

The uncertainty of life

By Don Cupitt

To the 2002 Sea of Faith NZ conference theme, I want to contribute some of the opening sections of a new book on the philosophy of life, titled *Life, Life*.



In this book I will argue that **life** has now become our most important religious word. Life is the new religious object, and we talk about **having faith in life** and **committing ourselves to life**, rather as our forbears spoke of having faith in, and committing themselves to God. **Life is everything:** but unlike God, it is finite, and it includes both good and evil, both joy and sorrow.

When we **love life**, we accept a package deal – as we did in the old marriage vows. But it is very important to recognise a consequence of life's baggy, mixed and finite character: in order to make sense of our life, we humans must actively impose shape and pattern upon it. Life's inconclusive shapelessness makes human creativity possible, and also makes it necessary. That is why I picture the religion of the future as calling for a greater creative input on our part than was normally expected in the past.

Life is everything

Life is everything. Life is God.

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

Life is like nothing, because it is everything.

– William Golding, *Free Fall*

In the year 2002 the old queen mother died in London, at the age of 101. There had been abundant time to prepare for this event, and the palace could not fail to remember that when Diana, princess of Wales had died the public had been deeply offended by the way the royal family had at that time retreated into privacy and silence, as if declining to have any part in the general grief. That mistake must not be made again, so on this occasion

both the queen herself and prince Charles recorded short statements, about two and four minutes long respectively, for television.

These statements were intended to relate the private grief of the family to the public mourning of the nation, and to set the completed life of an individual against the larger background of the ongoing national life. More than that, it was also – as always – the sort of occasion on which everyone feels a need to invoke a universal, cosmic background to our existence. Given the special status of the queen and her heir in relation to the national church, and the queen's own professed personal faith, there was every reason to expect some use of religious language.

At it turned out, however, neither statement made any mention of the soul, the world, God, faith, religion, sin, judgement, or life after death. The traditional religious vocabulary was entirely lacking: instead, both statements made repeated use of the word 'life'. Prince Charles, who used the word five or six times, is not known to be a student of philosophy, but two of his uses of 'life' had markedly Nietzschean overtones.

It cannot be doubted that both statements were very carefully checked by advisers, to make certain that they expressed only the most unexceptionable sentiments in the most generally-intelligible language. And, I suggest, we have here an illustration of the very striking fact that in the past few decades *life* has become our most popular totalising word – by which I mean, the word we use when we want to talk about 'it all' or 'everything' – and various 'life'-idioms have become the dominant form of religious language that is usable in public¹.

I first recognised this in about 1997, when I was casting about for a new way of writing philosophy and theology for a public that seemed to have become very resistant to both subjects. I thought of an indirect approach: instead of vainly attempting to interest the public in my own ideas, I would find a convincing empirical method of demonstrating what philosophical and religious beliefs members of the general public themselves already hold. I would do this by collecting all I could of the stock phrases current in everyday speech in

¹ See my *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* (London: SCM Press, 1999). I several times refer to this book in what follows, because I am starting from the data and the argument that it presents in order this time to turn the argument in a different direction.

which people choose to articulate their own thoughts about **the meaning of life**². As the man in Molière's play was astounded to discover that he'd been speaking prose all his life, so the ordinary English person would be convicted out of her own mouth of already having a worked-out philosophical and religious outlook, whether she liked it or not.

I sat around with a notepad, looking dreamy and jotting down phrases. In time I also purchased a shelf of dictionaries – of slang, of idioms, of proverbs, of quotations and so on. But I still possess the very first sheet of notes I made. At some later date, perhaps in 1998, I have gone over this sheet with a highlighter pen, marking the terms which occur most frequently. They are 'life' and 'it all', both of which are found some six times. It was these two terms that stood out and continued to do so, so that in due course they became the topics of the two Everyday Speech books of 1999, *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* and *The Meaning of It All in Everyday Speech* (both London: SCM Press). These books aimed to turn the tables on my critical reviewers. I would look innocent and say: 'I'm not trying to press *my* ideas upon *you*. Heaven forbid! No, I'm showing you what a deep and interesting thinker you already are: I'm showing you the implications of the language that you *yourself* are already using.'

Now, if my critics and all those ordinary people chose to be smart and suspicious they could require me to justify my singling out from everyday speech stock phrases that incorporate terms like 'life' and 'it all' as being of special philosophical and religious interest. Why not focus the enquiry around other terms such as 'believe', 'absolute' and 'certain'? The best answer is surely that people in general evidently find that these are our most effective totalising terms: I mean that when we talk of life we invoke everything about the human condition, human experience, and human knowledge as it appears to us humans who cannot but see everything from the point of view of living beings with an intense *interest* in life. The word life comprehensively reminds us of what we are and from what angle we see everything. And in fact I found that the new life-idioms and it-idioms are quite remarkably numerous. It seems that in modern times we have become acutely aware that life is everything, that life is all we have and all we will ever have, and that our being in life flavours and shapes the way we see everything.

² Here and throughout I follow my earlier practice of printing religiously-significant stock phrases about life in **bold** type.

In the past, thinkers have constructed God-centred, being-centred and knowledge-centred visions of everything; but today it seems that the life-centred point of view is the best. It leaves nothing out: as Wittgenstein says, ‘The world and life are one’³. Very well: but why has the old religious vocabulary so suddenly gone out of use, and why have the new terms so suddenly come to seem much more appropriate? Why the big changeover? The historical story that I have already told elsewhere remains, I believe, substantially correct. It invokes ‘the discovery of time’, ‘the discovery of the mind’, the discovery of *bildung*, and the discovery of the innocence of everyday modern life, all in the period around 1780–1870⁴.

After the French Revolution a new commercial and industrial civilisation led by the middle classes began to develop very rapidly. Its outlook was and is highly ‘historical’: progressive, humanistic, liberal and democratic. Through the Romantic movement and the rise of psychology a strong interest in individual human subjectivity and individual life-experience began to develop. People began to see the human life-world as being the primary world in which we all live, and the novel became the dominant literary form. Naturally enough, novelists began to show a special interest in the major events of the human **life-cycle**.

Everyone became highly conscious of the story of her own life, and especially of the formation and development of the personality through childhood and adolescence to adulthood, courtship and marriage. Not least through the novel, women began to come forward into equality, both in art and in social and public life. And finally, people cast aside their traditional heavy moralism about big cities, and began to affirm the innocence of secular urban everydayness. *Plein air* impressionists, painting Paris, are a world away from Hogarth’s London.

Even a figure as intensely religious as Vincent van Gogh sees very clearly that modern city life escapes traditional religious censure. In particular, it escapes the old distinction between the sacred and the secular, or profane. The two have become fused together in a

³ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.621 (Pears and McGuinness translation).

⁴ *The Discovery of Time* is the title of an interesting book by Stephen Toulmin (London: Hutchinson, 1965, subsequent Pelican reprints). *The Discovery of the Mind* is the title of the last major work of the Princeton historian of philosophy Walter Kaufmann. For *bildung*, see for example *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* by Charles Taylor (Cambridge England: the Cambridge University Press, 1989). On the novelty and innocence of modern urban life, see various of the Impressionist painters, and later, the letters of Van Gogh.

new outlook which dramatically revalues everything that is finite, temporal, contingent and of this world.

Two of the very best statements of the new outlook are Wordsworth's straightforward confidence in the innocence of bodily life and sensuous experience, and Tolstoy's sentences – attributed to Pierre and written in the late 1860s – towards the end of *War and Peace*: 'Life is God', and 'To love life is to love God'⁵. Thus by 1870 or so in the work of certain major artists life is emerging as the new religious object. It is within us, it is that in which we live and move and have our being, and it is also in a sense over against us. My life is my own personal span, and I have to decide **what I want to do with my life**.

At the same time, life is also our other, our milieu and our only home. It may be personified as calling for our commitment to it, as guiding us, as teaching us lessons and as dealing out to us our fates. Gradually ordinary people's outlook has become more and more life-centred, until by today people instinctively take a life-centred view even of death itself. Thus the funeral service has become **a thanksgiving for the life of ...** and the memorial service is **a celebration of the life of** the dead person. Increasingly, even the churches are opening forest burial grounds where corpses, instead of lying 'asleep' waiting for the general resurrection, are content to be recycled into the biological life of this world.

So we see today that a long process of return, to this world, to time, the body and everyday life – a process that first began, perhaps, with or shortly before the Protestant Reformation – has by now reached a certain completion. In the early days Protestant attitudes to the senses, the body and everyday life were decidedly mixed. On the one hand there was a desire to assert the holiness of everyday work and especially of domestic life, a theme to which seventeenth-century Dutch painting already bears eloquent witness; but at the same time there was also a pessimistic conviction that sin could not be finally conquered and the human condition could not be changed greatly for the better by anything short of the return of Christ.

In the nineteenth century that mixture of optimistic and pessimistic strains continues, as we are reminded when we note that Tolstoy's Pierre who so extravagantly praises life is

⁵ On Wordsworth, see *The New Religion of Life* cited above, pp.25f. The most important mistake in that little book was my failure to recall the Tolstoy quotation. In the L. and A. Maude arrangement of the text of *War and Peace*, it is from Bk 14, c.3.

also a prisoner of war who has recently lost his faith and has been having a cruelly hard time, and that the Paris whose everyday life is so eloquently hymned by a long line of painters had just gone through the horrors of the Franco-Prussian War. Claude Monet himself had experienced great hardship and had left the city – but here he is back home, and Paris is paradise again.

In the twentieth century the same ambivalence continues, as Henri Matisse maintains the vision of this life as Edenic while living under the Vichy government in southern France. But modern people take a non-realist view of life. It is not an iron cage. Our **life is what we make it**. By changing the way in which ordinary people see themselves and their world, and by changing the political and economic arrangements under which they live, we can make everyday life paradisaical. It can be done. It's up to us. There is therefore no excuse for *not* holding, and battling to realize, the Edenic vision.

So it has come about that since the 1960s the new religion of ordinary life that Tolstoy had adumbrated a century earlier has now become the effective religion of ordinary people, embodied in all the stock phrases about life that are common currency. **All life is sacred**, and we must **have faith in life**. We all of us want to **love life**, to **live life to the full**, to **trust it**, to **commit ourselves to it**, and to **make the most of it while it lasts**. Two centuries ago, Hegel described the process by which the entire supernatural order returns into this world, coming down to earth and being diffused through the common life of ordinary people.

We should not *regret* this process; its happening is part of the working-out of Christianity's own logic. After Protestantism, the next step is the religion of ordinary life. As I have suggested elsewhere, the traditional 'church' sort of Christianity should not grumble about this, but rather rejoice to see itself as at last being elbowed aside *by its own fulfilment*. Like John the Baptist, it should graciously give place to its proper heir and successor.

In my 1999 book, *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* and its two successors I said all this. But I made some mistakes. I concentrated the argument around an attempt to demonstrate that life has become the new religious object, trying to show how the various things that we used to say about God have now been reshaped into sayings about life. We need to **have faith in life**, we **should not tempt life**, because **nobody is bigger than**

life⁶, and so on. This ‘interest’ or *tendenz* of the argument led me to stress the respects in which life resembles God, and relatively to neglect the various important ways in which life is quite different from God. The result was a little book that was accurate so far as it went, but which failed to make as much as it should of the good idea from which it had begun.

There are two ways in which life differs markedly from God. They arise from the fact that the ‘omni’-attributes of God come out quite differently from those of life, because God is (or was) transcendent, simple, unmixed perfection, sovereign over all things, whereas life is finite, temporal, immanent and all-inclusive. God is pure holiness and goodness, whereas life is baggy and shapeless, and includes all the opposites: bliss and wretchedness, comedy and tragedy, fullness and emptiness, good and ill, all bundled together in one great package. The result is that saying ‘Yes’ to life is markedly different from saying ‘Yes’ to God. When we say ‘Yes’ to life we say ‘Amen’ to *all* of it as a package deal, and thereafter the so-called problem of evil does not arise. We are required to renounce the victim-psychology and the old impulse to complain about being unfairly treated.

Those who say ‘Yes’ to God, on the other hand, take sides. They commit themselves to a dualistic view of life, at every point choosing this and rejecting *that*. Inevitably, they have great difficulties with suffering and evil – not least because with our historical picture of nature it has become very hard to maintain that aggressiveness and death are no more than secondary intruders into a life-world that was originally designed to work best without them. But there it is: those who love life say ‘Yes’ to it all and try to learn never to complain, whereas those who love God pick and choose in the hope that they will one day be spectacularly vindicated.

The second way in which life differs from God is that – unless they claim to believe in a ‘life-force’, or something of the kind – the lovers of life are non-realists. Life is not a great

⁶ I take the phrase ‘bigger than life’ from the film actor Elliott Gould: ‘There’s a great danger of thinking you’re bigger than life. Nobody is bigger than life’ – an interesting transfer to life of the traditional warning against hubris. *Daily Telegraph*, 22 March 1999, pp.14f.

The belief that we can transcend the limitations of our own biological makeup, and live like spirits while still in this life has sometimes been called *angelism*. The implication was clearly that angelism makes a bad mistake: a living human being is always a sexual being, whereas spirits in Christian art always lack secondary sexual characteristics. Angels never have either breasts or beards, and Satan always lacks genitals. All of which is clear enough. But in Christian culture people usually failed to draw the obvious conclusion – which is that the very notion that we can and should spend our life preparing for another sexless world ‘beyond this life’ is badly mistaken. We will never get either religion or morality straight until we admit that we belong here, and only here.

being, self-existent and utterly distinct from us. Life is just the going-on of things in the human life-world. Life is our human traffic, our business, our conversation. Life is communication: life is our world, and life is what we make it.

A religion of commitment to life is therefore the only fully immediate and non-dualistic religion, for it refuses to make any distinction between our outer life and our inner life, or between secular and sacred spheres of life, or between loving God and loving **it all** or loving one's neighbour. Nor does it distinguish between temporal and eternal concerns: on the contrary, it simply calls for an unhesitating and unreserved ethical response to **the call of life**, where you are and right *now* – ie the sort of response that the teacher Jesus of Nazareth is reported to have demanded. Life is chaotic: we can't expect to be able to totalise it speculatively. But by the way we commit ourselves ethically to life and to our neighbour we can *make* sense of life.

Here we should notice that the religion of life is metaphysically very different from traditional theism. In the religious outlook in which we were all brought up there were two great totalizing ideas, God and the finite, created order which is usually called 'the World'. I am now replacing those two with a single new object, which may be called Be-ing or life. It is finite, temporal and contingent. Above all, it is a single, immanent, continuous whole of which we are seamlessly parts. It is outsideless. Life is, simply, everything.

Life is contingent

In the world of everyday life – which, I am insisting, is the world of ordinary language, the primary world, the one into which we were first inducted and in which we continue to live – everything is contingent. We are well aware that we can recognise some events as being meant by other people, and some pressures and 'necessities' as having been imposed upon us by other people. But we do not experience *everything* as being in some way meant or necessitated to happen. On the contrary, in the lifeworld everything just happens to happen, or turn out, or befall in the way it does. When we speak of 'befalling' here, the fall in question was no doubt originally the fall of a die; and similarly, when we speak about the way things 'pan out', the panning in question was originally the panning of a hopeful prospector in the goldfields of northern California.

In such circumstances people may desperately want to believe in luck or fate, and may look very hard for some way of improving their chances. But the way we use the metaphors, and such other expressions as ‘the run of the balls’, ‘the luck of the draw’ and ‘the lap of the gods’, shows that in the end we know that everything is the product of time and chance: everything just happens. Too much looking for ‘meaning’ or meant-ness is a waste of time.

That everything in the lifeworld is contingent becomes obvious when we pause to consider how it must originally have come into being. Emerging from their animal background into the first glimmerings of consciousness some tens of thousands of years ago, early humans started with little but their own intense sociability and their need to develop a common language – which in effect means a common world to co-inhabit. The world of sense-experience available to them was very various, chaotic and fast-changing. How could a common world be built out of it? Briefly, they had to use language to make bits of their sense-experience differentiated, clarified and *common*. They had to find out by trial and error which bits of sense-experience could be referred out into objectivity, fixed and stabilised as parts of a common world. It was not an easy thing to do: even to this day we are often not quite sure what’s out there and what’s only in our sense organs.

The main point is that we have to learn to do the referring-out in a standard, rule-governed way. In the end we succeeded and it was all done, just by the talk of us human beings. So the life-world evolved: we all live in it, and for the most part it works very well. But it follows from this account of how the lifeworld came into being that everything in it is contingent, and the order we seem to see in it is merely an order that we ourselves have imputed to it. Or (to put the point a shade more cautiously) collectively we have found it convenient to impute to our world the degree and patterns of order we seem to see in it.

Notice that in imagining how they and their world looked to the first humans we have made the mistake of projecting back our own highly elaborated language and world-picture into *their* situation. I did that in order to explain my theory of how they were first able to develop the earliest beginnings of a common language, a common world and some measure of lit-up subjective consciousness. But it wasn’t quite like that *for them*, in those days. *We* weren’t hovering around, observing them and understanding them and so helping them to understand themselves. They had only their own immanent point of view, such as it was. They knew nothing of the past, nor of any independent world apart from themselves. All

they could be aware of was the first appearance of a small, lit-up pool of consciousness in the obscure writhing painful darkness of animal experience. That for them was the moment of creation: a little light appears in the general darkness. And what does this pool of illumination consist of? It is the very beginnings of a common language and a common world, when in the cry of a fellow-member of one's own species one *recognises* a shared meaning, general significance, something in common.

So consciousness depends on language, which in turns depends upon the recognition of something public, something in common, which in turn again depends upon the establishment of shared meanings. To demonstrate the point, lie back and let your mind wander. Consciousness idling consists of running words – and words are public objects. Now try just inventing some new word of your own, and turn it loose: see if it will run along with the other, ordinary words in your vocabulary. It will not. The thing cannot be done. Idling consciousness consists, and consists *only*, of a motion of public objects, ordinary words, somewhere within your system.

Consciousness is not something private and 'spiritual' that goes on in the brain: consciousness is simply a secondary effect in us of the motion of the public language. That is why the dawn of consciousness coincided with the first establishment and recognition of common meanings, and it is also why, philosophically speaking, language precedes 'reality'; that is, the public world of linguistic meaning logically precedes *both* the public world of fact *and* the seemingly private world of lit-up subjective consciousness. People usually make a rather sharp distinction between the public and private realms, but language in motion cheerfully disregards it. The public/private distinction *is itself secondary*.

All of which sounds very clear and satisfactory. But philosophy is not easily satisfied. It has long regarded the ordinary-life-world as a very unsatisfactory world, and has dreamt of escaping from it to find a more real, unchanging and intelligible world. This dream of an intellectually-satisfying noumenal world influenced the way people saw the new mechanistic science that developed in seventeenth-century Europe between Galileo and Newton. The new physics proposed a highly-idealised picture of the workings of the physical universe as being completely describable in terms of matter, motion and number.

It was a universe that was, or seemed to be, transparent to reason and fully deterministic. Because of complications like air resistance, rolling resistance and so on, bodies in the empirical world did not behave with quite such exact predictability as the model said they would. But it was assumed that the complications could be taken into the calculation, and that the world as described by scientific theory was a clearer, more exact and truer account of the real world out there than the account given in ordinary language. So to this day many scientists can still regard themselves as being like platonic philosophers, leading us towards a truer vision of the real world than the one that is given to us in our ordinary language.

This history explains why for a long time western thought suspected that although everything in the lifeworld seems to be contingent, the higher truth revealed by science is that every event in the physical world is mechanistically determined. Determinism seemed to be a major problem, and indeed threat.

Today, we hear much less about determinism. The mechanistic world-model thrown up by seventeenth-century science was only ever a highly-idealised model. It was a mistake to suppose that it was a world-picture more reliable, more real and more true than the world-picture of ordinary language and everyday life. On the contrary, in order to bring the idealised world of Newtonian mechanics into line with the fuzzier facts of the world of ordinary language and everyday life, we would have to introduce so many qualifications and complications that we would inevitably move over from the clean-cut mechanistic notion of causation to something much more like the Buddhist account. And in any case, the old mechanistic determinism presupposed an exceedingly clean-cut notion of a determinate material world existing out-there, prior to language, independent of it and copied by it. But today, language and the world are interwoven, and the world has inevitably come to share language's own fuzziness, indeterminacy and (sometimes) slippery ambiguity.

So we can forget determinism, and I return to our insistence that everything in life is contingent, which means that it is not meant or necessitated, but simply happens or befalls. Everything comes to be, and passes away, in time. Everything, including both so-called objective reality and so-called subjective consciousness, is language-mediated and part of a single package. It is because everything is outsidelessly part of a single great big shapeless bundle – a package that we ourselves have described and assembled – that to my

mind the only way to come to terms with **it all** is to say ‘Yes’ to it all. Try to moralise about **it all** as little as possible, and to complain about one’s own fate not at all. Cultivate instead the large, generous spirit of one of those great picaresque artists such as Pieter Breughel or Laurence Sterne. That is the best, and the least judgemental or moralistic attitude to life.

We should **say ‘Yes’ to life** in all its contingency because it is the accidentalness of life that makes *happy* accidents possible, and that makes innovation and creativity possible. We wouldn’t wish the self-replication of DNA always to proceed with precise accuracy, because without all the slippage and the accidents there would not have occurred the favourable mutations on which evolution depends – and so it is also in the realm of language and personal life.

No doubt people’s suspicion and fear of universal contingency is related to their fear of death. They imagine – no doubt we all of us sometimes imagine – that on the leading edge of time, where the present is always slipping away into the past, everything is passing away all the time, and we with it. Many people suffer dreadfully from the fear of death, and above all from horror at the thought of the state of being oneself dead. They need a cure; and fortunately there is a cure. In religion, the cure is the practice of solar living. In philosophy, we can make essentially the same point by saying: Don’t think only of the universal passing-away of everything. Think also of everything’s coming-to-be. And then give the two thoughts *exactly equal weight*. Contingency is universal passing away *and* universal renewal, going away and coming back, loss and gain, both at once, and as a single package. To accept and affirm universal contingency is to say ‘Yes’ to the whole package, in the recognition that we cannot really imagine things otherwise. How else could it be? Those of us who have learned to love contingency have found that it is precisely the most fragile, ephemeral and secondary things that move us most deeply, and that we love most dearly.

Life exceeds and laughs at all our faiths and ideologies

Georges Perec (1936–82) published *Life: A User’s Manual*⁷ in 1978. It is ‘the last major event in the history of the novel’, as Italo Calvino called it, an encyclopaedic account of the inhabitants of one Paris tenement house, in all the extraordinary variety of their lives and concerns, which becomes a microcosm of the whole human lifeworld. Which in turn leads

⁷ English translation by David Bellos, London: Collins/Harvill, 1987.

me straight to the question to be debated now: the human lifeworld is so vast and so endlessly varied and contains so many inconsistencies, extremes and sharp incongruities that it surely cannot be totalised and explained in any one tidy system of general thought. Life contains all the systems – the religions, the philosophies, the works of art, the political ideologies – but it is bigger than any of them. It far exceeds them, and it laughs at them all. What do we make of that?

Might we perhaps respond to this challenge by trying to frame a *Lebensphilosophie*, a philosophy of life, which starts from precisely the features of life that are alleged to make it untheorisable? Maybe. But surely it cannot end up with any more than what Perec has already given us, namely a rather detached, droll and good-humoured description of a typical sample of life's huge, tumultuous variety. No theory of life is going to be able *both* to do full justice to it all *and* to tell us what it all means, and how we should live.

Alternatively, we may admit that life itself is wildly chaotic and excessive in all directions, but then we may go on to say that the job of a particular philosophy or religion, or whatever, is to present us not with the whole truth about life, but only with a reduced art-image of life, life made sense of in such a way that within this simplified and meaning-rich representation of our life we can hope to frame a personal faith to live by and a meaningful project of our own.

How will a person who takes this line explain and justify her own faith? She'll say: 'If I try to stay true to life itself and as a whole, I'll end up in Perec's position: droll and detached, with a feeling of infinite absurdity. I'll feel overwhelmed: I won't be able actually to *live*. So it seems to me reasonable, for the sake of gaining life-satisfaction and for the sake of ethics, to seek out a powerful and wide-ranging art-image of **what life is all about**, and to commit myself to it so that within it I can shape a life and pursue the values that seem most worthwhile to me⁸. It seems to me that life itself is so chaotic and appalling that just in order to live I've got to cut it down to size and *make* it make a sort of sense.' Thus she admits that we cannot have a conceptually-clear philosophical totalisation of the meaning of life, but she says we can be content with art-images of life's meaning, depicting it for example as a great journey, or as a school in which we are preparing for a final exam.

⁸ I offer this as an interpretation of what Jean Anouilh means when he says that the job of art is to give life a shape.

By the end of the twentieth century, I suspect that most people in the west had reached the position just described. It implies that we've given up old ideas of divine revelation, and we've given up the claim that our own religious doctrine-system is universally and dogmatically just *true*, for all human beings everywhere. Instead, the person I have described sees religion as being cultural, and as like art. Most of us humans have at least some residual connexion with an ancestral religious tradition. That tradition gives us, under a group of dominant symbols, a worldview and an account of how we human beings come to be here, how it is with us, and how we should live. Such traditions are in most cases pretty flexible: they can be bent into new shapes and appropriated in new ways. Other people, in other cultures, are often so different that it hardly makes sense for me to claim that my tradition is normative for all other human beings everywhere. But I *can* make the much more modest claim that with a bit of low cunning I can appropriate *my own* tradition in such a way as to make it possible for me to construct a meaningful and value-rich form of life for myself out of it.

In which case we now say: Life is much too vast and various for any one religion or philosophy to be objectively just true, everywhere and for everyone. But by working with the stories and symbols that we have inherited we can still build a house of meaning for ourselves to inhabit. And others, in other traditions, are fully entitled to do something similar for themselves with the rather different materials available to them.

– This talk was delivered at the September 2002 Sea of Faith (NZ) Conference in Timaru, New Zealand which had as its focus 'Creative uncertainty'