of the citizens are effectively enabled to love each other.

Agape love's predominance over justice means that those condemned by the standard of justice love defines are also loved. This means that there is inescapable tension because such persons are both hated and loved, yet love retains its predominance. The meaning of forgiveness is that agape love is willing to pay the costs of continuing to accept those who deserve to be rejected. This does not mean that in the civil order criminals need not to be apprehended and restrained, but it does indicate how such persons should be treated once they are brought into the custody of the community. The predominance of agape love means that the principle of forgiveness rather than obedience to law be-

[15] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966) iv–x, 46–58, 65–70, 153–154.

[16] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.) 291.

[17] Immanuel Kant, ed. Karl Vorländer, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952) 140–151.

[18] Lk. 10:25–37. It does not follow that the subordination of the value structure to agape love requires a pragmatic concept of truth. Such an epistemological theory must be defended on its own merits. Nor does the predominance of agape love mean that the mind must subject itself to external authority. Truth about the world, from whatever source it may be gained, is to be sought and accepted. Only if there is complete freedom in the quest for truth can truth be put to its proper use.

[19] Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Scribner's, 1952) 99–103.

comes the constituting principle of the community, from which it follows that a community so constituted is committed to reconciliation and ultimately the acceptance and inclusion of all persons who reside in a given area, being prepared to make the necessary adjustments which such an inclusive commitment implies.

There is reason to ask, however, whether agape love has the power it must have to be predominant over the value structure and desire on the one hand, and justice and law on the other. First it should be noted that agape love does not seek to destroy the power structures that both of these motifs represent. It exerts its predominance within these power structures through individuals and communities who confess that they have experienced the the transforming power of agape love. «We love because he first loved us» (1 John 4:19). This is not only an individual and communal experience here and now but the historical process is interpreted as manifesting the redemptive and creative power of agape love. There is a chain reaction of this love reaching from one person to another, from one generation to another, that goes all the way back to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. To regard Jesus' resurrection as an instance of the victory of agape love need not imply any particular understanding as to how the resurrection took place. Nor does the faith that agape love is predominant grant complete understanding as to what the implications of this predominance will mean in a given individual's life. The person who is fully committed to agape love may therefore have to face her/his final crisis with no more clarity as to how love will triumph in her/his life destiny than did Jesus when on the cross he is reported to having cried out, «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?» (Mark 15:34).

We turn now to pluralism in the ethical context of meaning. Some who do accept religious pluralism do not think that they must also accept ethical pluralism. They assume that it should be possible for all people to agree about the distinction between the good and the bad. It was, however, noted above that in addition to the distinction between good and bad one can also speak of the distinction between right and wrong, and it is not certain that these differing distinctions wholly overlap. Still another distinction could be the fitting and the unfitting. Here we may have the language of three different ethical motifs. Nygren distinguished between teleological, legalistic (deontological), and dispositional ethics and sought to show that of the three a dispositional ethics is to be preferred.[20] These three types of ethics are related to the fact that the ethical situation can be examined at the level of consequences, at the level of the act, or at the level of the disposition, which is the source of the act with its consequences. It would then appear that a deontological ethics would be concerned with the act, whether it was right or wrong, while a teleological ethics would be concerned with consequences, whether they were good or bad, while only a dispositional ethics would be concerned about the disposition.

It should be noted, however, that all three of the ethical types can be viewed as dispositional. In a teleological ethics one is disposed to achieve good consequences as the result of one's behavior, which may be because one is acting out of self-interest, so as to advance one's own individual good. In a deontological ethics one is disposed to act out of a sense of duty, so as to conform to norms determined by some group, centering primary attention on the rightness or wrongness of one's acts. There is also a third option in which the individual is disposed to act out of a loving, self-giving concern for the welfare of other human beings, primarily being oriented toward accepting them and caring for their needs. Here one is concerned that one's acts be fitting expressions of this disposition and that the consequences of these acts are not such as to defeat the purpose of what was intended. Though in the third option attention is most evidently focused on the disposition, in each of the options the individual is choosing to act in a particular way and this is basically a dispositional choice.

There is clearly a close relationship between the ethical options, which may also be called ethical motifs, and the religious motifs enumerated above.

In the ethical as well as the religious motifs one finds that desire and the value structure, law

20 Anders Nygren, *Filosofisk och kristen etik* (Stockholm: Alb. Bonniers, 1932, 2nd ed.) 160–183.

and justice, and agape love are useful terms in characterizing the ethical motifs. One must determine which of these component factors, desire and the value structure, law and justice, agape love, is predominant in each of the patterns of moral commitment that is being studied. If one inquires as to whether there is a significant distinction between the religious and the ethical contexts of meaning, given the similarity of the motifs found within them, the answer is that it is what one believes and hopes that becomes the presupposition motivating and directing one's moral behavior, what one chooses to do.

One implication of the principle of predominance is that the religious and ethical motifs are mutually exclusive. If in answering to the basic religious or ethical questions one has acknowledged the predominance of agape love, one cannot without changing one's commitment acknowledge the predominance of law or justice. If desire for what the value structure has to offer is predominant, one cannot at the same time grant such predominance to agape love. From this it follows that commitment to any one of the basic convictional alternatives implies exclusion of the others. Another important consideration in understanding the motifs is that not only are they mutually exclusive, they are also incommensurable, in the sense that there is no common standard in terms of which they can be compared. The motifs are answers to the same basic religious and ethical questions, but they answer these questions in different ways. Their incommensurability consists in the fact that when one decides in favor of one of the motif options rather than the others, it is in terms of the standard that option represents that one rejects the other possible options. The other options are found wanting in terms of the option chosen, rather than all the options being evaluated in terms of the same norms, with one of them on the basis of this evaluation being shown to be superior.

The religious motifs, furthermore, offer comprehensive structures of rationality, each faith option by its very nature claiming to be the ultimate court of appeal. From this it follows that arguments for one or another of the faith options are circular, in the sense that one can only repeatedly set forth the option and its implications. Any comparisons with the other options, that are intended to persuade, presuppose the commitment that the option chosen represents. This circularity of the argument for any given faith option need not, however, be regarded as vicious. Argument within the structure of rationality that a religious motif provides, given the fact of the pluralism of such incommensurable structures, is inescapably circular precisely because there is no more ultimate reference to which appeal can be made. What should occasion surprise is the fact that there is pluralism also at this point, not the fact that, given such pluralism, the faith options are rationally incommensurable.

While the principle of predominance and the fact of incommensurability appear to sharply separate the religious and the ethical motifs from each other, there is at the same time, as far as moral behavior is concerned, a *de facto* consensus that makes the common life in communities possible. A helpful way to understand the im-portance of religion and ethics for the common life of a community is to compare the community to a tree. The roots that support the more visible trunk and leafy branches are the differing faiths to be found in the community. That there are several such roots can be a source of strength rather than weakness. The trunk is the *de facto* moral consensus that enables the citizens to live and work together. There are certain behaviors that those committed to the differing ethical motifs can agree are good, right, or fitting. This consensus must, however, again and again be renegotiated. The leafy branches are the differences in both religious practice and moral be-havior that in a pluralistic society are permitted to flourish. Religious faith that is foundational in any society has a dual relationship with moral behavior. On the one hand, some moral imperatives derive directly from religious faith. It can be helpful in deliberations about moral issues, an example would be the issue of abortion, to know how this derivation occurs, why one faith calls for one kind of moral behavior and why another prompts different moral judgments. The other more fundamental relationship between religious faith and moral behavior is, as was stated above, that faith provides the individual with the motive to do what she/he is persuaded is good or right or fit-

ting. This indicates the intimate relationship that exists between the religious and the ethical motifs, between religious faith and moral behavior. It is impossible to have disciplined moral behavior without religious faith of some kind underlying it. When this faith is not openly confessed its nature can be discovered by examining the presuppositions of that person's moral convictions and the acts that follow from them.

Finally, what benefits does motif theology offer to modern pluralistic societies? There are two major benefits. One is that motif theology can make possible fruitful dialogue between the several living religions in the modern world. Motif theology does not seek to prove that one religion is better than the others; it seeks only to describe them as accurately as possible and constructively to develop their implications, to the point that adherents of a given religion or ethical orientation recognize themselves in the description and the constructive implications of that description. The principle of predominance and the fact of incommensurability explain why faiths and the moral convictions that follow from these faiths differ and why the purpose of interfaith dialogue is not to overcome these differences. Though there can be conversions from one faith to another, the faiths, the differing motifs, will remain into the foreseeable future. When a common understanding of the differing faiths has been achieved, this will be a significant contribution to peace within communities and peace in the world. There is no more urgent task lying before us than to achieve common understanding of how Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, to mention a few of the living world religions, answer the basic religious and ethical questions. A later stage in the dialogue can be discussion of how different faiths, different motifs, can most creatively relate to each other.

The second major benefit of motif theology is that it can be used to show that all human beings are believers, all have answered in some way or another the basic religious question, What do/may I/we believe and hope? One does not find persons who claim to be able to ignore the basic ethical question, What should/ought I/we do? There are, however, persons, who with respect to the religious question, What do I believe and hope?, prefer to consider themselves secularists, advocates of secularism, which *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines as «a view of life or of any particular matter based on the premise that religion and religious considerations should be ignored or purposely excluded.»[21]

It is odd that secularism, or secular, has come to have this non-religious meaning. If that which is secular is not religious, what is it? The word has no synonyms that are very helpful, so we must examine its etymology. The word comes from the Latin *saeculum*, which means generation or age. Thus «secular» can mean living or lasting for an age, or occurring or celebrated once in an age, a century, or a very long period. In ancient Rome what were called secular games were held once each one hundred twenty years. This temporal meaning is found in 2 Tim. 1:9, «This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,» where *ante tempora secularia* in the Latin Vulgate translates the Greek *pro chronon aionion*. The temporal meaning of the word is found also in prayers of the Latin mass, which end *saecula saeculorum*, which means «forever and ever.»

A derived meaning of «secular» is the world during any given age. This meaning in ecclesiastical Latin is due in part to influence from the Hebrew Old Testament. The Hebrew language, while rich in words having to do with time, was poor in words meaning space. Thus temporal terminology was used also to express the concept of the world. This practice influenced both the Greek New Testament and its Latin translation. While «world» in the Latin Vulgate is often *mundus*, in 2 Cor. 4:4 it is *saecula* and in James 1:27 *saeculo*. In these passages *saecula/saeculo* has a negative meaning. This is in part due to the influence of apocalyptic thought, which taught that the present world/age[22] was evil but that it would be finally replaced by a new world/age.

21 *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1981) 2053.

22 Compare the translation of 1 Tim. 6:17 in the *Revised Standard Version* («As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty ...») and the *New Revised Standard Version* («As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty ...»)

This hope is expressed in the third article of the Nicene Creed: *et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum et vita venturi saeculi* (and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come).

Perhaps most decisive in the development of the modern meaning of the word «secular» was the fact that the Roman Catholic Church began to use this term in distinguishing between two groups in its clergy, the religious clergy, by which were meant priests belonging to various orders and often living in monastic seclusion, and the secular clergy, priests living among the laity in the world and serving parishes. This distinction between the religious and the secular was strongly rejected by the Protestant reformers, who insisted that the world, or what could be regarded as secular, was precisely where Christian ministry should be exercised.

Given this background of the word «secular,» it is extremely ironic that it should be used to refer to that which, it is claimed, has nothing to do with religion. It is hard to understand how a word so drenched with Christian meaning, that one almost needs extensive study of the Bible and church history in order to make sense of the different ways in which it is defined in the dictionaries, could have received its present wholly non-religious connotations!

Those, therefore, who claim that they are secularists may well have abandoned the Christian or the Muslim or the Jewish faiths, but they have done so to embrace another faith. They most likely are to be found in what Nygren called the eros motif, where desire and the value structure are predominant. If motif theology were successful in helping many in the United States and western Europe recognize what they do in fact believe and hope, it would be performing a significant service.

In summary, it can be affirmed that not only the basic scientific question, What can I know?, but also the basic religious and ethical questions must inescapably be asked and answered by all individuals. Life from the very beginning is a continuing learning process. As knowledge of various kinds is gained, one must determine what to do with what one has learned. In addition to knowing and doing, in all cultures individuals and groups believe and hope. Here one finds the presuppositions, often hidden, that guide their moral behavior. It is impossible to live as a human being without believing and hoping, although it is possible to take what one believes and hopes for granted and not reflect very much about it. The purpose of motif theology is to help people gain self-knowledge at this point.